

# *The Unpaid Debt*

**Ethel Almaz Stout**

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# THE UNPAID DEBT

*by*

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*Author of The Chain of His Sins*

*London & New York*

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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# The Unpaid Debt

## Chapter 1

With a sigh of satisfaction Gerard Napier flung down his book and leaned back in his deep leather chair. With contented eyes he looked out over the shimmering surface of the Thames, almost colourless in the bright afternoon sunshine, which was blazing in through the wide-open window, flooding every corner of the old room which had housed so many generations of students and followers of the Law.

He was feeling at peace with himself and all his world. He had been working hard for many months at his own chosen subject, knew that he had satisfied his exigent coach, and that he had earned the holiday which he hoped would bring him his heart's desire.

It was hardly to be wondered at that he was finding the world a very pleasant place indeed and that he was expecting to find it infinitely more pleasant in the near future.

He was still in the early twenties, possessed magnificent health and a finely-built, well-trained body, owned an adequate private income, and had a career full of promise ahead of him. Above all, he had a hope which set his heart racing every time he sent his thoughts winging to a certain beautiful old homestead in the West. It seemed as if Fate had withheld none of her gifts.

Content shone in his clear blue eyes, which looked out with a simple, boyish directness on his entirely satisfactory world and showed in every line of his fair, well-modelled face, whose clean-cut lines of jaw and chin suggested an austerity that was contradicted by the softness of the somewhat full mouth. But in the main it was a fine face, in spite of a hint of that latent something which made Stevenson, the coach under whom he had worked for

two years, observe a certain reservation when he classed Gerard Napier as one of the best students he had ever had.

The content in his eyes leapt to sudden excitement as there came a loud double knock on his oak. Could that be the answer already to the letter he had posted yesterday, on which answer he felt all his future life depended?

A moment later the excitement faded as he admitted a short, thick-set man, in reality a man of his own age, but looking many years older.

“Hullo, old bean,” said the visitor, screwing a quite unnecessary monocle into his eye as he pointed to the books on the table by Gerard’s chair, “swotting as usual? What you do it for I can’t think.”

“Well, how d’you suppose I should get through my exams if I didn’t swot?” Gerard retorted, as he sank down again into his chair and pushed the tobacco jar and cigarettes towards his friend.

Jimmy Benson helped himself to a cigarette as he sprawled on the lounge under the open window. “I dunno. Never could see the use of exams myself. Anyway, you’ve got to drop your beastly old books and play with me to-night. Polly Pellew and her sister Stella are coming to my digs and we’re going on to The Freaks afterwards.”

“Sorry, old man,” Gerard said calmly, “but I can’t come.”

“You’ve jolly well got to. Put off your engagement with whoever it is. You can have ’flu or sleepy sickness or any old thing you like. I specially want you.”

“Sorry, Jimmy, but it can’t be done. I haven’t got a definite engagement, but I’d rather not.”

Jimmy stared at him. “Great Cæsar’s ghost, why ever not, if you are not engaged?”

Gerard hesitated a moment before he answered: “Well, if you must have it—I don’t want to be offensive about your friends, but the truth is I don’t care about Miss Pellew’s crowd.”

Jimmy’s usually mild blue eyes grew hard. “Look here, I don’t know what you’re getting at, but I don’t like your tone. I can’t for the life of me imagine why Polly should want to meet you again, for the last time you dined at my place with her you were as dull as ditchwater. But when I asked her she said she’d come and bring Stella if I’d get you for a fourth. I said I would and you’ve bally well got to come.”

“Don’t get ratty,” Gerard replied. “You like Miss Pellew and her lot. Well and good. I don’t. As you tactfully remark, I’m as dull as ditchwater. Then leave me out!”

“You bet I will,” Benson replied, his voice suddenly rising with anger. “But lately you are giving yourself the most confounded airs!”

“No, I’m not. Oh, I know perfectly well that because I don’t want to spend all my time drinking and dancing and rotting you think me a muff. I heard Bill Baines call me ‘Sissy’ the other night when I cleared out from Kello’s. You don’t suppose I liked it, but I’d sooner be called a Sissy than—than stay amongst what was going on.”

A dull flush stained Gerard’s face from his hair to the edge of his collar.

“It was a bit thick that night,” Jimmy admitted. “I told Baines so afterwards. But you’re not suggesting you will see or hear anything polluting to your young morals at my diggings, are you?”

“Of course not! Don’t be an ass, Jimmy. And don’t let us quarrel just because I say I’d rather not come to-night. As a matter of fact I hope to be leaving Town on Tuesday, and I really ought to go and see old Stevenson after dinner. He said he should be in, and I half promised I’d look in. It’s my only chance of seeing him before I go.”

“Oh, of course if you prefer a dried-up old museum specimen to me and my pals, I’ve nothing more to say. Only, as a matter of curiosity, I should like to know what it is specially you have against Miss Pellew?”

“I haven’t anything. It doesn’t matter to me a brass cent what she is or does, only I don’t want to spend my time with her. I don’t know what to talk to her about. I’m all at sea. And—oh, hang it all, Jimmy, you know her better than I do, and you know perfectly well you wouldn’t ask your mother and sisters to invite her to their house.”

Jimmy stared at him open-mouthed.

“Good lor’, man, but where does that come in? Of course I shouldn’t. But you aren’t a fellow’s mother or sister—or maiden aunt either! You are not suggesting she would injure your morals? Surely they are too firmly cemented to be in danger?”

“Oh, drop it!” Gerard retorted, roused at last. “I’m sick of your suggesting all the time that I’m a prig because I find no fun in rotting about with girls one—one can’t respect. Cut it out!”

Jimmy rose slowly and picked up the hat he had flung down on the table.

“You watch it, Gerard, my son. You’ll come an unholy cropper one of these days. Well, ta-ta. I suppose when you leave London next week you’re going to pick buttercups and daisies in the dear, old, simple country. Give my love to ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary.’ Oh—damn you!”

As the door slammed behind him, Gerard stood still, his hands thrust deep in his trousers’ pockets, a worried look on his fair, sun-burned face.

He wished Jimmy hadn’t gone off like that. They had been such good friends up to a year or so ago. It was only lately that they had disagreed so violently about what constituted “pleasure” which they had enjoyed together in the old days.

But Gerard’s secret talisman against such attractions as the vivacious Miss Pellew, or indeed that which any other young woman had to offer, lay in the old homestead in the West where all his dreams were centred.

Two years ago he had met Patricia Mannering and her father, Sir John Mannering, at Le Touquet. They had become friends from the first moment of meeting and they had met on various occasions since, while twice he had stayed at their home in the Cotswolds, with the result that the boy and girl friendship started on the golf-course had now become the greatest thing in his life. Patricia was no longer *a* girl—she was the one and only girl in the world, and in her Gerard saw embodied his ideals of womanhood—beauty, breeding and all the honesty and gentleness summed up in the old-fashioned word goodness. And in his heart he hugged the knowledge that he could approach her on her own plane of innocence.

It had not only been a certain secret idealism which had hitherto kept Gerard Napier from the muddy patches of the roadway which the youth of all ages so often finds alluring, but a very definite fastidiousness which had always made him turn away from what might have been tempting to a less discriminating taste. And it was perhaps almost inevitable that the ordinary young man, neither better nor worse than his kind, eager to drink the mixed cup of Life, with its dregs as well as its elixirs, should class him as something of a prig, in spite of the fact that as a sportsman, as a rugger and a cricket blue, Gerard commanded the respect of all his fellow sportsmen.

But he had a trick of turning away as though he were suddenly deaf when some particularly salacious story was being told or of flushing unexpectedly when a woman was being discussed in an uncomplimentary way that made other men sometimes mutter contemptuously “Hypocritical young prig.”

But though Gerard might be a bit of a prig, he was no hypocrite.

He had been strictly brought up by a guardian who was no relation, and he had always felt he owed it to him not to fail him or to waste his time. William Napier had adopted him when he was a child of three or four and had brought him up as his own son. Gerard knew that he owed him everything—the solid comfort that had always surrounded him, his education at Rugby and the University, his future position and his income. For his parents, who had died when he was a baby, so he was told, had left him nothing. The only return he could give his benefactor was to live up to his requirements and to profit by all the chances he gave him.

He had not found that difficult, for he was naturally a worker and honestly enjoyed work as well as play, and he had not disappointed or failed Mr. Napier. On the contrary, he had fulfilled all the old man's dearest hopes, and when the latter had died a few months previously he had left everything he possessed to "my dear adopted son, Gerard Napier."

For a few minutes after Benson had gone out in dudgeon, Gerard almost wished he had accepted his invitation. After all, perhaps he had been a fool. It would have meant a cheerful evening; he would have pleased Jimmy, and Polly and Stella were not by any means the worst of the crowd in which Jimmy Benson found himself so much at home. He took a step towards the telephone, then stopped and shrugged his shoulders. Of course, it was too late. He couldn't get hold of Jimmy and, anyhow, he would have asked someone else by now.

He changed his coat and went out and walked along the Embankment and through St. James' Park to the club which he had joined on Mr. Napier's death, a club usually frequented by men twice his age.

He smiled and nodded at two or three elderly men he knew as he made his way through the smoking room to the billiard room, where the man he wanted to consult about buying a two-seater car was usually to be found at that hour, carrying with him an atmosphere of youth and vigour and magnificent health.

The eyes of one old retired Civil Service man watched him with definite envy. His own only son, the last of a long line of distinguished servants of the country, had well-nigh ruined him, and he had seen that son, only yesterday, walking somewhat unsteadily down Piccadilly by the side of a lady whose profession was written on her once-beautiful face.

"Clean-looking lad that," he said with a sort of envious growl to a man with white hair and a clean-shaven face. "A boy any father might be proud of."

“Um,” returned the famous K.C. “Ever met his guardian and adopted father, William Napier?”

“No.”

“He was a fine old chap. Narrow, puritanical, hard, but straight as a die. He grounded this young cub well. Did his best to stick him firmly on the rails on which he wanted him to run, and, curiously enough, seems to have succeeded in making him stay there. I like the boy myself, but it seems to be the pretty general idea that he is a bit of a pompous prig.”

“That’s what people are only too ready to call a man who lives decently and cleanly,” said the other bitterly. “The world wants a bit of priggishness these days. It’s made such a fetish of liberty that it doesn’t realize that what people are demanding is unbridled licence, not liberty. What the present generation wants is a course of strict discipline, moral and physical.”

## Chapter 2

“Confound the boy!”

A frown darkened the face of Sir John Mannering as he laid down on the table the letter to which Gerard Napier was so anxiously awaiting the answer.

“I’m sure he deserves confounding if you say so. But who—and why?” said a voice behind him, as a kiss fell lightly on his grizzled hair and two capable-looking hands rested momentarily on his shoulders.

“Why, Gerard Napier. I wish to goodness we’d never gone to Le Touquet, then we should not have met him!”

A slow smile touched Patricia Mannering’s lips as she took her place beside her father at the small round breakfast table.

“But I thought you liked him. Anyhow, you’ve invited him here the last two summers.”

“Because I thought he was a decent lad!” Sir John stirred his five lumps of sugar violently in his cup.

“And—isn’t he?” inquired Patricia innocently, as she helped herself to bacon and kidney.

“No, certainly not. Of course, you know what you’ve been doing to him?”

“I?” returned Patricia, lifting her eyebrows, “what have I got to do with it?”

“Apparently—everything. I’ve got a letter from the young jackanapes this morning reminding me of the indefinite invitation I gave him in the winter and asking if next week would suit us to have him. But he warns me that he intends to try and persuade you to marry him. I’ve a good mind to send him a wire, telling him it’s like his impertinence and that the invitation is cancelled.”

“All right, dear. I’ll send it for you. I’m going into the village to see Mrs. Graham. I’ll send off your telegram.”

“Pat, come here.”

He pushed back her chair and Pat slid from her chair to his knee.

“You know what you are to me?” The grave, kind eyes grew graver.

“Yes.” She pressed herself closer into the fold of the arm that was holding her.

“You know I want you to be happy more than anything in the world?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I’m not going to ask questions you may not want to answer. Naturally I hate the very thought of any man who wants to take you away from me. I feel I should like to shoot him on sight. For one thing, there’s no man living who’s good enough for you in my stupid old eyes. But I know mine *are* old eyes and— —”

“They’re only fifty-two,” interrupted Pat.

“Well, that is old to twenty-one. Of course, I know I can’t keep you for ever, but I’m not going to give you up to any man, young or old, who isn’t a white man. I admit Gerard Napier seems a white man, though he doesn’t come up to my standard in everything. Now, shall I send him a wire telling him not to come or—or shall I let him come and leave things to chance?”

His troubled eyes looked down into hers, as blue as the fine china on the table.

For some seconds Pat did not answer. Then she said very quietly, “Supposing Gerard does as—as you say he is going to do, I don’t know what I feel about it yet—truthfully I don’t. I haven’t seen him for nearly six months, not since we went to London in the winter. But—but I think I would rather you left things to chance.”

Sir John sighed heavily.

“Right you are, my dear. Then the incident is closed for the present. Did you say you were going down to see Mrs. Graham?”

“Yes. Do you want to send her a message?”

“Wouldn’t it be rather nice if she came up to dinner to-night?”

“I should love it. But you know how difficult she is to persuade. Anyhow, I’ll ask her.”

Pat slipped from his knee and went back to her place. Deep as was the devotion between father and daughter, it was seldom they indulged in open

demonstration, and, the little tense moment over, they resumed their normal manner.

“Do you know how much longer Mrs. Graham is staying in Westlea?” Sir John asked, as he rose to get the pipe lying on the mantelpiece.

“I fancy till the end of September. She took Myrtle Cottage for six months and she came at the beginning of April. I wish she would settle here for good.”

Sir John kept his back to her as he filled his pipe.

“Perhaps she’ll decide to stay on. She says she likes the place. She certainly looks much better than when she came.”

“So I told her yesterday. She looks more—peaceful. You know, Dad, I’m certain there’s some real tragedy in her life, something more than just ordinary grief over ordinary, inevitable sorrows. Of course, I know she lost her husband, but that was twenty years ago. She can’t be grieving for him still. Sometimes, when she thinks no one is looking, her eyes seem to me—haunted.”

“Yes,” returned Sir John slowly. “It’s obvious that at some time or other she has had a very rough row to hoe. Try to persuade her to come to-night. I’ve got to be off almost at once, for I have got to go round by Jevon’s farm before I go on to Gloucester. Can I do anything for you there?”

“Rather! Change my books, will you? I’ll go and get them. And I know Davies is waiting for some green paint for the new shed. I’ll go and ask him how much he wants.”

After Pat had seen her father off in the small car she usually drove herself, she went up to her bedroom to put her hat on. But instead of getting ready at once, she went over to the open window and stood looking out over the well-kept gardens on to the park-land, with its surrounding copses beyond and the Cotswold Hills in the background. How she loved every inch of it, every rose-tree, every silvery birch, every sturdy oak!

And—since she had told her father she wished Gerard Napier to come again as their guest—she knew that at no distant date she would have to decide whether she would leave it or not.

Being a very attractive young woman, as well as Sir John Mannering’s only child and heiress, she had not reached twenty-one without many offers to change her name and home. But, so far, she had never felt the slightest temptation or inclination to do so. The idea that she could leave her father

and her beloved home for anyone else seemed a suggestion too absurd to take seriously.

That is, until a year ago, when Gerard Napier had come to stay with them for the second time. The first visit had followed immediately on that chance meeting at Le Touquet, two years ago, when Sir John and Patricia, Gerard Napier and Jimmy Benson had made up a daily foursome.

It was not until the second visit that Pat began to feel a strange yet subtly delightful awkwardness with Gerard. She had hitherto smiled at the thought of being in love—had told the men who had wanted to make love to her that marriage was a thing she had no use for, anyhow, for many years to come. But for the last year, although she had refused several entirely suitable offers, she had not laughed at love or at the suggestion of marriage.

There was a strange new softness on her face as she looked out over the garden and park she loved so well.

The July sunshine was bringing out all the crimson and pink of the roses, all the blue of the lupins and delphiniums, all the orange and copper of the omnipresent nasturtiums, and intensifying the fragrance of the Gloire de Dijon climbing round her window and the honeysuckle and jasmine just below. How beautiful, how sweet-scented, how gorgeous was the world—her own particular world.

Would love—could man's love add to it?

Her heart contracted as though physical fingers had touched and squeezed it as she thought of Gerard Napier. She had known last year that he loved her. He had tried to tell her so, but she had shied away from having it put into words.

She had said quickly, "Oh, stop, stop! Don't say anything to spoil things. I don't want to hear! If you do, I shan't want to see you again."

And Gerard had stopped. He was not as a rule over-intuitive. But his love for his beautiful young hostess had quickened his perceptions and he realized that to say anything more at the moment would definitely injure, not help his cause. Pat was not ready for any man's love—yet. So he had answered:

"Very well, I won't say anything now. Perhaps I haven't the right until I've passed my final. But next year I shall ask you again and, oh, Pat," with sudden boyishness, "do be good to me then!"

Since then she had only seen him two or three times when she and her father had paid flying visits to London. And Gerard had kept his promise, as far as words went, but his eyes had told what his lips withheld.

And now he was coming down with the definite and expressed intention of asking her to marry him. In a very few days he would be here and she would have to make up her mind what answer she was going to make. She had told her father to let him come and leave things to chance. In her heart she knew that if she had decided to say “No” she would have told him to tell Gerard not to come. But was she going to say “Yes”?

She leaned farther out of the window, her firm, rounded chin cupped in her hands, taking in, one by one, all the familiar details of the surroundings of the home she loved.

Could she leave it all? Could she give up The Court and everything it stood for, could she leave her father for a comparative stranger?

If she accepted Gerard it would mean living in London. He had just passed his finals and, as he was not only keen and ambitious, but had many influential friends in the legal world, there was every reason to suppose he would make a success of his career.

Of course, she would come home often—The Court would always be Home, but London would be the place where she would have to live.

“I wish I could have it all,” she said half aloud, holding out her hands as though to gather all the beauty and sweetness of the old place into her arms, “Gerard and The Court and Dad as well. But as it’s one or the other— —”

For a few minutes the glory of the morning was dimmed as a cloud passed slowly across the face of the sun and, with a little sigh, she drew in her head and went to fetch her hat.

The Court lay nearly a mile away from the snug and smug little village of Westlea, which was clustered round a fifteenth-century church overgrown with ivy. The straggling street, with its small shops, its Olde Inne, its low-eaved schools, was still a village street. Westlea was on the highway to nowhere, and up to the present had remained immune from the huge motor char-a-bancs which have deprived most country places of their privacy and primitiveness.

It was the boast of the old inhabitants that Westlea was still a bit of the Old England disappearing so fast that many of the younger generation do not and never will know it, and it was their intention to keep it so as long as possible.

They took a pride in observing old customs, in keeping up old traditions, in upholding social conventions which have long ago been discarded by the present generation.

As Pat walked through the village there was hardly a soul who had not some greeting. A few newcomers to the place, refusing to recognize the tradition of "The Squire" and his household, passed her without a glance, but the majority of the villagers, young and old, knew "Miss Patricia" and were delighted to give and receive a smiling "Good morning."

A short distance out of the farther end of the village, Pat turned in at a gate placed in a high, thick-set hedge which completely encircled and concealed a glorified cottage surrounded by a fair-sized and beautifully laid-out garden.

On the step of the open doorway a magnificent chinchilla cat, with his paws tucked contentedly in under his breast, blinked lazily in the sunshine.

"Hullo, Regal," Pat said, stooping to pass her hand caressingly over his beautiful, dignified head. "Is Missis at home?"

She rang the bell, and an old woman with a dried-up, inscrutable face and grey hair drawn neatly back under an old-fashioned white goffered cap, came to the door.

A frosty smile touched her thin lips. There were few people at whom Nannie smiled, but Pat was one of the few.

"Good morning, miss. The mistress'll be glad to see you. She had one of her bad headaches last night, so hasn't gone in to Gloucester, as she meant. Will you please to go into the drawing-room and I'll tell her."

Pat crossed the narrow, stained hall and entered the small room whose door Nannie held open.

As she looked round, waiting for Mrs. Graham, she thought once again it was one of the most satisfying rooms she had ever been in. Everything was just right, perfect in its expensive simplicity, from the oak press, with its priceless old china, to the glass bowls, filled with masses of roses and honeysuckle, and deep chairs covered with pale cretonnes and cushions of bright washing silks.

Pat loved the room, though until Mrs. Graham had taken the house furnished, she had not entered it since she was a child, for the owner had shut it up after his wife's death. But now the owner too was dead and the son, who had no desire to live in it, but saw an opportunity to make money

out of it, had handed it over to a clever decorator with instructions to utilize its old treasures to the best advantage for letting purposes.

Pat thought it a perfect room and a perfect setting for the woman to whom she had given, almost within the first week of their acquaintance, a greater measure of affection and admiration than she had ever given to any woman in her life. She had never known her own mother, and as she had been her father's inseparable companion except during her school terms, she was generally a little shy with older women.

"Good morning, Pat. How nice to see you!"

Pat turned quickly. "Oh, my dear, Nannie said you had had a bad headache. But how terribly done up you look."

"At my age I know one can't afford bad heads and bad nights. They are so dreadfully unbecoming."

"Nothing could unbecome you," Pat answered smiling. "Whichever way you look, whether you are pale and sad, or light-hearted and smiling, I always think it is the way I admire you most."

"My dear!" For one moment Mrs. Graham laid her hand on Pat's sunburned arm. "I wonder why you are so sweet to me. I'm not used to it."

"That's hard to believe. You are so different from anyone I ever met. Quite apart from being more beautiful, you are so—big. In yourself I mean. I've never heard you say anything small or unkind. I don't believe you could even think a petty thought!"

Eleanor Graham's pale face flushed like a girl's. "I couldn't ask for a higher tribute, especially from you, who are so generous yourself in your thoughts. And you haven't had the reasons I have had for learning not to judge too harshly. I've learned my lessons in a hard school. You haven't, you know. And the harder the school, the easier it is to assimilate the lessons."

"You are right about my school. It has been easy and beautiful. I've had everything I wanted all my life. I can't remember anything I really wanted badly that I haven't had—except a mother. Now both Dad and I want something badly to-day. We want you to dine with us to-night."

"Oh, my dear, you know I seldom go out in the evening—"

"Yes, I do know, and I can't think why. You aren't a bit delicate, so it isn't that you are afraid of the night air. And, of course, the car will bring you home."

“It isn’t that. I enjoy walking on a lovely fine night. But— —”

“Don’t say you won’t,” Pat said impulsively. “We shall be quite alone and I do so want you.”

Mrs. Graham’s face cleared. “If you are really going to be alone, I’ll come. I was afraid you might be having a party.”

Pat shook her head. “No. But next week I want you to come when we shan’t be alone. I specially want you to come. We shall have a friend staying with us and—I want you to meet him. I want you to like him. I know he’ll love you. He can’t help it.”

Mrs. Graham’s hands, that had been idly re-arranging some of the roses in the bowl by her side, grew suddenly still.

“Who is it, dear? Who is the friend you want me to meet—and like?”

“Oh, I’ve spoken of him to you several times before—the man we met at Le Touquet nearly two years ago, Gerard Napier.”

There was a dead silence for a few seconds.

“Gerard Napier?” Mrs. Graham said at last. “So he is coming to stay with you next week?”

“Yes. He’s coming on Tuesday.”

Pat was not looking at Mrs. Graham. She was gazing with exaggerated indifference out of the window on to the well-rolled lawn.

“Tuesday. And to-day is Friday—four days.”

Pat was roused from her assumed indifference. Four days. She had already counted them. In fact, she had done more than one sum in hours, as well as in days. But why should Mrs. Graham be sufficiently interested in a young man completely unknown to her, to reckon up the time before his arrival?

“You will come and meet him, won’t you? You will come to dinner soon after he comes?”

“Yes, I’ll come,” Mrs. Graham returned quietly. “He plays tennis, of course?”

“Oh, yes. He plays awfully well.”

“Then perhaps you will bring him over here one day? I’ll ask Mr. Elliott and Betty Bellingham. You will make a good four.”

“I know he’d love it. Now I must be off. I only came to bring you this,” laying down a book, “and to ask you to come to-night. I’m going on to see Betty now, to fix up about the tournament next week. I’m so glad Mr. Napier will be here for it. You’ll have to come. Even if you won’t play, you must come and watch.”

She rose and for a moment looked as if she were going to say something more. But she changed her mind and, after a definite pause, moved towards the door.

Mrs. Graham accompanied her to the gate, picking up the chinchilla cat as she passed out of the door. She held him in the crook of her arm and up against her breast like a baby, as he blinked sleepily into her face.

“*Au revoir*. To-night, seven-thirty,” Pat called out as she turned into the lane on which the dust lay in thick white folds.

For a few minutes Mrs. Graham stood still, the sun beating down on her uncovered head, watching Patricia Mannering pass out of sight.

Even in the revealing glare Eleanor Graham was still a beautiful woman. She did not look anything like her forty-four years, for her face retained its delicate, clearly-defined curves. The mouth was set in a straight, steady line, as if it were accustomed to hold back rather than to give expression to the thoughts that filled her mind. There were little fine lines running from the nostrils to the corners of the lips that showed plainly in the daylight, lines that at night were not discernible. But the throat and the chin, so softly round, yet so determined, were as firm and well modelled as a girl’s. Her hair, too heavy and plentiful for eyes grown accustomed to the sleek shingle, was nearly snow white, in almost startling contrast to the soft, still youthful colouring of her face. But it was Eleanor Graham’s eyes that brought other eyes again and again to her face. They were dark, so dark that it was difficult to decide if they were deep hazel or green or grey, with lashes so black and long that they cast definite shadows on the curves of her cheeks. Though a smile was often on her lips it was seldom it reached her eyes, which at times conveyed an idea almost of expressionlessness, so dead level was the calm of their gaze.

Indeed, calm was the dominant note of the atmosphere Eleanor Graham carried about with her. But it was the studied, settled calm of the peace that comes after strife rather than the sure serenity of temperament.

But when at last she turned and re-entered the house, after putting the cat down again in the sun, the calm was broken and her eyes were shining as she called to the old servant coming down the narrow staircase.

“Nannie,” she said breathlessly, when the two women were standing inside the sunlit drawing-room. “He is coming down in four days! He will be here on Tuesday! And perhaps the next day I shall see him. After twenty years! Oh, Nannie, Nannie!”

She remained standing still, tears rolling down her face and her hands tightly clasped in front of her.

The old woman took the trembling hands and held them closely in her own.

“You are not going to give way now, Miss Eleanor, you who have been so brave!”

“No, no, Nannie, of course not. But I don’t know how to face it now it is so near. I feel afraid. Perhaps I have done wrong to come here at all? But I wanted to see him so terribly, to hear his voice! Nannie, think of it! In four days I shall see him, speak to him!” The words came quickly, in staccato confusion.

“Yes, my dear. Only don’t build too much on it. He may not be a bit what you think he’ll be.” Nannie looked at her with warning in her eyes and a terrible foreboding at her heart.

But Eleanor was not in the mood to accept warning or to feel doubt.

“Perhaps not,” she answered in a low voice. “But he will be—my son.”

## Chapter 3

It was the afternoon of Gerard's arrival and Pat had safeguarded herself by inviting some friends to tennis.

When the car which had been sent into Gloucester to meet him drove up to the door and he leapt out and hurried across the terrace to the tennis court at the side of the house, Pat was at the service line. She promptly sent two balls running into the net, and her opponent called out "Double fault, game and set!"

Then with flushing face she turned to meet her newly-arrived guest.

"Your train must have been late. I thought you would have been here half-an-hour ago."

"It was a bit late. By Jove, it's ripping to be down here and to see you again." His voice fell on the last words, so that only Pat heard them.

"I'm glad you were able to come. I'm sorry Dad isn't in. He had to go to a funeral. But he won't be long now."

Pat spoke a little breathlessly, for she was feeling oddly nervous, a quite unusual sensation for her.

Gerard turned, as Pat's late partner strolled up to them. "Hullo, Elliott, glad to see you again!" His blue eyes were alight with happiness, as though he were glad of anything and everything.

"I should have been glad to see you at any other moment. But your thoroughly inopportune arrival so demoralized Pat that she threw away a game I've exhausted myself in trying to win!"

Gerard gripped the outstretched hand with a grin.

"Isn't it unusual for you to make a sufficient effort to get exhausted?"

"You are right there, Mr. Napier," said a pretty, slim girl gaily, as she joined the little group. "Teddy is lazier than ever. I'm looking to you to try to put some strenuousness into him. You succeeded for a time last year, but he's backslided ever since."

"I'll do my best. I'll take you on in a single presently, Elliott."

Teddy Elliott promptly sat down on the grass.

“It takes two to make a single. Not much, my son. All I want is a long rest. Betty, be an angel and give me that cushion,” pointing to a coloured cretonne cushion just out of his reach.

Betty Bellingham obediently did as she was asked, as Pat moved away by Gerard’s side.

“Will you go straight up and change? You’ve got your old quarters, the Blue Room in the East Wing. Be as quick as you can.”

“I won’t be five minutes. I’m afraid I’m a bit out of practice, for I haven’t played once this year.”

“You’ll soon get your eye in. You must, because we’ve got a tournament on here on Friday and you’ve got to play.”

“Of course I may play with you?”

“As a matter of fact I had arranged to play with Major Dent, but he’s hurt his wrist. So if you really wish— —”

“I shouldn’t want to play if I couldn’t play with you. Oh, Pat, I can hardly believe I’m really here again. I’ve been counting the hours. I— —”

He paused as they reached the wide stone steps leading up to the old oak door.

Pat drew back before the glow in the radiant blue eyes.

“I—I’m glad. You can find your way up, can’t you? I must go back to the others. Tea will be ready by the time you come down.”

She turned and hurried back to the little group on the lawn, sitting now under the shade of a cluster of lilac trees, while Gerard entered the big hall, and ran, two steps at a time, up the great oak staircase that divided at the first landing, leading to different wings, and along to the Blue Room, which he was now occupying for the third time.

His suitcases were already unstrapped and in a very few minutes he had dragged out his white ducks and tennis shoes and racquet.

But when he was ready he did not immediately leave his room. He went over to the window and stood as Pat had stood, a few days before, looking out, realizing the beauty, the graciousness of it all.

He was going to ask Pat at the very first opportunity to give up all this for him, to leave her luxurious old home with its traditions, its peace, its

luxury, its accustomedness, for a necessarily small home in restricted and unfamiliar surroundings, with him.

“It’s confounded cheek on my part,” he thought, with a passing pang of apprehension. “But if only she’ll trust me I’ll never rest till I can give her something nearly as good in exchange.”

He dismissed the fleeting sense of doubt, and, picking up his racquet, ran downstairs again and out on to the lawn, where Pat was pouring out tea.

Sir John had just returned and greeted Gerard with a hint of formal reserve. He could not forget that the latter had come down with the avowed intention of trying to take his beloved daughter away from him. And as Gerard stood there, with the sun shining on his six feet of muscular manhood and crinkled fair hair, he thought with a swift pang that the lad had everything to offer a girl that a girl could ask for, with the one exception of an old and honoured name.

He knew as much and as little as the rest of the world knew; which was that Gerard had been adopted by Mr. Napier, a reserved and eccentric old scientist, when he was a child of three or four. But beyond that fact, Sir John knew nothing, and it certainly had not been his business to make inquiries. Of course, if Pat decided she cared for him, it might be different. But in these days when birth and heritage count for so little and when a money-aristocracy has taken the place of the old order, he knew that even if Gerard could produce no satisfactory account of his origin, it would not necessarily be any handicap to him.

“Hope you had a good journey down?”

“Quite, thank you, sir, though we lost time at Swindon.”

“Come and sit down here, Mr. Napier,” said Betty Bellingham, the tall dark girl who was just engaged to Edward Elliott, patting a cushion on the ground between her own chair and Pat’s. “I’m longing to hear all the latest news about the latest plays and the latest dance steps.”

“Sorry I’m no good at telling you about either,” Gerard returned, taking a large cup of tea from Pat. “I go comparatively seldom to the theatre, and I don’t dance often enough to get good at it.”

“My hat!” returned Betty. “Fancy being in London, with dances going on every minute of the day and night, and not dancing! What waste of opportunity.”

“I should rather call it waste of time if I did!” Gerard returned with a touch of sententiousness.

Unconsciously Sir John’s eyes flickered, but he pulled himself up quickly. Why should he have felt that passing but definite flash of scorn for a man because he preferred to put his time to some good account rather than spend it in heated rooms with a careless, irresponsible crowd?

As though desirous of making up for the injustice of his unconscious thoughts, Sir John said,

“You’ve been working pretty hard this year, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” It was one of Gerard’s habits to address men older than himself by the simple, old-fashioned word. “There is such an awful lot to learn and such a short time to learn it in.”

Teddy Elliott turned over on the grass and, stretching out a long arm, seized a plate of cakes and put it on the ground by his side. “That’s why I give it up. It’s too much to expect a fellow to learn all there is to know. So why try?”

“You might learn just a modicum about one thing if you tried very hard, couldn’t you?” asked Pat, prodding him with the toe of her tennis shoe. “You don’t even do that.”

“Oh, Teddy’s not half as silly as you all think him,” Betty flared out at her. “What do you think I found him reading the other day?”

“Oh, shut up,” said Teddy promptly, turning round to give her slim ankle an expostulatory tug.

“I shan’t shut up. You always try to pretend you have no brains and never think of anything serious. But,” turning round to the others with a little flash of defiance in her eyes, “I found him reading Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and a huge heavy book on Heredity that looked terribly difficult and complicated. I read a few pages of it and could not make head or tail of it. So there!”

Gerard glanced at Elliott with surprise. “Are you really studying Heredity? We must compare notes. That’s one of the things at which I’ve been working hard in my spare time. I think it’s the most fascinating subject I’ve ever taken up.”

“But that isn’t part of your work for the Bar, surely, is it?” asked Sir John.

“Indirectly it is. You see I want to specialize later on in medical jurisprudence and have been going to evening classes with Stevenson, who is *the* big authority, and he is very keen on the effect of heredity on all of us. It opens up an enormous field of study and, as far as I have gone, it has convinced me that heredity is the greatest dominating factor of our lives, and — —”

Teddy groaned aloud. “For heaven’s sake, spare us, Napier. This is a gathering for mutual amusement, not for mutual enlightenment.”

“I beg your pardon.” There was a hint of sharpness in the eager voice. “I didn’t mean to bore you.”

“You don’t bore us,” Pat said quickly, as she noticed the quick flush that had sprung to his face. “It’s an awfully interesting subject, though most of us are hopelessly ignorant about it. But if Teddy won’t listen to words of wisdom, he’ll have to play. Get up, Edward, and make up a four with Gerard and Betty and Mrs. Forsyth.”

But Teddy only lay flatter. “No, I utterly refuse. You go and play. I mean to stay here and converse—not talk, I would have you note—with Sir John. I’m going to discuss with him the Einstein theory, while you young things disport yourselves idly, and,” with a sly glance at Gerard, “waste your time at a rotten old game of ball.”

They all laughed as they rose and moved off to the tennis court, Pat and Gerard as partners against Betty Bellingham and Mrs. Forsyth, the doctor’s new wife, a stalwart, plain young woman.

Teddy got up promptly and sank into a chair by Sir John’s side.

“I want to ask your advice about pig-keeping, Sir John,” he said, as he lighted a cigarette. There was an entirely different note in his voice, an alert look in his eyes. “Watson is keen for us to start in with a hundred Middle-Whites. He declares it’s a thoroughly paying proposition, and goodness knows we want something as a set-off to our expenses, which seem to increase every month. The Governor isn’t dead nuts on it, but if I vote for it and take the whole business in hand, he’s willing to let me have a try.”

“My advice is—follow Watson’s. He’s a sound man, and has had considerable experience. If you start in a small way, as he suggests, you can’t go far wrong. I’ve been thinking of doing the same thing myself, more as a fresh interest, as far as I am concerned, than as a source of income. You see, when Pat marries, as, of course, she will one day, I shall want things to fill more of my time.”

“Yes.” Teddy’s eyes, so often sleepy and lazy, but intelligent enough now, were fixed on Pat as she took a couple of balls from Gerard’s racquet. “I suppose she’ll marry Gerard Napier in the end. It’s been plain enough from the beginning he’s head-over-ears in love with her. I wasn’t sure of her. But—forgive me, Sir John, if I’m butting in, I’m afraid she’s a bit keen, too, now.”

“Why do you say ‘afraid’?” Sir John asked sharply.

“Of course only because I know what it will mean to you to lose her. Though, of course—I’ll be honest—I don’t think him good enough—no, not exactly that—perhaps I ought to say not old enough for Pat. She’s not like most girls. You know I should have been in love with her myself years ago if I hadn’t realized I hadn’t and never should have an earthly. Now, of course, Betty is everything in the world to me. But all the same I know Pat is—is, oh, I can only repeat—not like most girls. She’s so—big. Napier isn’t big enough for her—yet. But of course, he’ll grow,” he added as an afterthought.

“That’s just my feeling,” Sir John returned in a worried tone.

“I know he’s as straight as a die,” Edward went on quickly. “He doesn’t drink or gamble, or waste his time or—or do any of the silly old things an ordinary rotter like myself does. I didn’t mean to crab him or queer his pitch. He’s no end of a fine fellow really, and if Pat thinks him good enough, then I expect he is. Perhaps I was a swine even to say what I did. I like him myself no end. It’s only that—oh, well, you know. Pat ought to marry a Prime Minister or a Prince Regent or someone of that sort, a man with a big outlook and wide interests.”

For a moment Sir John’s hand rested on his shoulder. There was a strong friendship and mutual respect between the middle-aged man and the young heir to the Pelton Barony.

“I know. But, as you say, if Pat passes him, that ought to be enough. It’ll have to be enough, anyway.” Then, with a sudden change of tone, “When do you and Betty mean to get married?”

“Not till the autumn, at earliest. Of course, I want to be married at once, but Betty won’t leave her mother yet. You see, Mrs. Bellingham has been ordered to Switzerland for two or three months after that long illness of hers and Betty insists on going with her. As soon as they come back she has promised to marry me, so I can’t say anything more, can I?”

“No. And being one of the older generation, I think Betty is right. Her mother has put her first all her life, now I think Betty should put her mother first. Am glad she does. Now come along into the house and join me in a whisky and soda. It’s no use waiting for Napier. He doesn’t touch anything but lemonade!”

## Chapter 4

It was not till the following afternoon, after lunch, that Gerard got his opportunity.

On his first evening Pat, suddenly panic-stricken, had persuaded Teddy and Betty to stay to dinner.

It had been a cheery evening, for directly after dinner Pat had turned on the gramophone in the hall and they had danced for more than an hour. Gerard had been right when he had said he was not a good dancer. He was too stiff, too precise, but both Betty and Pat declared before the end of the evening that he had improved considerably.

When at last Betty had said she must go home and she and Edward had taken their leave, Pat had said she was tired and must go to bed. Gerard had tried to persuade her to one more dance, but she had replied decisively she was too sleepy for anything and, having said good night somewhat breathlessly, had made quickly for the staircase.

The following morning after breakfast he had suggested a walk, but Pat, with a very determined hand on her father's arm, had said she wanted to play golf and they would play a three-ball match on the links some four or five miles away. So Pat had ordered the small car and insisted on driving with her father in front, while Gerard sat in the dickey behind. It was a lovely morning, the links fairly empty, and they were all on their game, yet Gerard's fair face was distinctly sombre as they drove home in the same order just in time for lunch.

But after lunch Gerard's luck turned, for Sir John's lawyer turned up unexpectedly from Gloucester, saying that as he had to come to Westlea he had called on the chance of finding him free, as there was an important matter he wanted to discuss.

Pat looked at the closing door as her father and Mr. Weston entered the library and made a step forward.

"No good, Pat," Gerard said. "They don't want you. What do you say to going down to the summer-house?"

"Or what do you say to a game of tennis?" Pat said hopefully.

“No, thank you. Much too hot. Come, Pat, I haven’t had one word alone with you since I came.”

For a moment she hesitated. Then she went a little pale. She knew the moment had come and she would have to make her decision. But she still did not know what she was going to say.

“All right. Perhaps it will be cooler there.”

She picked up a garden sunshade lying on a chair and held it over her burnished, shingled head that shone like a polished red-brown chestnut, as they walked across the lawn to the thatched summer-house, facing away from the house.

Inside there were two or three big wicker chairs and a table with a box of cigarettes and some matches and an ash tray.

Pat sat down, trying to look utterly unconscious as she pointed to the cigarettes.

“Smoke, won’t you? Only remember the rule: ashtray, not the floor, because of the old wood.”

But Gerard was not interested in cigarettes. He had gone quite pale and his hands were trembling a little.

“I don’t want to smoke. I want to talk to you. You’ve kept me at arm’s length ever since I came down, though you knew how terribly I have wanted to talk to you.”

“Well, I should have thought you had talked quite a lot,” she answered with a little unsteady laugh.

“Yes, but I’ve said nothing. You asked me last year to wait and I’ve waited. I’ve passed all my exams now and already I’ve been promised a brief for the autumn. Old Jarvis, Mr. Napier’s solicitor, has promised me one, perhaps two. I know it’s uphill work, and I don’t expect to make a fortune all at once. But I’ve got enough for us both to live on while I’m waiting. And—oh, Pat, I love you so dreadfully. Can’t you—won’t you try to learn to care for me a little?” His voice broke suddenly, as he leant forward and laid his hands on her shoulders.

Pat’s eyes were veiled as she said slowly, “I wish I knew, Gerard, but I don’t think I do know.”

His spirits rose. The last time she had definitely refused to listen to him. This time she was temporizing, hesitating.

“I love you so,” he whispered. “There has never been anyone but you. For two years I have thought of you—only you. It has been you who have driven me to work when I might have played; it has been the hope of persuading you to love me that has been with me every day and every night. Your dear, beautiful face has come between my eyes and my books, again and again. I will do anything in the world to try to make you happy if only you will let me.” Suddenly the stilted phrases broke and he cried out in longing, “Oh, Pat, I love you so!”

With a little hoarse sound he flung his arms round her and tried to draw her close to him. Just at first she resisted. She was not sure she was ready to yield. The streak of cold virginity which had hitherto kept all her lovers at arm’s length, still made her struggle against the allure of his passion, against the rising tide of her own. But suddenly her resistance broke, as a wave of strange, unknown feeling surged through her every vein.

In another moment his lips were seeking hers, and, as she surrendered, she lay limp and trembling in his arms.

At last he lifted his head and there was a strange intoxication in his arms.

“Oh, my darling,” he whispered, “I can hardly believe it. Is it really true?”

She put her hands on his shoulders and drew back a little.

“You won’t expect too much, Gerard? I mean, you won’t ask me to leave Dad for ages?”

His face fell. “But, my darling, why not? If you love me, and if you will put up with a modest home, there’s nothing to stop our being married at once. In any case it would be years before I could give you a home anything like this. If I had to wait for that, why—we should be old people.”

“Don’t be silly, Gerard. You know I wasn’t thinking of that. I’m not afraid of being poor. Besides, Dad will help us. It isn’t that. But I don’t want to marry anyone, not even you, yet.”

His eyes clouded. “But you can’t really love me then. I feel I can’t bear to think I’ve got to leave you ever again. I want to be with you every minute of the day.”

“Of course, if you don’t think it worth while waiting for me— —”

In a moment his eager young mouth silenced her.

“I would wait for you to the end of my life! Only don’t make it longer than you must. Oh, my dear, I will try to be good enough for you, indeed I will.”

Pat smiled at him.

“You? Why, it’s you that are too good. I shall always be afraid of shocking you.”

Gerard shook his head. “How could you? I know I shall be pretty well hated by all your friends, for they will all think it infernal cheek of me asking you to marry me, and of course they’ll be perfectly right.”

“For goodness’ sake, don’t put me on a pedestal, Gerard! I’m a very human woman and I’ve been thoroughly spoilt all my life. You’ll soon find out I’m chock-full of faults and I warn you I’m awfully used to my own way. We are bound to disagree and to quarrel.”

She slipped her hand into his as she spoke with a little confiding gesture that made him lift it to his lips in open adoration.

“We shan’t quarrel,” he said with triumphant assurance. “We are both too sensible and level-headed. When you are right I shall give in, and when I am right you will give in.”

Pat gave a joyous little chuckle as she shook her head. “I don’t promise. Dad always lets me think I’m right.”

“Well, I expect you are, so that’ll be all serene. Do you know, your father wrote me such a wonderful letter? I thought it only right to tell him before I came this time that I was going to try to make you promise to marry me. When he answered my letter he said that was a matter for you alone and that he didn’t want to discuss it either with me or with you before I had spoken to you. He said he thought all that was sacred to just you and me, if we were the right man and woman for each other, and that I could talk to him afterwards if you were willing to think of me.”

“That’s just like Dad,” Pat answered, as she allowed her lover to draw her head against his shoulder. “He’s an incurable romantic. He just adored my mother, but they were married for barely a year, for she died when I was born. He has never looked at another woman since—until lately. Now, though he doesn’t know it, he is in love with someone who I wish with all my heart would marry him, but I fear she won’t.”

“Perhaps, if she only would, that would reconcile you to marrying me sooner than you threaten. Who is she? Anyone I know?”

Pat shook her head. "No, though I have written to you about her. Mrs. Graham has only been in Westlea about three months. I'm probably taking you to play tennis there to-morrow. I love and admire her more than I can say, Gerard. If I were a man of her own age I should be wildly in love with her. She's beautiful, she's distinguished, she's clever, she's big-minded, and yet so gentle and—I think feminine is the word I want. I'd love it if only she'd marry Dad."

"And won't she?"

"Well, he hasn't asked her for one thing! But if he does, I fear it'll be no use. I once said something to her about marrying again. I shall never forget how she looked when she said, 'Never, never again!'"

"Then she's a widow?"

"Yes. I believe her husband died ages ago. But it's plain she doesn't like talking about him. She either loved or hated him so much that it's obviously painful to talk about him at all. In fact, she won't. I want you to love her as much as I do."

"I'm bound to love anyone you love, Pat. Of course, I want to see your paragon."

Pat turned her head as a long coo-ee sounded through the garden.

"You hear that? That's Betty. We must go."

He drew her close to him again.

"Oh, no, no! I want to keep you all to myself," he urged insistently.

For a few seconds she clung to him, while that strange thrill ran again along her veins.

"We've got all the years, dear heart. Oh, Gerard, I think I am very glad we love each other."

He pressed his lips to her beautiful shining eyes, closing the dark-fringed lids.

"I'm so happy I feel I could die with happiness. There isn't a single thing left in the world for me to wish for," he whispered. "In giving you to me Fate has given me everything."

As he spoke a sudden shadow fell across the glorious afternoon, as a heavy thundercloud that had been gathering tumultuously passed before the face of the sun and the air became sensibly, if only momentarily, chilled.

Pat gave a little shiver.

“Oh, don’t, Gerard, don’t say that. It sounds like tempting Fate. There’s lots more to look for. Come, there’s Betty calling again. Coming, Betty, coming.”

## Chapter 5

“Well, my lad, what is it?”

Sir John turned the swivel chair in front of his writing table round as Gerard entered the room.

“Can you spare me a few minutes, sir?”

Sir John’s heart sank. Gerard’s face was aglow and triumphant. There was no earthly doubt as to what he had come about.

“As long as you want. Sit down.” He did his best to speak heartily, but it was an effort.

Gerard sat down on an upright chair. He had no nervousness now. That had gone when Pat had admitted her love for him.

“I want to speak to you about Pat. When you wrote as you did when I told you I meant to ask her to marry me, I supposed you wouldn’t object to me. You would have told me not to come if you had.”

“Quite right—I should. I suppose, as a matter of fact, I ought to be grateful that you referred the matter to me at all.”

“That was only your right. After all, you are Pat’s father and have done everything for her all her life. I don’t mean that if you’d turned me down I shouldn’t still have tried to win her, for I should. But I should have told her you were against me. I would have fought for her in the open.”

“That’s all right,” Sir John returned gruffly, wondering why he wasn’t more attracted by this frank confession which told so to the lad’s credit. “I take it you have spoken to Pat?”

“Yes, sir.” His voice rang with triumph. “And she’s done me the honour to say she’ll marry me some day.”

Sir John stretched out his hand and gripped the younger man’s. “You are right, it is an honour, though I am Pat’s father. Well, well, it had to come some day. But I warn you, if ever you give her one hour’s unhappiness, I’ll smash your head in, as surely as my name is John Mannering!”

The smile on his fine clear-cut lips robbed the words of their sting.

Gerard’s blue eyes, as clear and honest as a boy’s, met his unflinchingly.

“I should deserve it. I can only say that from the bottom of my heart I love her, and I’ll do my very best to deserve her and to make her happy.”

“Good lad. Light up, won’t you?” Sir John pushed a box of cigars towards him.

“I ought to tell you a little about myself. My guardian left me everything he had. His estate brings me in about a thousand a year now. But part of his capital is invested in a gold mine in South Africa, where they have just come across a marvellous vein of ore and, according to the latest reports, my interest in it is likely to increase enormously within the year. Then, of course, there’s my profession, and I’ve got some good friends who’ve promised to help me. I—I mean to get on.”

“I’m sure you will, too. You’ve got brains and application. I’m not afraid of the future. Besides, of course, I shall make a substantial settlement on Pat on her wedding day. But what of the past? I understand you are not Mr. Napier’s own son?”

“No.” Gerard’s face clouded. “That’s my one trouble in life. To tell you the honest truth, I don’t know who my father was!”

Sir John sat bolt upright. “You don’t know who your parents were?”

“No. Of course, when I was a kid, I didn’t think or care anything about it. Uncle William, as I called Mr. Napier, just told me, as soon as I was old enough to understand anything, that both my parents were dead and that I belonged to him entirely and to no one else. He was living in Scotland when he adopted me, but he left directly after and went to Hampstead, where we knew no one. So of course no one questioned me. It was generally accepted that I was Mr. Napier’s nephew, as well as his adopted son.”

“I see. And what did you think yourself?”

“I didn’t think. I took things for granted. Only when I was older I began to wonder, and I remember it was during the holidays after my first term at Winchester that I asked Uncle William to tell me about my father and mother.”

“Well, what did he tell you?” Sir John’s eyes were fixed on the young fellow’s troubled face.

“Nothing. At least it amounted to nothing. He just said they had been friends of his and, when they had died, as they had both done when I was between three and four, he had adopted me. He refused peremptorily to tell me anything more and there was no one else I could ask. Even the servants

who had been with him when I first went to live with him had stayed behind in Scotland and of course I had been too young then even to remember their names.”

“What an extraordinary thing! I—forgive me, Napier, but it sounds to me distinctly fishy. Unless there was something he very much wished to hide from you about them, why shouldn’t he tell you? It was your right to know.” Sir John spoke with some vehemence. He felt it was his right, as Pat’s father, to know too.

“Of course it was. But every time I referred to the subject, as I did once or twice afterwards, he got so annoyed and so upset I really couldn’t persist. He refused to discuss the matter with me. Said I was his legal son, as he had made the adoption according to law, and that was sufficient for me and everyone else. The old man was such a brick to me I didn’t like to pester him. But if I had, it would have done no good. He was as obstinate as a mule over anything he had made up his mind about. But I found out something last week which is a great relief to my mind.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, that my people were gentlepeople and—and married and all that. That was what I was afraid of—that I was illegitimate. I will confess that at one time I thought I was an illegitimate son of Uncle William himself. But that’s all right. I went to see Jarvis two or three days before I came down here, and told him he must be able to tell me something. He was so much in my uncle’s confidence that he must know who I was. He admitted he did know, but that he had given his word of honour to Uncle Will never to tell me. He himself said he saw no earthly reason why I shouldn’t know—had, in fact, done his best to persuade my uncle to tell me when I was twenty-one, but it was no good. But when I put it to him that I loved someone and didn’t feel it was fair to ask her to marry me if I was illegitimate or if I had been born in the slums—for I think you know how strongly I believe in the laws of heredity—he told me this much—that my people were well-born and married. I do hope you’ll think that enough, sir?”

He looked anxiously at Sir John, who was frowning heavily. “But why make a mystery of your birth in that case? I think it’s most unfair.”

“So do I. Though I must say an immense load has been taken off my mind in learning as much as I have. Old Jarvis did his best to make out there was no mystery—that Mr. Napier might just as well have told me the names of my parents, who were friends of his. He declared it was just a whim of

his. But that, as he had given his word of honour not to tell me what my uncle had withheld, he could do no more.”

“I see. Well, perhaps if you’ll give me Mr. Jarvis’ address I’ll go and see him myself some time when I am in London.”

“And you won’t let it tell against me with regard to Pat?”

Gerard rose to his feet as he flung his cigar stump out of the window.

“No, no. I know well enough that sort of thing doesn’t count nowadays. Pat certainly won’t allow it to count if she loves you.”

At that moment the door opened and Pat herself came in.

“Well, Dad?” She paused and looked from the one man who had been everything to her, father, mother, friend, for twenty-one years, to the man to whom she had just promised the rest of her life.

“Come here, my dear,” Sir John said.

She went over to him and he pulled her down on to his knee. “Napier has just been telling me you want to leave me for him. Is that true?”

“No, Dad, not that. I want to keep you both.”

Her eyes suddenly pricked with tears at the tone in his voice.

“But you want to marry him?”

Pat’s face went a little pale.

“Yes,” she answered steadily.

“Then I’ve nothing to say but bless you, my children. Be good to her, Napier. You’re a very lucky young devil.”

“I know that, Sir John.”

Pat ran her fingers over the back of her father’s hand.

“You know his name is Gerard, don’t you, Dad?”

“Sorry.” Sir John forced a laugh. “What are you and Gerard going to do now? I’m going into the village. Are you coming with me?”

“No, I wish we could,” Pat answered regretfully. “But I promised Mrs. Forsyth we’d go in there to listen to the doctor’s new wireless. We had better be off, Gerard.”

“Righto.”

Slipping his hand through her arm, Gerard left the room with Pat, and Sir John was left alone.

With a sigh he realized it would always be like that now. He would no longer be first with Pat. Her mate had claimed her and his claims would be paramount. Well, it was the law of nature. But in his own case it had worked for such a short time. He had claimed Pat's mother from her father, but she had died in less than a year from their marriage—such a frail, gentle girl, that her slender body had not been able to survive the strain put upon it in bringing his child into the world. Alicia had given him Pat to take her place, but she herself had drifted away on a sea of weakness after a nightmare of torture.

He had gone nearly out of his mind when he realized that she would never speak to him again, never again wander with him round their beautiful home, taking stock of every tree, of every flower.

For nearly a year he had left his baby in the care of nurses while he had wandered the world over, trying to find cessation from heartache. But the first real assuagement he had experienced had been on the night of his return, when the nurse, who had resented his long ignoring of her charge, had put the child into his arms and had left them alone.

Pat had looked up at him with his wife's eyes. After a prolonged stare the small crimson mouth had widened into his wife's smile. And in that moment Pat had smiled herself straight into her father's heart.

After that there was no question of his leaving The Court again. He settled down to his duties of squire and magistrate until the war came, when he offered himself repeatedly, over-age though he was for active service, only to be rejected time and again on account of his age and defective eyesight. At last he was taken on as an ambulance driver in the French Army, and remained in France until the end of the war.

And in all those years no woman had made any appeal to him. He had never been tempted for a single second to put anyone in Alicia's place. Pat had been all-sufficient for him.

But now for the very first time, as he realized how empty The Court would seem and how lonely he would be when Pat had gone, the thought consciously came into his mind that it might be possible to bring home another woman to take her place, a woman who would be mate as well as companion.

A slow, dark flush ebbed into his face as for the first time he consciously thought of Eleanor Graham as his wife. He had thought her beautiful from the first, he had realized her charm and distinction, her quick brain, but he had only thought of her as a friend, as a delightful addition to their somewhat restricted circle.

His pulses quickened as they had not quickened for over twenty years as he thought of what it would be like to have her as mistress of his home, to see her dignified, gracious figure moving about the house, to see her clear-cut, still beautiful face, with its crown of marvellous white hair, leaning against the cushions of the chair opposite him.

After Pat had gone it would be horribly lonely on long winter evenings, when there was nothing to be done out of doors, nothing to be done indoors but to read and sleep and go to bed. But supposing someone were to take—not Pat's place, but a place all her own?

He got up abruptly and, whistling for Nellie, the brown setter, he left the house.

## Chapter 6

Eleanor Graham stood in front of her looking-glass, staring at herself. She had tried on almost every dress in her wardrobe, and had finally decided on a black crêpe-de-chine.

There came a light knock at the door and Nannie entered.

She gave a little cry of dismay when she saw her mistress.

“Why, Miss Eleanor, what on earth have you put on a black dress for—such a lovely day as it is?”

“Because I think it’s more suitable. It looks older.”

“And what for do you want to make yourself older than you need? Take it off, Miss Eleanor, and put on your blue and white. You know how Miss Pat admires you in that.”

“Yes. But I’m not dressing for Miss Pat to-day. I am dressing for—him.”

She turned away to hide the glow in her eyes.

Nannie shook her head. “You’re building too much on it. If he’s like most young gentlemen he’ll think, just because your beautiful hair is white, you’re old. With young ladies like Miss Pat and Miss Bellingham about, he—maybe he won’t notice you much at all.”

Nannie’s cynicism could not quench the glow in Eleanor’s eyes.

“Of course, I’m prepared for that. But I want him to be—shall I say ‘favourably impressed’? And I am sure he is more likely to be if he thinks I am suitably dressed, and being twenty-four—twenty-four and three months to be exact—he is bound to think white hair and black should go together.”

Nannie still looked discontented. “Well, you aren’t going to wear that old thing, are you?” pointing to a plain dark straw hat on the bed.

“No, I know feathers are thoroughly inadmissible on a county hat, but I *do* look nice in my new black tagel, don’t I, Nannie? I really must wear it.”

She gave a little excited laugh like a girl as she lifted out of its box a small shady hat with a clump of tiny black and orange feathers at one side, set at an angle only achieved by a Parisian hand, and pulled it well down over her carefully waved hair.

“Ah, that’s better,” Nannie said, “that brightens you up a bit. Anyway, there isn’t anyone in Westlea who can hold a candle to you for looks.”

Eleanor smiled.

“Well, if only he thinks I am nice to look at, I don’t care about anything else. Oh, Nannie, Nannie, I can’t believe it. Think—it’s over twenty years since I’ve seen him, twenty long years. And now at last I shall see him, touch him!”

There was a sob in her voice, though her eyes were dry and bright as she passed her fingers down the old woman’s arm, fingers that, in imagination, were touching a very different arm, a strong muscular man’s arm—or was it a soft baby’s?

“I only hope you won’t be sorry afterwards.”

“Why should I be? Don’t be such an old croaker, Nannie. Even if I never see him again I shall know just how he looks, what his voice is like, how he laughs. I’ve had to live on imagination all these years. Now I shall know.”

“I know that. But I’m afraid. I feel as if no good’ll come of it. It isn’t as if you could tell him, as if you could be open and above-board.”

“No. I can never tell him.” All the light faded out of Eleanor’s eyes. “He must never know. I shall never, never hear him say ‘Mother.’ Think, Nannie, I’ve never heard that word used to me. For just a little while I was ‘Mummy,’ but for such a little while.”

“Miss Eleanor, it’s not like you to be upsetting yourself like this,” the old servant said sternly, but her own eyes were smarting with the tears she was holding back. “And you’ve got to finish dressing. It’s nearly four o’clock and they may be here any minute.”

She slowly left the room, a heavy foreboding at her heart. Some hidden sense was telling her that the scene so carefully set, the plans so elaborately made by the mistress she adored were doomed to disappointment. And “Miss Eleanor” had suffered so much. She could not bear to think she was deliberately courting more disappointment. Why could she not have left well alone? If she had borne all she had for twenty years, why not have continued along the old paths she knew, paths which at least had brought peace, if nothing else?

“I don’t know why, but I feel it’s all going wrong,” Nannie said to herself as she went downstairs to put the finishing touches to the tea-table,

“though it may be only the looking-glass I broke yesterday. Only I wish we’d never come down here!”

Upstairs Eleanor was standing still, holding in her hands a small, old-fashioned locket which she always wore round her neck on a slender platinum chain long enough for the locket to be concealed by any dress except a low-cut one. Very slowly she lifted it to her lips and held it there for a few minutes before she replaced it in the bosom of her gown.

Then she turned and, after a final glance at herself in the mirror, went downstairs.

Teddy Elliott and Betty Bellingham, together with Philip Mason, the Vicar’s son, just down from Cambridge, were the first to arrive.

The two former greeted their hostess with vociferous affection, for they were almost as great admirers as was Pat herself.

Teddy lifted the long, beautiful hand to his lips with an exaggerated deference that was only half-assumed. “Greetings, O beautiful lady. May we introduce a new member to your court? Philip, my boy, you haven’t met Mrs. Graham yet. You may worship—but from afar, or beware of my jealousy, which brooks no rival!”

Mrs. Graham’s eyes were very tender as they rested on Teddy’s sleek, dark head for a moment before she turned to the new-comer. For the sake of one boy she loved all young things, especially all young men, and Teddy Elliott had a very warm corner in her heart.

“Don’t be put off me, Mr. Mason, by Mr. Elliott’s absurdities. I’m quite a sedate, middle-aged woman really.”

“It is rude to contradict a woman, I know,” returned Philip Mason, a plain, honest-faced young giant. “But I’m certain you could never be anything but young, and, if only you’ll let me, I mean to try and earn Teddy’s jealousy. You see, I’ve heard such a lot of you from him and Betty, although I only came home last night, that I was three-parts in love with you even before I saw you.”

“I wonder what there is in Westlea air that breeds such courtiers,” Eleanor said gaily, her spirits rising. “I’ve never had such delightful things said to me in my life as I’ve had said to me by young men since I came here.”

“And girls,” chimed in Betty. “You know Pat and I feel just the same as Teddy.”

“I know you are all far too kind and sweet to me,” Eleanor said, suddenly grave. “Between you, you have given me the happiest three months I’ve known for many, many years, although Miss Beasley does disapprove of me so strongly!”

“Oh, Miss Beasley,” returned Betty scornfully. “She is the prime village cat—all claws and fuss!”

“Don’t malign cats to me,” Eleanor said warningly. “You know my devotion to them, especially to my Regal. Come and sit down in the shade until a fourth turns up. I am expecting Pat and a man friend who is staying at The Court.”

Betty turned to her, her dark piquante little face eager at being the first to impart a piece of interesting news.

“Haven’t you heard from Pat or seen her since yesterday?”

“No.” Eleanor shook her head. “I haven’t seen her for two or three days.”

“Then you haven’t heard about her and Gerard Napier?”

“No—nothing.”

“They’ve followed our good example,” began Teddy. But Betty broke in indignantly.

“Don’t be mean, Teddy. Let me tell! They’re engaged, Mrs. Graham.”

Eleanor sat perfectly still, her face strangely set and white.

“Engaged—Pat and—and— —”

“Yes, Gerard Napier. Of course, Teddy and I have been expecting to hear it for the past year, for it was as plain as a pikestaff when he was down last summer he was head-over-ears in love with her. Pat has refused two or three splendid men lately, to say nothing of men who could never have had any chance. Well, what did she do that for, if she wasn’t in love with Gerard? But, friends though we are, she would never say a thing. She’d never own up it was Gerard.”

“I—I can’t take it in. Pat and Gerard—Mr. Napier.”

Edward, who was watching her, wondered why she looked so strange, so—if it hadn’t been so absurd—so perturbed. She had never met Napier, for he had not been in Westlea since she had come there about three months

ago. Therefore she had no reason for thinking the engagement was not highly satisfactory.

“Yes, but it’s quite true. Ah, here they come. Here are Pat and Gerard.”

Eleanor rose unsteadily to her feet as for a moment everything was blotted out, the sunlit garden, the group of chattering young people around her, the two white-clad figures approaching her across the lawn, it seemed as if a cloud descended on her senses, numbing them, stifling her.

In an impulse of self-preservation, as she swayed forward, she put out her hands and grasped the back of a wooden garden seat.

The contact of the hard wood steadied her, and the singing in her ears grew less as her eyes cleared.

With a violent effort she forced her mind, as it were, to attention. Never through all the nightmare years of the past had she lost her self-control. She told herself sternly that whatever happened she must not lose it now.

A moment later she was advancing to meet the newcomers with a still smile on her white face.

Pat, as usual, only shook hands. She kept her rare kisses for occasions when they were alone. But her eyes, shy in her new happiness, looked significantly into Eleanor’s for a moment as she said,

“May I introduce Mr. Napier? Gerard, this is my Mrs. Graham, of whom I have told you so much.”

A swift, unconcerned handclasp and Gerard had turned to answer the eager, somewhat excited greeting of Betty Bellingham.

The moment had passed, the moment for which she had schemed and planned, the moment of which she had dreamed. A drama in miniature had just been enacted and no one had eyes to see it.

As in a dream, Eleanor found herself quietly asking Pat if she would like to play or to have tea first.

“Oh, tea, please,” she answered, sinking down into a chair. “We’ve walked over. Dad is coming presently in the car to fetch us. He says he knows you didn’t ask him, but he’s coming all the same.”

“Of course, I shall be delighted to see him. Pat, dear,” she lowered her voice for a moment as the others all clustered round Gerard, ragging him, “Is it true—about you and Mr. Napier?”

Pat nodded as she held out her left hand, on the third finger of which gleamed a large single diamond. "Yes. I should have written, only I knew I was going to see you to-day."

"Oh, my dear, I hope you will be very happy."

Pat looked up at the low passionate voice, "I feel sure I shall be. I must talk to you presently. Arrange it so that I have a few minutes alone with you, will you? Ah, Regal, you angel, come here, you beautiful thing."

She stooped and picked up the great Persian, who, still blinking sleepily, had slowly approached her from a soft, sunlit bed of forget-me-not plants. She snuggled him close in her arms, a liberty which Regal permitted, as he was graciously pleased to permit Pat's attentions, a favour he did not accord to everyone.

Eleanor rose. "All of you come along into the house, will you? I have had tea put in the drawing-room. I think it's cooler in there."

Her eyes strayed to Gerard Napier, but he was sparring with Betty, who seemed to have appropriated him.

After a second's hesitation she slipped her hand in Pat's arm and led the way into the house.

Already there was a very definite sinking at her heart. Of course, to Gerard Napier, she was merely a middle-aged friend of Pat Mannering's. But Pat had introduced her as a very special friend, and, after all, she was his hostess. Even Philip Mason had shown infinitely more interest in her!

At tea she had no chance of speaking to him. She was busy with the tea-cups and Philip Mason insisted on doing all the waiting. Her eyes kept turning to the corner of the room where Pat and Gerard sat together, but beyond a casual question as to whether he was ready for more tea, she had no word with him.

After tea was over there was a lively discussion as to who should sit out with Mrs. Graham and which four should play.

At last Betty suggested they should cast lots.

"Good idea," agreed Teddy, and in a few moments slips of paper were prepared and their names written on them. They were thrown into a hat and Mrs. Graham was asked to draw.

Her fingers shook a little as she drew out a little folded slip and read out the name.

“Philip Mason.” She kept the disappointment that surged through her out of her voice, and smiled at Philip as he said,

“Ah, I’m the lucky one! Don’t be too quick over the game, as I want my chance of cutting you out, Teddy!”

Edward went up to Mrs. Graham and held her firmly by both shoulders while he looked imploringly into her eyes.

“You won’t let him, will you? Remember I am your very best and most trusted lover. Mason looks honest and dependable, but he isn’t. He’s a gay dog and a breaker of hearts, and he doesn’t mean a word he says.”

Betty took hold of his arm. “Come along, Teddy! I won’t have you make love so violently and blatantly under my very nose, even to Mrs. Graham. Come along, I’ve bet Pat sixpence we’ll win, and I’m so hard up I can’t afford to pay, so we’ve got to win.”

“Go along, Teddy,” Mrs. Graham said with the swift smile that made her face look like a girl’s. “We’ll have our turn presently, when Betty isn’t listening.”

The set was a long, hotly-contested one, in which Betty lost her sixpence. She was the next to cut out and she was followed by Teddy and then by Pat. As each name was drawn Eleanor’s heart gave a little swift turn-over. It was getting late. Sir John might come at any time. He might come before it was Gerard’s turn to stand out, before she had her chance of talking to him. And it might be her only chance of speaking to him alone.

She found it difficult to keep the fret out of her voice as Pat sank down on to the grass at her side.

“Tired, dear?”

“Not a bit!” Pat smiled up at her. “Only hot.”

“Well, here comes Nannie with the drinks. Help yourself, dear. There’s lemonade, orangeade, and claret-cup.”

As Nannie put the tray of glasses and jugs down on the rustic table she said, “Bring out the whisky and soda, too, please, Nannie. Sir John is coming along presently and I know his little weakness.”

Pat smiled. “Yes, Dad doesn’t mind going without a drink with his dinner, but he does enjoy his peg at this time.” Then, as Nannie disappeared, she said quickly, “I’ve been longing to ask you—I hope you like my—my young man?”

“I’ve hardly spoken to him, have I, dear? But he looks straight and clean.”

Pat glanced up quickly at her tone. Mrs. Graham’s eyes were dark, almost fierce.

“He is—oh, I am sure he is. I’m only afraid I shall disappoint him. He thinks such a tremendous lot of me, and of course I’m not a bit of a saint, I’ve a quick temper, and I’m very intolerant when people don’t agree with me and— —”

“You—intolerant?” repeated Eleanor. “Why, for your age you are the most tolerant and understanding girl I ever met.”

“I’m afraid I’m not. I’m awfully intolerant of intolerance, which is really just as bad as being intolerant of weakness or wickedness.”

“Not quite. Your form of intolerance is righteous anger with narrowness and prejudice. I do hope you are going to be very, very happy, my dear.”

A little smile touched the corners of the girl’s lips. “I am—awfully happy. I have only one sad bit in me and that is very sad. I mean about Dad. Of course I shall be here a lot, but I suppose my home will be in London, and Dad will miss me so terribly.”

“Yes. He will be very lonely.”

“I don’t see why he should be really.” Pat glanced at her for a moment from under her lashes. “He is still a young man. He is only fifty-two. He would make any woman happy.”

“I am sure he would,” Eleanor returned heartily. “Is there anyone? Do you think it likely— —?”

Pat kept her eyes on her ring which she twisted round and round on her finger. “I think there is someone of whom he is very fond, someone whom he would very soon love very dearly if only she would let him. If ever he does ask her to marry him, I do hope she will say yes. I am certain she would never regret it.”

For a moment Eleanor drew in her breath. Pat’s meaning was too obvious not to recognize it.

There was a short silence before Eleanor said quietly,

“Tell me about yourself and Mr. Napier. When do you think of getting married?”

“Oh, not yet. I know long engagements are quite out of date. But I’m not ready to leave Dad. Besides, there is plenty of time. Gerard hasn’t got a home where I could go to or—or anything.”

“Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is better to wait and be quite, quite sure. Such terrible tragedies come about through people who really know nothing of each other marrying in a hurry.”

Pat moved a little nearer her, so that her burnished head leaned against the elder woman’s knee.

“Would it be impertinent of me to say I can’t help feeling you were unhappy in your marriage and that somehow the shadow of that unhappiness has lasted till now?”

“Why should you say that?” Mrs. Graham’s voice was very low.

“Oh, because—oh, because I seem just to feel it. I know you are always bright and cheerful on the outside, but you know occasionally, you let me have a glimpse of the inside—and—oh, well, I can’t put it into words.”

“My dear, I am middle-aged. And middle-age is bound to be sad sometimes. Don’t fret your dear heart about me. Make Gerard happy—and I ask nothing more.” She gave a little forced laugh. “I mean, of course, I ask nothing more than that he should make you happy. Pat, look up.”

Surprised, Pat turned round and Mrs. Graham, with a swift movement, took the upturned face between her two hands. Then she stooped her head and kissed her with strange, swift passion.

“Oh, my dear, I *pray* that he will make you happy,” she whispered with such vehemence that Pat was startled. But she had no time to answer.

A white-clad figure came round the corner of the house and a loud cheery voice called out,

“Pat, you are wanted. It’s my turn to talk to Mrs. Graham.”

A moment later Gerard had sunk into the chair by Mrs. Graham’s side and Pat, racquet in hand, was speeding towards the tennis court.

## Chapter 7

“Have you been having good games?” Mrs. Graham asked with a carefully casual smile, though the blood was racing through her veins now that at last her moment had come.

“Topping, thanks. It’s such a treat to have the chance of playing every day. Until I came down here I hadn’t played once this year. That accounts for my being a bit out of condition.”

Gerard wiped the back of his sunburnt neck with his handkerchief and then stuffed it into his pocket.

“Don’t you belong to any club in Town?”

“No. I shall now, but I determined I wouldn’t join any club that might tempt me into wasting time before I had passed all my exams. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Do. I’ll have a cigarette myself. Help yourself. There are Turkish and Virginian on the table.”

“Thanks.” He handed her the double silver box she indicated and, after she had helped herself, he lighted a match and held it, first to her cigarette, then to his own.

Mrs. Graham pointed to the tray with the refreshments.

“Won’t you have something to drink—lemonade—claret-cup? Or would you prefer a whisky and soda?”

Gerard gave a little grimace as he poured out a full tumbler of lemonade.

“No, thanks. I never touch spirits.”

“I’m glad.”

Gerard looked up. He had only just caught the low, swiftly-uttered words, but he *had* caught them, and his look of surprise, that held a hint of hauteur, caused her to add quickly,

“I mean I think it is such a pity when young people take spirits, especially when all they want is a long drink. It is only a habit in most cases, but a habit that so often leads to unfortunate results.”

“That is quite true,” Gerard agreed, putting down his empty glass. “But it is a habit I am never likely to acquire. I hate the stuff. I even dislike the smell of whisky. I drink wine sometimes, but it’s more to avoid comment than because I like it.”

There was a strange look in Mrs. Graham’s eyes which would certainly have astonished him if he had chanced to be looking at her, but he was stubbing out his cigarette on the grass.

“Don’t you think that is rather a good thing?” she suggested.

“Oh, I don’t know. Would you mind awfully if I had a pipe? You wouldn’t? Thanks. I sometimes wish I did like wine. It seems to make people so much cheerier and more amusing.”

“Don’t ever wish anything so wrong!” Mrs. Graham broke in quickly.

A look of offence crossed Gerard’s face.

“Oh come, surely you don’t think that? It’s wrong to take in excess, of course, as all excess is wrong, but not in moderation. You have wine and spirits on your own table, haven’t you?” glancing significantly at the laden tray.

“Yes, because all the people I know here are something more than moderate. If I did not know that, I certainly should provide nothing of the sort. I never touch wine myself.”

Gerard lighted his pipe and pulled at it with satisfaction.

“My dislike of the smell of spirits dates so far back, in fact as long as I can remember, that I feel certain one of my parents must have hated them. My adopted father was a rigid teetotaler and encouraged my natural and, as I believe, inherited taste—or lack of taste.”

“You sound as if you are a firm believer in heredity, Mr. Napier?”

Eleanor’s eyes were fixed on him as he lay back in the canvas garden chair, taking in every line, every curve of the handsome young face, every kink in the sunny, well-brushed hair, and her hands were clenched in her lap to resist the impulse to stretch them out and stroke the bare sunburnt arms.

“I am.” Gerard leapt to the bait and instantly mounted his hobby. “I believe its influence on our individual development is enormous, far greater even than that of environment. Environment may modify character, of course, but it can never fundamentally alter inherited characteristics.”

“It’s not a subject I have studied closely, I admit. I once read a very interesting book by some monk who experimented with flowers, somewhere in Bohemia, I fancy, but I have forgotten his name.”

“Mendel,” returned Gerard eagerly. “Yes, he was a genius, and he would have received recognition far sooner if the scientific world had not been absorbed in Darwin’s theories expressed in *The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man*, at the time Mendel made his discoveries. But if you are interested you ought to read Lombroso and Sir Francis Galton. Lombroso proves effectually that crime is nearly always induced by inherited insanity or alcoholism. But— —” he stopped abruptly, “I beg your pardon. Elliott pulled me up the other day when I got on to heredity, telling me I was an unmitigated bore.”

He laughed a little self-consciously.

“It doesn’t bore me. I am very interested,” Mrs. Graham said. “I shall certainly try to get hold of some books by Lombroso. Have you succeeded in interesting Pat in the subject?”

“Oh, she’s interested in any thing that has an intelligent bearing on the problems of life,” Gerard returned rather sententiously. “Though she hasn’t yet made a special study of heredity, she will, I know, now she knows how keen I am on it.”

“It will be delightful for you if you are both interested in the same things and can work together, for she is as clever as she is sweet and charming. You know you are a very, very lucky man, Mr. Napier, to have won Pat.”

“I do know it.” Instead of expanding to the praise of his sweetheart, something inexplicable made Gerard draw back. It was almost as though he resented it. “I fully realize my good fortune.” There was a definite chill in his voice.

Mrs. Graham’s lips were a little tremulous as she said “I wonder if you do? You know, Mr. Napier, we women know each other as we really are— as, I know, you men claim to know each other. You often say that if a woman would only accept a man’s estimate of the man she proposes to marry, there would be far fewer unhappy women. Well, the same thing applies the other way round. If only men would sometimes listen to their sisters and mothers about the girls they propose to marry!”

“I agree with you. Life would probably be infinitely happier if people were to know more about each other, their tastes and so on, before they agreed to spend their lives together.”

“With Pat,” Mrs. Graham went on, “there is nothing to know that is not beautiful and sweet. Mr. Napier, I am old enough to be your mother, and Pat has no mother of her own, so forgive me if I speak as a mother might. You see, I may not see you alone again. Just now you are in love with her, but, in the time to come, when Love has to take the place of Being in Love, never lose your tenderness for her. A woman’s heart is a thing very easily hurt—and broken.”

Her voice shook as her eyes yearned towards him. But he was not looking at her. Instead, he was gazing with a frown in the direction of the tennis court, just out of sight. He was wishing the others would come and break the tête-à-tête with his hostess. He was vaguely uncomfortable. He felt she was being quite unnecessarily intense, and he had no desire to discuss the girl he loved with a complete stranger. He had not taken that instant fancy to her which Pat had told him he would take. To his own astonishment he felt a vague antagonism. He felt that, as a stranger, she was approaching far too near, that her little outburst to him was thoroughly out-of-place. Instead of touching him or appealing to him, it left him cold, almost annoyed.

“I fully realize,” he said at last, “that I am a very lucky man. I assure you, as I have already assured Pat’s father, that I shall do my utmost not to fail my own wife.”

The covert snub was not lost on Eleanor, who drew back, quivering with the smart of the unmistakable rebuff.

“And you think it is nobody else’s business?”

Gerard looked uncomfortable.

“I am sorry if I was rude. I didn’t mean to be. I know how fond you are of Pat. I told her that I knew all her friends would hate me, because none of them would think me good enough for her.”

“Ah, it isn’t that! And you must not resent an old woman’s interest in the love story of—of a girl she loves and the man she has chosen. Don’t be vexed with me, Mr. Napier.”

She held out a hand with a swift impulsive movement. As Gerard turned to take it he saw her eyes were filled with tears.

“I say, Mrs. Graham, I hope you didn’t think me an awful bear just now!” he said quickly. “I’m sorry if I said anything that was discourteous.”

“Of course you didn’t. I quite understand. Pat’s love is so new and so wonderful to you, you don’t want any hand, not even that of an old woman who loves her, to touch it. It was I who was clumsy. It was just because I am so wishing with my whole heart that you will both be happy that I spoke perhaps too frankly.”

“No, no. It was awfully kind of you.” The feeling of discomfort had returned. In her portrait of Mrs. Graham Pat had suggested a calm, cultured, self-contained woman. The woman he was talking to appeared emotional almost to the point of hysteria.

“You see,” Mrs. Graham went on, speaking more calmly and steadily. “You are both such children still. Pat is only twenty-one, and you—to me you are still a boy.”

“I am twenty-four,” Gerald interrupted.

“Twenty-four! With all your life before you. Only twenty-four and yet you are planning to get married! You know marriage is so irrevocable, for good or evil. It can be Heaven or Hell. I hope you are going to make it Heaven for Pat. You have so much to make up for!”

“You mean for Sir John and her home? I know that.”

“I didn’t mean only that. I was thinking so many men make marriage a Hell for so many women, that it is up to some other men to try and redress the balance. Now I’m talking in riddles which you can’t understand.” She ended abruptly. She realized that his interest was definitely wandering, that he was vaguely impatient and out of sympathy with her.

She rose swiftly. “The others must surely have nearly finished their game. Shall we go and see how they are getting on? It is unfortunate that there is no shade round the court where we can sit and watch. But in any case there would be no room for chairs.”

He jumped up with alacrity. “It’s a topping court, but the run-back is a bit too short. Don’t you play yourself? I feel sure you must.”

Now that they were off sentimental ground Gerard had recovered his lost poise and turned with smiling courtesy to his hostess.

“I’ll let you into a secret. I do sometimes play a single with Pat when no one is looking. But I made her promise not to give me away. All young people love to play and, however polite they are, in their hearts they resent an old woman keeping them off the court. So I always say I don’t play.”

She had quite regained her ordinary smiling calm.

“But you are not old,” expostulated Gerard.

“Of course forty-three isn’t old to men and women, but it is to boys and girls. Well served, Pat!” she called out gaily as they turned the corner and saw Pat serve a splendid overhand service which was the winning stroke of the set.

As the players strolled away from the court, Sir John came round the corner of the house.

“Your old Nannie told me to come straight round here, Mrs. Graham.”

Eleanor turned to greet him. “Of course. So glad you could come. But I hope you don’t want to take your young people away yet? There’s plenty of time for another set.”

“I certainly don’t,” he replied, wondering at the sudden feeling of youth and vitality that seemed to be running through his veins. “I want to stay and talk to you, if you’ll let me.”

“Delighted. Now which of you is going to sit out?” She turned to the group of white-clad boys and girls, looking so fresh, so happy, so healthy in mind and body, clustered round her.

“I’m afraid I’ve got to be the unlucky one.” Philip Mason said regretfully. “For I shall be late now. I promised the pater I’d be in by a quarter to seven. I shall have to sprint as it is. I’ve had the best afternoon I’ve had for ages, Mrs. Graham. Thanks most awfully for letting me come.”

“I’m so glad to know you,” Eleanor said, taking his hand and meeting the honest grey eyes with smiling friendliness. “I hope you’ll come again very soon.”

“Would to-morrow morning at nine o’clock be too early?”

“Not a bit,” she laughed. “I’m an early bird. But I warn you, if you do you’ll have to work. I look after the garden myself, and I work all the morning. Mr. Elliott knows that, so I will whisper in your ear that he is too afraid of what I may set him to do ever to come here before three in the afternoon!”

“Is that fair?” Teddy said reproachfully. “To prove it isn’t true, I shall come here to-morrow at 8.55 and forestall Philip with the worms.”

“Oh, no, you won’t,” Betty said. “You’re going to take me into Gloucester. Now if we are going to play one more set we must start at once. I’ve got to be home early to-night as well.”

Sir John and Mrs. Graham strolled back to the chairs under the trees. But for once they seemed to find little to say to each other. Mrs. Graham was pre-occupied and Sir John found himself watching her, wondering what had brought that fresh shadow to the dark eyes and why she was so colourless and lifeless, as if she had been drained of all vitality, wondering if the oval cheeks would be as soft to touch as they looked, if the long, white hand nearest him, which, although it was the left hand, was absolutely bare, would look still more beautiful if it bore a plain gold ring.

As he sat there looking at her, leaning back in her chair, apparently unconscious of his gaze, it came to him quite definitely that one day before long he would ask her if she would come to him when Pat married and went away.

She looked as if she needed someone to take care of her, and he certainly would need someone to take care of him. Why shouldn't they make a bargain? He found himself colouring like a boy as the thought came to him—Why shouldn't they love each other?

“You are tired to-night, my dear,” he said quietly.

Eleanor did not start at the novel mode of address. She met his eyes without any embarrassment.

“No, not tired; I was thinking.”

“That is often the most tiring thing one can do. Anything I can help in? You know I'm a friend—I mean a real friend.”

He leaned forward, his hands clasping his knees, as he spoke quietly but urgently.

A little grateful smile touched Eleanor's lips.

“I do know. If *anyone* could help I should ask you. But no one can. Besides, I was only thinking of ancient history.”

“Waste of time. Think of the future instead,” he said tersely.

“There isn't any future—there's only the past for me,” Eleanor answered with very unusual bitterness.

“That can't be true. It isn't true for anyone, let alone for anyone like you.”

“You don't understand.”

“Of course I don't—unless you'll tell me. Perhaps some day you will?”

She looked at him steadily before she turned away.

“Perhaps some day I will. If I ever did tell anyone, I think it would be you. I could trust you to understand and not to judge—at any rate, not to judge harshly. Ah, here come the others.”

Betty and Edward Elliott went away at once, but Pat and Gerard came and sat under the trees for some time until Sir John said reluctantly, “We really must be getting home. I had no idea it was so late. Come along, Pat. Mrs. Graham must be tired to death of us. When will you come and dine with us? Next Tuesday?”

Mrs. Graham hesitated.

“Do come that evening, Mrs. Graham,” Pat said quietly. “We are going out on Wednesday, and on Thursday Gerard is going away. He is coming back later on, but he has to go over to Paris for a week or so. Do come.”

“Thank you. I will. Eight o’clock?”

“Yes. Good-bye and many thanks for a delightful afternoon.”

After she had watched them drive off from the gate, Mrs. Graham slowly made her way back to the house. She shivered a little as she went in, thinking how chilly and gloomy the evening had become. She felt tired and old, and there was a strange new heaviness at her heart.

What had she expected? What had she hoped for? Whatever it was, she was vaguely but utterly disappointed. Had Nannie been right? Would it have been wiser never to have come to Westlea?

She found the old woman waiting for her in the drawing-room. Her keen, dark eyes darted to her mistress’s face.

“Well, ma’am?”

“Well, Nannie.”

The dreariness of the voice, generally so sweet and musical, told Nannie all she needed to know. It was as she had feared.

“Were you—were you satisfied?” she asked.

“Satisfied?” Mrs. Graham repeated tonelessly. Then she flung up her head and cried passionately, “Satisfied? After all these long, lonely years—satisfied!”

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” was all the old woman could find to say.

“Nannie, I don’t know how I am to go on. I’ve lived on, waiting for something, hoping for something—I didn’t know what, but something that would partly make up for all the years I’ve lost. Now I know it will never come, can never come.”

“My dear—don’t.” The old woman laid her hand on her arm and peered at her through the gathering dusk. “Nothing has altered, everything is just the same as it has always been.”

“No, it isn’t; it’s all altered and I feel broken at last. I’ve no pluck left. I’ve been looking forward to to-day for twenty years, and— —” She stopped and then finished with a little half-sob. “Oh, Nannie, he doesn’t even *like* me!”

“You expected too much. I warned you. But it can’t be that he didn’t like you. That couldn’t be true. He—he just wanted to be with the young ladies.”

“No, it was more than that. Do you suppose I couldn’t tell? He resented every word I said. He wanted to get away from me. I—bored him.”

“Oh, my dear, don’t, don’t.”

There was anguish in the cracked old voice as she listened to the broken sobs that had no relief in tears.

“I won’t, after to-day. You know I never whine, and I won’t whine after to-night. Go away, Nannie, now, you blessed old darling. Leave me by myself a little bit.”

She was holding her hands pressed against her throat as though something were physically hurting her.

“I can’t leave you, like this, my bairn.”

“Yes, please. I’ll be all right presently. If you don’t go I shall break. I must be quite alone. You’ve never failed in understanding yet, Nannie.”

Slowly and reluctantly Nannie crossed the room and disappeared. She realized that a door, which her mistress usually kept tightly locked, had been flung wide open and memories of nightmare days and nights had come flooding out, swamping, submerging her. She would have cut off both her worn, capable hands if it could have served. But she knew that when “Miss Eleanor” looked and spoke like that, she must be left to her Gethsemane—alone.

The old woman went upstairs and waited. She had spent a great deal of her life waiting.

She knew she would be wanted presently.

## Chapter 8

Dinner was over and Sir John had asked Mrs. Graham as they rose from the table if she would go to his library for a few minutes to see some pieces of salmon-scale Worcester he had recently purchased at an old curiosity shop in Gloucester.

Pat glanced at Gerard. "You've seen it before. Come along with me and help me to make the coffee."

Sir John and Mrs. Graham disappeared into the former's study, while Pat and Gerard crossed the hall to the drawing-room. The evening was chilly and a bright log fire was burning in the open grate, casting long, flickering shadows over the painted walls, touching the picture frames, the old china and polished silver cups and bowls, with darting gleams of golden light.

Pat put her hand on the electric switch, but Gerard interposed quickly.

"Don't turn the light on yet. Let us have these few minutes alone in the firelight."

He tried to put his arms round her, but she did not melt under his touch. Instead, she moved away from him and, going over to the fireplace, put another log on to the fire.

Gerard stood very still, looking at her.

"Pat, what is it?" he asked quietly.

"What is what?"

"You know quite well. I've vexed you somehow. What have I done?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered with studied indifference.

"Oh yes, I have." He put his arm round her as she stood with one hand resting on the mantelpiece. "Do you suppose I can't feel it? You were annoyed with me at dinner and now—why, you are freezing me!"

She laughed as she let him kiss her at last.

"Well, I'll admit I was vexed at dinner, as well as generally disappointed and hurt."

“Pat darling,” he exclaimed. “Hurt? I didn’t know it was as bad as that. What can I have done to hurt you?”

“It’s about Mrs. Graham.”

She felt him grow a little rigid.

She turned swiftly round in his arms so that she could see his face in the firelight.

“There, I could feel it! At the very mention of her name you grow stiff. I can’t understand it. Of course, you are perfectly courteous to her, but you are so formal, so stand-offish, not a bit like yourself. You are so nice to all my other friends, and you know I like Mrs. Graham better than any other woman I know.”

“Yes, I do know it,” Gerard answered. “And I wish you didn’t.”

Pat’s eyes flashed. She was not used to being crossed or criticized, and Gerard’s words suggested criticism of the woman for whom she felt an almost passionate friendship.

“Why not?” she asked sharply. “She is beautiful, she is obviously a lady, she is the most interesting, cultured and travelled woman I ever met. I can’t understand your attitude towards her, especially when you know how I love and admire her. Why don’t you like her?”

“I don’t really know,” Gerard answered slowly. “I admit I do feel a sort of antagonism to her that I can’t explain. I know she is everything you say, beautiful and charming and all that, but—well, for one thing, she never seems quite frank, almost as if she were keeping something back.”

“Well, why shouldn’t she?” Pat asked hotly. “If she were to rush all her thoughts and family history at you, you would be the first to accuse her of lack of reticence.”

“Of course that isn’t what I mean. But,” he went on doggedly, “you know yourself you told me you know nothing about her husband—who he was, where they lived, or anything about her early life.”

“But why on earth should I? Why should she tell me? Why should I ask her about her ancient history? It doesn’t concern me. It would be impertinent of me!”

“That might be. But most people volunteer that sort of information when they come to a new neighbourhood, that is, if they want to be accepted. Then have you noticed that she doesn’t wear a wedding ring?”

Pat gave a little contemptuous laugh.

“Lots of women don’t in these days. You are thinking of twenty years ago. You have obviously been listening to Miss Beasley! I saw her talking to you at the Vicarage. Surely you are not—forgive me—small enough to listen to what the village scandal-monger says?”

It was not often Pat spoke so strongly. But she was carried away by her loyalty to the woman she was defending.

Gerard flushed. “Of course not. But I admit it made me think. And didn’t you notice when she was talking of hunting as a girl and I asked her in all innocence where she had hunted, she evaded answering? And twice when I spoke of her husband you must have noticed she shut up like an oyster?”

“Oh, I noticed,” Pat returned significantly. “For I realized you were trying to get her to tell you who he was; in plain English, that you were trying to pump her. And, frankly, I did not think you should have done it. If she chooses to wrap a veil round him, it is entirely her own concern. In any case it isn’t yours!”

“I say, Pat, you can hit hard, can’t you? But you must know it is only on your account I wanted to be quite sure she is—is, well, all right, you know.”

He looked so concerned, so genuinely distressed that Pat relented.

“You know, Gerard, you are much, much more conventional, in spite of living in London, than Dad and I. We take people as we find them. If we like them and they like us, that’s all we care about. And you can see for yourself what I hinted to you before, that Dad is really in love with her. As for her first husband, perhaps she has very good reason for not talking of him. For instance, he may have died in a lunatic asylum. In that case, of course, she wouldn’t want to talk of him.”

“I suppose not. But you see, if people won’t tell you anything about themselves, they must expect other people to speculate a little. But, Pat, don’t let us quarrel about her. I’ll make a confession. I admit I’m a bit jealous of her. It seems to me you think more of her than you do of me.”

He smiled into her eyes, but his voice was serious.

“You foolish boy! Fancy being jealous of a woman. I wish I could make you understand my feeling about her. It isn’t only that I admire her so much. I have a vague feeling that I want to protect her. I am convinced that at some time she has had a very hard life—that possibly someone has been very unkind to her.”

“If that were the case I should be sorry for her too, but she seems to me to be a particularly prosperous and assured sort of woman and quite cheery.”

“I know—on the surface. But you see I have watched her when she has been off-guard, so to speak, and to me there is tragedy in her face. I have often thought what a thousand pities it is she hasn’t any children. She is such a wasted mother. She seems so to love all young people. Betty and Teddy adore her, as I do, and you could see for yourself Phil Mason fell straight for her the other day. You are the only young man I know who doesn’t like her.”

“Well, that doesn’t really matter, does it? She can’t take any special interest in me,” he said cheerfully.

“Well, frankly, I don’t know why she should, seeing how—how prejudiced you are!” Pat retorted. “But you see, she happens to be fond of me, so naturally she takes an interest in my ‘young man’.”

At that moment Sir John and Mrs. Graham came into the room, the former switching on the lights as he entered.

Mrs. Graham moved up to the fireplace and sank into the huge, silk-cushioned chair Pat pulled forward invitingly.

“How lovely to see a fire, though one should not need one in June,” she said, holding out her hands to the blaze.

“We often have one in the summer,” answered Pat. “I love a fire and open windows. But it’s rather chilly with the French windows open. Will you shut them, Gerard, and open one of the small ones, while I make the coffee.”

She walked across to the small table, on which stood a tray with cups and a patent coffee-maker. She lighted the spirit lamp and placed it under the glass container, and proceeded to sort out the little pile of letters lying on the tray.

“Quite a big mail to-night. Three for you, Dad, four for me, and one for you, Gerard—such a fat one!”

“Thanks,” Gerard took the letter from her and glanced at it. “Ah, that is one from my old coach, Stevenson. It’s sure to be interesting. I’ll open it now, if I may.”

He put it down for a moment, as Sir John asked him to hand Mrs. Graham the cigarettes.

As Sir John looked at her lying back against the blue cushions his heart gave a quick throb. He had very nearly asked her just now in the library if she would think of him as something different from a friend, but she had made it difficult. She had seemed as if she anticipated his intention and, when the words were trembling on his lips, she had suggested, so definitely that he could not gainsay it, that they should join the others.

But how beautiful she was!—her small, proud head leaning against the blue silk cushion, and her long, ringless white hands lying along the padded arms of the chair!

She was wearing a very handsome black velvet gown, for Eleanor loved beautiful clothes for their own sake, apart from her desire to wear them. When she had selected this particular gown in Paris in the spring she had demurred at the complete absence of sleeves. But the Parisian *artiste* who had tried it on her had been horrified at the bare suggestion of adding them, exclaiming in broken English that it would ruin the model and that, moreover, to hide one inch of Madame's beautiful arms would be an artistic and sartorial crime.

Eleanor had allowed herself to be persuaded and had kept the gown for special occasions. She felt it was somewhat "grand" for this little family dinner, but as she knew it suited her better than anything else she possessed, she had put it on. The simple lines showed every graceful curve of her tall, slenderly-rounded figure, as supple as a girl's, and the richness of the black fabric showed off the whiteness of her arms and of her throat which was bare of all ornament with the exception of the narrow platinum chain and locket which she always wore.

"You like sugar and no milk, don't you, Mrs. Graham?" Pat was saying. "Gerard, please give Mrs. Graham her cup. Dad, lots of milk and lots of sugar. Same for you, Gerard. Now then, good people, have you all got what you want?"

"I have," said Mrs. Graham smiling, glancing tentatively at Gerard as he handed her cup, but, as he was not looking at her, he did not see the smile.

"You'll have a liqueur," said Sir John. "Brandy—Cointreau—Benedictine?"

Mrs. Graham shook her head. "No, thanks, I never touch anything."

"I know it's no use asking you, Gerard!" said Sir John, as he poured out a small brandy for himself, and sat down in a big chair where he could watch Mrs. Graham.

She was so extraordinarily satisfactory to watch. Everything about her was perfect, so well-bred, from her grey-white crown of abundant hair to her small arched feet, in their silk stockings and silver shoes.

Pat paused with her cup in the air.

“Anyone want to play bridge? If so, I won’t get comfortable.”

“Oh, please, no,” Mrs. Graham said quickly. “You know I don’t really play at all.”

“Thank goodness!” Pat answered, sinking down with a little bump on a large soft “pouffé” by Mrs. Graham’s side. “I don’t want to play. I’d far rather talk. I was only trying to do my duty as a hostess!”

Pat was looking very charming herself in a pale blue chiffon gown that made her look younger and more girlish than usual. She was generally taken for considerably more than her twenty-one years, but to-night she looked less than her age.

She leaned back against the side of Mrs. Graham’s chair, just touching her knee for one second with her hand.

Mrs. Graham smiled at her. Pat’s devotion was the greatest happiness that had come into her life for many years. And now her devotion meant more than ever. Since she was going to marry Gerard, its value was intensified a hundredfold.

“You look very absorbed, Gerard,” Pat said, twisting her head in his direction.

He was turning over several newspaper slips and pieces of paper covered with small crabbed handwriting.

He looked up, his eyes bright with interest.

“Sorry. Stevenson has sent me some cuttings about the Granfield murder case, which you know so far is a complete mystery. He wants me, as a sort of exercise, to send up one or two suggestions which could explain it—I mean before the trial. He says he is convinced he has the solution himself, but he has arrived at it entirely by a method of deduction, along a line the police so far have not touched.”

“What a gruesome sort of exercise,” Pat said, finishing her coffee. “For goodness sake don’t start on it while you are here.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s awfully interesting. Supposing I were to think of the same solution as Stevenson, I should be frightfully bucked. Have you

read the case, Sir John?"

Sir John glanced at his eager face.

"Oh, yes, of course, I know the outlines. I haven't read the details. I always feel so devilish sorry for the unfortunate victim, as well as for the poor wretch who will have to hang by the neck until he is dead!"

"I'm sorry for the victim. I don't know so much about the murderer," Gerard objected. "His motive, nine times out of ten, is a sordid one. But in this case, though it has many features like the famous Gore case of twenty years ago, all motive seems lacking on the part of the only person at present suspected."

"The Gore case?" repeated Sir John, "I seem to remember the case vaguely. Wasn't it something to do with a woman?"

"Yes," returned Gerard, laying down his notes on the table. "It was one of the cases we studied last term, so it is fresh in my memory. It was the case of a woman, a young woman of good family, murdering her own husband."

Pat gave a little shiver. "Oh, how terrible." She reached out her hand to put down her coffee cup on a small table and then turned to take Mrs. Graham's. As she glanced up at her, her eyes suddenly darkened.

"Do you feel all right?" she said in a low voice, under cover of Sir John speaking to Gerard. "Is the room too warm?"

"No, no," Mrs. Graham answered shortly, "I'm quite all right."

She moved her head aside so that she could see Gerard, who had just lighted a cigarette, and was in the act of throwing away the match.

"That sounds rather a terrible story you were referring to, Mr. Napier. Won't you tell us about it?"

His young face was stern and hard as he picked up the little packet of notes.

"Don't you remember it? I warn you it is a very ugly story. A man called Cyril Gore was married to a young and beautiful girl. He doesn't appear to have been a very attractive character. But, after all, she need not have married him. She was poor and he was very well off, or, at any rate, he had a very big allowance from an uncle or some relation, so I suppose she married him for his money."

"I shouldn't say necessarily that," said Mrs. Graham in a slow, judicial voice, as though she were choosing her words, leaning back so that her face

was in shadow, out of the circle of light thrown by the electric lamp on the table close by. "Of course, I know if one party to a marriage has money and the other has none, the one who lacks is always accused of being mercenary. But after all, it is possible for a poor man really to be desperately in love with a rich girl and to regret her riches. And it is equally possible for a penniless girl, especially if she is very young and very inexperienced, to imagine herself in love with a man who is perhaps handsome and has a fascinating way with him, even though in reality he is a scoundrel as well as rich."

"Of course I quite admit that," Gerard returned rather grandly. "I only suggested it as possible that in this case Gore's wife married him for what she could get. She certainly must have had a rather thin time, for Gore drank and the records of the case state that at times he completely lost self-control. But, after all, she married him for better or worse. And I can't help thinking if she had been a good wife she might have helped him quite a lot."

Mrs. Graham was watching him with half-veiled eyes, and her long, white hands were pressed hard against the ends of the padded arms.

"Yes, that sounds all right—quite pretty, in fact. An erring husband and a sweet, loving and dutiful wife trying to reclaim him!" Sir John looked up quickly at the bitter ring in her voice. "But have you the least idea what you are talking about? Have you ever known a man who is a confirmed drunkard? I mean, have you ever seen or lived with one in his own home, where he feels there is no need for him to put any restraint on himself or to keep up appearances?"

Gerard made a little grimace of disgust.

"No, thank goodness."

"Well, believe me, no woman, no man on God's earth can fight and restrain the beast that perpetual drinking makes of a man!"

The words seemed to rip the air. An obstinate look came into Gerard's blue eyes.

"You speak very strongly, it seems to me rather hardly, Mrs. Graham. You are judging only as an onlooker. I try to put myself into the place of the man who is suffering from what is more or less of a disease. And, in my opinion, a man who drinks habitually is not only suffering from a disease but probably from an inherited disease. Then the poor devil has no chance, for the craving grows and grows till it may become impossible to resist."

“That is true to a certain point. I think excessive drinking does finally become an obsession. I believe it does pass out of a man’s power to control. But that is the ultimate stage. What about all the long time before that stage is reached, when a man could pull up if he only would? When, if necessary, he could even go into an institution, where he would be cured?”

“Oh, an institution! That is asking a great deal of a man,” Gerard objected.

“Not if you admit his failing is a disease,” retorted Mrs. Graham. “You can’t have it both ways. If a man has tuberculosis he goes to a sanatorium, if he has scarlet fever he goes to a fever hospital. There are institutions which can and do cure a man of the drink habit. Why shouldn’t he go there before he has lost all sense of honour, before he has forfeited his manhood?”

The discussion had passed into a duologue. Sir John was sitting very still, his cigar dead in his fingers, his eyes wandering alternately from the eager, obstinate, young face of the man—male-like fighting for his kind, to the stern white face of the woman, keeping out of the pool of light. The air was tense and electric. He felt there was something he did not understand going on, something beyond his power to stop or control.

Pat was sitting rigid and alert. She had moved her position slightly, so that she could see Mrs. Graham plainly when she looked that way. But for the most part she kept her eyes on Gerard, and they were filled at the moment with something approaching anger as well as reproach. If she had taken part in the argument she would have sided with Mrs. Graham. She longed to say something to show with whom she was sympathizing, but she felt that the subject was beyond her. She had had no experience, she had never seen a man so drunk that he had lost his self-control. Meeting a cheery reveller singing through the street at night was the nearest approach she had made to one of the great tragedies and blots of civilization.

“You seem to have no sympathy with a man who has that unfortunate failing,” Gerard went on. “Now I have. Although you know I dislike drink myself, I can understand how easily a man may drift into taking too much. For example, he may be miserable or lonely. He drinks wine or spirits and he finds he feels cheerier. Next time he takes a little more, and so it goes on till he has got into the habit of drinking too much without realizing it.”

“Ah, for a man like that there may be an excuse, though even then I don’t admit there is justification! Even then he should have regard for and should protect the dignity of his own manhood. However, we will grant excuses for the man who is in pain, or who is lonely or heartbroken. But

leave that sort of man aside. Take the case of a man who has every inducement to keep straight, a man who has money, friends, possibly a wife, a child, all eager to help him. What do you say to a man who, having all that, utterly refuses to help himself, or to let others help him, and deliberately makes of himself a beast—beast, body and soul!”

Her voice sank almost to a whisper, yet it seemed to ring through the room with pent-up intensity.

Sir John cleared his throat and tried to speak. He felt some flood-tide had been let loose and he wanted to stem it before it swept them all before it. But Gerard was before him.

“I don’t believe any decent man would act as you are suggesting!” he cried hotly. “You are suggesting that a man might set himself deliberately to drink and to degrade himself. You can know very little about men if you think they take to drink in that way,” he added with youthful arrogance. “If a man becomes besotted as in the case you are putting, he not only has probably some very big excuse for it, but also, as I said before, an inherited craving. Then you should not blame him at all. It is beyond his power to control. You should pity, not condemn him.”

“If you carried your analogy far enough,” Mrs. Graham answered swiftly, “you would have to condone every wrong-doing under the sun. But you are eliminating all idea of Free-Will.”

“Not at all,” Gerard answered obstinately, leaning forward, his hands clasped between his knees and immensely in earnest. “You’ve heard me speak of Stevenson? Well, he was discussing this very point at his last lecture. Though it’s true I agree with him, it’s his opinion I’m putting forward, and he is a recognized authority. He maintains there are some weaknesses which destroy a man’s will-power, others which strengthen it—it may be for evil, but still strengthen it. His contention is that drink and drugs so destroy a man’s will that he is not responsible for what he does—therefore he cannot be blamed for his actions.”

For the first time Pat spoke.

“Then surely he should be put under some sort of restraint when he reaches that stage?”

Mrs. Graham leaned forward so that her face was clearly visible. Sir John drew in his breath sharply. He realized she looked ten years older than she had looked at the dinner table, when she had sat smilingly discussing the values of old china with him.

“Exactly,” she said with a ring of triumph. “Pat has hit the point. If a man allows himself to become a danger, moral and physical, to those around him, he should no more be permitted to be at large than any other lunatic.”

At that moment Gerard moved his arm and accidentally swept the little pile of notes from the table at his side. As he stooped to pick them up, lying scattered on the floor, he said with a little short laugh, “Well, we’ve got on to a big abstract question. We started with the murder of Thomas Granfield last week by some unknown person, and have got on the Cyril Gore who was murdered some twenty years ago by his own wife.”

“And I suggest we end there,” Pat said definitely. “I don’t like horrors. I’ve had enough of stories of murder and of drunkards, and I am sure Mrs. Graham has.”

“Frankly, I should like to hear Mr. Napier tell the rest of that long-ago story. He has only told us so far that Mr. Gore was murdered by his wife,” Mrs. Graham answered grimly. “I should like to hear from him why she did it and what happened to her. Was she hanged?”

“No,” Gerard returned, with a touch of indignation in his voice, “though many a poor devil has swung for a far less cold-blooded action than hers. As a matter of fact, she was not convicted of murder—technically she could not be, though morally she certainly should have been.”

“You accused me just now of speaking hardly of a man who drank himself into madness,” Mrs. Graham said, again leaning back in her chair and speaking with quiet deliberation. “But you are speaking very hardly now of that unfortunate woman. Why does she so specially merit your—your condemnation, if the law of the land did not find her as guilty as you evidently think her?”

“Well, I think you would all agree with me if you knew all the details of the story. No one here seems to remember it. Shall I tell it?”

He looked round from one to the other. Sir John and Pat looked disapproving and Pat said emphatically “No!”

But Mrs. Graham again interposed.

“I think it would be very interesting to hear it. Remember, Pat dear, your feelings need not be harrowed, for it is all ancient history. The story is twenty years old. I admit I should very much like to hear Mr. Napier’s version of it and the reason for his strong views on it.”

Gerard needed very little encouragement to launch out.

“Well, I’ll tell it as briefly as I can. As I said before, Cyril Gore married a beautiful young girl, with whom he lived somewhere in the north of England for four years. During that time he drank heavily and doubtless she had a pretty bad time. Well, then he became very ill. It seems that at some time he had gone on a trip to the West Coast of Africa, where he contracted a somewhat rare form of fever. He was very ill at the time, but ultimately got well. But it appears to have been some sort of recurrent fever, for he had one or two mild returns of it, from which he recovered each time. Then he had a bad bout. At that time this particular fever was attracting a good deal of attention, and a famous bacteriologist, Sir Moreton Reid, had been sent out by the Government to study the disease on the spot. He claimed to have discovered an almost certain specific. In every instance in which he had used his discovery, however ill the patient was, he had effected a cure. The Gores’ local medical man telegraphed to Sir Moreton Reid asking him to go down and see Gore. He went, diagnosed the case, and gave his instructions himself to the wife, who was nursing Gore, for he had resolutely refused to have a trained nurse, or anyone else to look after him.”

“Point number one to the wife,” interrupted Mrs. Graham, in a low voice. But Gerard caught it and turned to her impetuously.

“No. It makes her conduct all the more abominable! Remember the man was helpless in her hands. Sir Moreton Reid explained that his directions must be implicitly followed. If they were, he said he could practically guarantee a recovery. The drug he prescribed was a very powerful one, and had to be administered every three hours for twenty-four hours, even if it meant waking the patient. He gave the bottle, containing eight doses of the drug, to the wife, who was to sit up all night with her husband, and left the house. When the local doctor came, at a very early hour the next morning, Cyril Gore was dead.”

He spoke slowly and impressively and as he ceased there was a prolonged silence. Sir John and Pat were staring at Gerard, waiting for him to continue. He had told the story with a certain, rhetorical force, and they felt themselves caught up in the drama of it.

The silence was broken at last by Mrs. Graham.

“Well?” she asked coldly but curiously.

Gerard leaned forward, his hands on his knees, and continued in the impressive voice he had been using.

“The wife had sat by her husband’s side all through that night and had not given him one single dose of the drug that would have saved his life!”

Once again Mrs. Graham interrupted.

“*Might* have saved it. It was a new drug, after all, remember, and, in spite of Sir Moreton Reid’s assurance, it was only in the experimental stage.”

“How do you know that,” Gerard asked quickly, “I thought you said you didn’t remember the case?”

“I don’t think I said that,” Mrs. Graham replied quietly, “I think I said I should like to hear your version and views of it. As a matter of fact, the story is familiar to me. I read about it, of course, at the time, and, as you told it all the details came back to me. I remember at the time all my sympathies were with—the wife.”

Pat looked at her. Mrs. Graham had almost forgotten both her and Sir John. Her whole attention, as her every remark, was directed to Gerard. Pat’s eyes were very soft and very pitiful. She had not yet stumbled on the full significance of the story, but, intuitively, she was siding with Mrs. Graham and against her lover, who, even then, before the story was further unfolded, she felt was being hard and uncompromising.

“You sympathized with the wife?” Gerard repeated indignantly. “How could you? Of course, it all happened long ago, and I have only been able to read newspaper reports of it, but it seems to me that a woman who could sit by her own husband’s bedside and watch him dying, when she had the means to save him, was absolutely inhuman!”

With a little cry Mrs. Graham held up her hand, almost, it seemed, as though to repel a blow.

“But supposing she judged mistakenly and did wrong, she suffered for it. Doesn’t that mitigate her offence in your eyes? She paid the penalty for what she did—or refrained from doing.”

Gerard flung back his head, his handsome young face hard and determined.

“No, there you are mistaken. Many a man and woman has paid the death penalty for less calculated murder than that, and she was only indicted for manslaughter. The doctor refused to give a death certificate, in view of Sir Moreton Reid’s opinion. So an inquest was inevitable. A charge of manslaughter was brought in and she was brought to trial at the next Assizes. She was tried three months later, when she was convicted of manslaughter—though in my opinion the verdict should have been murder.”

For the first time Sir John interposed.

“I think you are wrong, Gerard. Quite apart from the reasons which the woman must have had for withholding the drug, all that she did was—to withhold it. She did nothing actively, or, anyhow, you have not suggested that she did, to hasten the man’s death. She merely omitted to do something. You might as well say that if I see a man drowning in a river and omit, either because I cannot swim, or because I am a coward, to go in after him, I ought to be indicted for murder. The suggestion is absurd.”

“Ah, but that is quite a different point, Sir John,” Gerard said eagerly, “you would have accepted no charge for the care of that drowning person, and no one would guarantee that if you did dive into the river you could save him. But the law is very definite on the responsibility of people who undertake the charge of sick and helpless people. I’ve got a note here on the very point. Stevenson enclosed it as a guide in the Granfield case and it is directly applicable to the Gore case we are discussing.”

He turned over several sheets of notes and gave a little exclamation.

“Here it is. This is from Archbold’s *Criminal Pleading*,

““If a grown-up person chooses to take charge of a human creature helpless from infirmity, he is bound to execute that charge without wicked negligence, and if a person who has chosen to take charge of a helpless creature lets it die by wicked negligence that person is guilty of manslaughter. Mere negligence will not do; there must be wicked negligence, that is, negligence so great as to satisfy a jury that the prisoner had a wicked mind in the sense that he was reckless and careless whether the creature died or not.

““If the person has the custody of another who is helpless and leaves that other with insufficient food and medical attention and so causes his death he is criminally responsible.’”

Gerard looked up from the notes.

“There, could you possibly have anything clearer than that?”

“No, I suppose not,” Sir John admitted reluctantly.

“In this instance,” Gerard went on triumphantly, “the woman accepted the charge of a helpless man—and that man her own husband—and deliberately allowed him to die through wilful and criminal negligence.”

Pat got up, and taking a log from a basket by the side of the grate dropped it into the heart of the glowing fire which sent up a little shower of scintillating sparks. Then she turned to her lover with something more than a hint of disapproval in her voice before she sank into her old place by Mrs. Graham's side.

"You seem very keen on proving this poor wretched woman was completely in the wrong. So far you have told us only one side of the question—the side against her. You have told us nothing whatever of her side, of why she did as she did. She must have had some good reason. She must have had a defence."

"She offered none," Gerard broke in hotly. "She admitted everything. Her own counsel did his best to shake her evidence, to persuade her to plead that she had fallen asleep, had mistaken the bottle and given him something else in error. But it was no use. She persisted in the callous statement that she had been awake all night, that she had realized all the time exactly what she was doing, that she knew she might have saved her husband's life, and had made no attempt to do so!"

"Well, at any rate, if she admitted all that she had extraordinary courage," Pat said rebelliously.

Gerard felt the whole atmosphere of the room was against him. He had read up all the details of this particular case only just before he had left London, as, together with three or four other curious murders or mystery cases, it had formed the subject-matter of one of Stevenson's latest lectures. Therefore he felt if anyone was in a position to have the right to a definite view on its merits and its wrongs, it was himself; certainly not Pat who, admittedly, had never heard of the case before that evening; nor yet Sir John, who only barely remembered it as a *cause célèbre*; nor Mrs. Graham who, without any justification whatever, as he saw it, had elected to take up the cudgels on behalf of the criminal wife!

He turned to Pat with hurt amazement on his face.

"I can't understand you, Pat. You are usually so keenly on the side of anything that is helpless; yet you seem to be siding with the woman who let her sick and helpless husband die, though she admitted she could have saved him. I can't for the life of me see that there was a shadow of excuse for her or that there was any extenuation whatsoever of her crime."

"Stop!" Suddenly it seemed as if some new current had entered the room, charging the whole atmosphere with electricity. They all three turned to stare at Mrs. Graham, who was sitting bolt upright, her dark eyes blazing

in her ashen face and her long hands gripping the arms of her chair so tightly that the knuckles shone white. "Stop! You have talked enough conventional theoretical absurdities! How dare you, in your youth and ignorance, presume to judge and condemn a woman of whom you know nothing! Have you no pity for the weeks and months and years of torment and degradation that woman must have gone through before she could have brought herself to do such a thing?"

Gerard stared at her speechless for the moment at her sudden attack. Then he muttered, "Oh, well, I said she might have had a thin time, but that was no excuse for murder or manslaughter. One might have had the greatest pity for her if she had only gone on enduring — —"

Mrs. Graham interrupted him. "Enduring? But, inexperienced and ignorant as you are, can't you realize there might be limits to a woman's endurance? I — —" She seemed to pull herself together with a violent effort and went on more calmly, "I remember details of your story which may not be amongst your notes. She was a young, innocent, country-bred girl—three years younger even than Pat, when she married that—that man. He was raving drunk on their wedding night. He frightened and horrified her so terribly that, like the terrified child she was, she ran out into the hotel corridor, crying for help. He followed her and dragged her back and locked the door of their room before anyone came. She never appealed to anyone again. Her punishment was too awful for that. She kept all her misery to herself, maddened, made hardly human by it all, but she never whined. She never spoke to a living soul of the hell she endured!"

Pat had been watching her like one hypnotized. Every bit of her went out in sudden passionate sympathy, as a veil that had been thinning all through that evening was torn from her eyes. Half-crying, she pressed her hands against Mrs. Graham's arm as she whispered "Oh, poor, poor soul!"

Even Gerard's self-assurance was shaken.

"But surely he must have loved her once, or he would not have married her? Couldn't she have appealed to that love?"

Mrs. Graham answered him scornfully.

"Love? It is degrading to use the word in connection with the passion of such a man as Cyril Gore! He had been secretly drinking for years before their marriage, as she discovered too late; as his father had drunk before him. There was nothing decent left in him to appeal to. And you have forgotten. In telling the story you have never mentioned there was a child, who was his mother's greatest happiness and greatest torment. For her

husband tortured her through him—frightening him out of his baby wits, shutting him up in dark cupboards, telling him horrible stories.”

“Why, the man was a devil,” broke in Sir John hotly. “It seems to me he was well out of the world, if he was a brute to his wife and ill-treated his own baby son!”

Mrs. Graham scarcely seemed to hear him. She swept his interruption aside.

“But that was only a small part of his crimes against the child, whom he hated from the moment he knew he was coming into the world.” She put her two hands up to her throat as though she were choking. “And God allows such men to become fathers!”

“Oh, don’t, don’t,” whispered Pat.

The tears were pouring down her cheeks as she knelt by Mrs. Graham’s side and tried to take her hand. But the elder woman brushed her aside. She was unconscious of her and of Sir John, whose face was grey and drawn, for already he was feeling his way to the truth. All her attention was focussed on Gerard, who, it seemed to her, was the only person in the room, and she spoke with a swift rush of words that appeared to sweep everything before them.

“If it had only been his body he ill-treated it would have been a comparatively small thing, but he set himself to ruin and degrade the child’s innocent mind and soul, to drag him down to his own infamous level. He forced him, baby though he was, to drink wine till the tiny mite staggered about his own nursery, giggling horribly, sick—drunk, drunk! When he was barely three years old! And the mother, who worshipped the child, who would have given her life for him, was forced to look on and see her boy, her innocent baby, being turned into a beast. Oh, Great God above!” Her voice rose as she beat her two hands on the arms of her chair. “The wonder was that she had not murdered her husband a dozen times with her own hands, instead of waiting, till all she had to do was to sit still and watch!”

Gerard was awed in spite of himself, but he could not yet give up his point.

“But, if all you say was true, though there is no reference to any such condition of things in the report of the trial, why didn’t the woman leave her husband and take the child away?”

Mrs. Graham gave a little ugly laugh.

“It sounds so easy, doesn’t it? In these days it would be, but remember this was twenty years ago. The wife hadn’t a penny of her own in the world and no relations to help her. Her husband said if she attempted to run away, he would track her to the end of the earth, for he wanted her. You see, she was supposed to be beautiful, and he had no intention of letting his victim go—he took a devilish delight in her beauty, such as a boy like you cannot understand. She was always watched. The servants were heavily paid by him, and they acted as his spies. Of course, she tried many times to get away, but she never succeeded. He paid every bill, bought everything, so that no money passed through her hands. She was as helpless as a bird whose wings have been clipped and put into a cage. Do you wonder now that when she was told he would die without that drug and it was put into her hands, that she sat still and did nothing? It was his useless, vicious life against the life of her child’s mind and soul!”

“I can’t help it. I still think it an awful thing to have done,” Gerard muttered doggedly, although conscious that it would be wiser to hold his tongue.

“Of course, it was awful,” Mrs. Graham repeated. “Do you even realize how awful? Can you see that woman sitting there in that great dim room, all through that ghastly night? Can you visualize the interminable hours passing slowly away, every tick of the clock beating like a hammer-blow on her brain as she realized the appalling burden she was taking on herself—for the rest of eternity!”

Her voice was low and tense as she stared at him with dark, sombre eyes.

Almost Gerard was won to understanding.

But he half-turned to Pat and saw her eyes, filled with passionate sympathy, suddenly leave Mrs. Graham’s face and turn to himself in bitter reproach and appeal. All her love was crying out to him to have pity, to see with her eyes, to understand with her intelligence; and with the subtle strain of obstinacy that had hitherto served him so well, he hardened and stiffened. Why should Pat be so completely on that unknown woman’s side? Why wouldn’t she acknowledge his arguments? Why wouldn’t she admit that justice, as well as sentiment, should have a hearing?

Of course there was a great deal to be said for the wife. But there was surely much more to be said for the husband? He felt he must *force* Pat to see the point he had been trying so hard to make.

Yet it was to Eleanor he directed his answer.

“But don’t you see?” he cried desperately, “the whole point is she need not have done it. She should not have done it! I can imagine the scene as I can understand her temptation. But I can also see the man lying there, helpless, perhaps repentant at last, longing for one more chance to make up and atone. I can see him gasping his life out, while his own wife, the woman whom he perhaps loved in his own way, the woman whom the doctor was trusting to nurse and save him, sat by, deliberately letting him die before her eyes!”

“And can’t you see something else?” Mrs. Graham said, leaning forward and fixing him with her eyes, burning with a wild light. “Can’t you see that she must have been tempted almost beyond endurance to give it to him? For she knew that never again would she have one moment’s real peace of mind. She prayed, as surely no woman ever prayed before, as she knelt in that dim room, filled with a horror unspeakable, that God would understand and forgive her. And in her heart she believed and still believes He did. Because it was for her boy she did it, not for herself!”

Understanding at last flashed into Gerard’s face, and with it—not sympathy, but indignation, almost horror. He took a step forward, and said sternly,

“Mrs. Graham, how is it that you know all this?”

“Because— —” It seemed to her as if some force beyond her control drove her to the words as she rose to her feet, a tall, beautiful, dominating figure, as her voice rang out, almost majestic in its tragedy, “Because I am Eleanor Gore!”

## Chapter 9

For a few seconds no one stirred or spoke. Mrs. Graham and Gerard, who had also risen to his feet, were standing staring at each other, oblivious, as indeed Mrs. Graham had been during the greater part of the tense scene that had just risen to such a dramatic height, of the other two, who, in turn, sought each other's eyes, feeling helpless and impotent before the tragedy just unfolded.

At last, after instants that seemed hours, Mrs. Graham's poise broke.

She looked round, suddenly uncertain, apologetic.

"I—I—What have I done? I didn't mean to speak. I got carried away. Sir John—Pat—I am sorry."

In a moment Sir John was by her side, a light in his grey eyes. A woman was appealing to him, to his chivalry, to his understanding. Not only a woman, but the woman he loved. He seemed released at last from a spell that had held him, and he realized that, as master of his own house, he should have stopped this scene long before, he should have ordered Gerard to be silent; although, indeed, it had been Mrs. Graham herself who had persisted in continuing the argument, in almost forcing Gerard to tell the story, which had been her own terrible history, to the end.

"Oh, my dear," he said as he went close up to her. "How terribly you have suffered. I am glad you have allowed us to know the truth at last. It will be easier for you now that you can talk to us about it all."

"Yes, yes," Pat said, the tears still rolling unrestrainedly down her cheeks, as she took Mrs. Graham's hand and in a little passion of sympathy which she could not find words, only gestures, to express, she held it close against her own breast. "I am so glad we know what has made you unhappy."

"Then—then——" Mrs. Graham said tremulously, all her proud assurance gone and looking at them rather like a child pleading not to be punished, "You don't condemn me utterly?"

"Condemn you?" Sir John cried hotly, "Condemn you! I think you the bravest woman I have ever met. I—I feel honoured that you have allowed us to become your friends."

Mrs. Graham held out her hand in simple wordless gratitude. He took it and held it in a close clasp.

“And you, Mr. Napier,” Eleanor’s eyes turned to Gerard, who was standing still—doubt, anger, confusion, all struggling in his face.

“I—I—Oh, what does it matter what I say!”

There was all the genuine pain as well as the angry dismay of youth, when it finds itself confronted with forces beyond its understanding in his voice.

“It matters to me.” There was a very wonderful softness in her eyes as she spoke, and she took a step towards him. “Do you still think I did very wrong?”

Some fatal obstinacy, some demon of perversity drove Gerard to answer, “Well, if you force me to say it—however great your troubles were, I do think you did a terrible thing.”

The glow on Mrs. Graham’s face faded.

“And you don’t think that all I have suffered since has wiped out, has expiated the wrong? You know, quite apart from everything else, I was sentenced to five years’ penal servitude.”

“My God!” Sir John’s face contracted. “You went to prison?”

Mrs. Graham turned to him, surprised.

“Of course. Many people considered me fortunate to get only five years, for, of course, that meant only three and three-quarter years actually in prison. But perhaps you think,” turning back to Gerard, “that tells even more against me, in that I am an ex-convict?”

“No,” Gerard answered, driven by a fatal impulse. “But I do think you should let people know who you are before—before— —”

“Stop, Gerard! How *dare* you!” Sir John thundered. “Remember Mrs. Graham is an honoured guest in my house. Behave yourself, if you please!”

That streak of arrogant obstinacy which life’s experience had had, as yet, no chance to soften, prevented Gerard from doing the one thing that might have altered his whole life, held him back from making the one and only *amende* possible. The anger and condemnation in the older man’s voice only goaded him to self-assertion, the self-assertion of inexperienced youth.

“I am sorry, sir, if I annoyed you, but Mrs. Graham asked me to say what I thought.”

“That is quite true, Sir John.” Mrs. Graham said in a curiously still voice, her eyes like dark, unlit pools in her ghastly face. “And I want to ask him just one thing more. Do you still think me, after all you have heard, practically a— a murderess?”

She released her hand from Sir John’s, and took a step towards him, swaying a little unsteadily as she moved.

If only even then Gerard’s good genius could have stood by him, could have put some gentle answer on his lips! But, angered and hurt, like a spoiled child, at the furious indignation on Sir John’s face and the bitter reproach in Pat’s, he answered doggedly, regretting the words almost before they were spoken:

“I don’t understand why you are forcing me to say things which are making Sir John and Pat angry with me. But, since you do insist, I— well, I am afraid I do.”

With a little cry Pat stepped forward between them, as though to prevent his words from reaching Mrs. Graham.

“Oh, my dear,” she cried, “don’t listen to him. Don’t pay any attention to him. He doesn’t mean what he says. He will be sorry enough and on his knees in apology to you when he realizes.”

But Mrs. Graham pushed her aside with shaking hands and gasped chokingly,

“Oh, don’t say it—take it back, Gerard! I— —”

Suddenly the whole room was swallowed up in a thick mist which closed in on her and, as she crashed down, plunging, as it seemed to her, through a bottomless pit of darkness, she heard her own voice crying in a muffled whisper, “Gerard, Gerard!”

In a moment Sir John was stooping down, trying to raise her, but Pat interposed swiftly.

“No, don’t move her, just let her lie there quietly. Get a cushion and put it under her head.”

Sir John seized a cushion and slipped it under the beautiful limp head which Pat raised for a moment.

As Sir John withdrew his hand, his fingers caught for a moment in the slender platinum chain round her throat and unknowingly snapped it. The weight of the locket it had supported had caused it to slip to one side when she fell and it gently glided off her neck on to the cushion and then to the floor. Sir John was too agitated and Pat too busy chafing her hands to notice it, and it lay unheeded, almost concealed by the frill of the cushion on the thick Persian rug.

Pat glanced up at Gerard for a moment. "Get some brandy quickly," she said coldly. "Please fetch it yourself. Don't ring for anyone."

"He'd better telephone at once for Dr. Forsyth, hadn't he?" Sir John said anxiously.

Pat shook her head. "No, not yet. Wait and see if she comes round. I am certain she would rather have no fuss."

By the time Gerard returned with the brandy, Mrs. Graham had opened her eyes and was looking up at Pat.

"I am so awfully sorry," she gasped. "I never do a silly thing like that."

"Don't talk for a minute," Pat said, holding a small glass of neat brandy to her lips. "Just sip this and you'll feel better."

Mrs. Graham struggled to a half-sitting, half-reclining position, leaning against Pat, as she obediently drank the spirit. In a few minutes she said she felt much better and was ready to go home.

"Oh no, not yet!" Pat said quickly. "I can't let you. There, you see."

For as Mrs. Graham tried to get up, she staggered and sat down again quickly.

"It's air I want," she gasped. "If only I could get out."

"Get her cloak, Pat," Sir John said, "I'll help her on to the terrace."

In a few minutes, warmly wrapped in her fur-trimmed velvet cloak, Mrs. Graham was leaning back in a big chair which Gerard, at Sir John's sharp order, had dragged out on to the terrace.

"Ah, that is better, I feel quite different already," she said, with a forced little smile, to Pat. "Now do go inside, dear. I shall be all right in a very few minutes. You will only catch cold after being in that warm room."

"Oh, I never catch cold," Pat answered. "But, to satisfy you, I'll put on a coat. Dad, there's my white woolly in the hall."

Gerard had retreated to the drawing-room, feeling thoroughly miserable. He honestly meant all he had said. He did think that Cyril Gore's wife was a murderess in intent, and the discovery that Gore's wife and Pat's adored Mrs. Graham were one and the same woman had been a genuine shock to him. He told himself it explained the vague antagonism he had felt towards her from the first, accounted for his not feeling that admiration which everyone else seemed to feel.

But he wished he had not been forced into such open expression of his feelings. It was obvious that both Sir John and Pat were furiously indignant with him, and he felt it was unjust. He had known nothing of Mrs. Graham's identity when he condemned Mrs. Gore. Surely he was entitled to have his own views as to the right and the wrong of the action of a woman who had been convicted by her fellow countrymen twenty years ago. It was sheer bad luck that he had given his views in that very woman's presence. But, having given them, he was not going to withdraw them. He was, however, genuinely dismayed at Sir John's sharp reproof and at Pat's cold, indignant face. After all, he was her accepted lover. Mrs. Graham was only a friend. She should have been ready to see his point, to have sided with him.

After Sir John had taken Pat her coat, he came back to the drawing-room, where Gerard was standing moodily by the fireplace.

"How is she now?" he asked rather deprecatingly.

"Better," answered Sir John tersely. "I've ordered the car and am going to take her home in a few minutes."

"Can I—can I do anything," Gerard asked awkwardly.

"No, I rather fancy you've done enough for one evening! And let me tell you this, you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. If you haven't enough understanding to realize the nobility and the sufferings of a woman like Mrs. Graham, at least your manners should make you behave properly in my daughter's drawing-room."

Gerard's face flushed, then went deadly white at the sharply uttered reproof. At that moment he hated Mrs. Graham for being the cause of his discomfiture and humiliation.

"I am sorry if I spoke too strongly," he said stiffly. "But I didn't know who Mrs. Graham was when I told that story, and when I did, she forced me to say what I did."

As he spoke he moved forward to take his pipe from the table, and his foot caught in the cushion on the floor. He picked it up and flung it on to the

couch, and the small locket on the snapped chain, which had fallen from Mrs. Graham's neck, lay revealed. He stooped and picked it up, and it fell open in his hand.

He was about to close it when he suddenly stood quite rigid, staring down at the trinket in his hand.

"What is it?" Sir John asked as Gerard did not move. "What are you staring at?"

The lad raised his eyes, filled with perplexity mingled with a dawning horror.

"Mrs. Graham must have been wearing this. I noticed the chain round her neck at dinner. Have you seen it?"

Sir John looked at him with a half-frown. "No, no, certainly not. What is there curious about it?"

"Do you mind looking at it?"

Gerard's hand was shaking as he held out the open locket. Inside was an exquisitely-painted miniature of a small boy with a serious, freshly-coloured face, blue eyes, and golden curly hair.

"Why, I've seen that miniature before somewhere," Sir John said quickly. "But I don't remember Mrs. Graham showing it to me."

"But I have seen it before too!" Gerard said with a sudden break in his voice. "I have an exact copy of this miniature. I showed it to you and Pat when you came to tea at my chambers last year. Uncle Will—Mr. Napier—gave it to me and told me it was a miniature of myself when I was a child of three."

The eyes of the two men met. Even then Sir John did not begin to understand. Only Gerard felt cold with fear. Before either spoke again, Mrs. Graham and Pat came into the room, the former looking almost her normal self.

"I am feeling quite all right again," she said to Sir John, "and am ready to go home. I can only apologize again for being so foolish and upsetting everyone. I promise not to do it again."

Then she caught sight of Gerard standing with the locket and dangling chain in his hand.

Instantly her hand went up to her throat.

“Is that my locket? It must have fallen off when I fainted.” She held out her hand for it, but Gerard’s fingers closed over it.

“I found it open on the floor. I wonder—would you mind telling me who the little boy inside is?”

A tiny smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “That is my child—my boy whom I told you I sinned to save.”

Gerard stood as though turned to stone, staring at her, and it seemed to them all three as they watched him that his face aged before their very eyes.

As he made no comment, Eleanor said quickly, “But why—why do you ask?”

The words seemed to be dragged from Gerard as he answered heavily. “Because it is a replica of a miniature I have which Mr. Napier told me was a portrait of myself, painted just before he adopted me. If that child,” holding out the locket, “is your son, then I—then I must be your son too.”

The desolation in the young voice struck Sir John so forcibly that, for the first time that evening he felt a throb of understanding compassion for the boy whom he had been secretly anathematizing as an insupportable young prig.

For a long time Eleanor hesitated. Then she realized she had said too much to withdraw. Gerard had heard too much to be content to leave the thing alone, even if she lied and denied what she had said. He would now ask questions—make enquiries. Then came in a sudden flash a wild hope that perhaps, after all, the truth, which she had never intended to disclose, might win him to her, might give her the happiness she had foresworn twenty years ago, might give her back the son she had surrendered, almost with tears of blood, so that his life should not be clouded with the knowledge of the tragedy of her own. The sudden hope irradiated her face as she answered him.

“Yes. I never meant you to know. I never meant to tell you or to claim you. I thought it better for you not to know. But now that you do, oh, Gerard, doesn’t it change things, doesn’t it make you feel differently?”

She faltered as she saw his face harden and stiffen, not soften, towards her and she went on, her assurance breaking down more completely every moment.

“You do realize that what I did was for your sake, don’t you? Just think what your life would have been if your father had lived, and what sort of

man you might have been, instead of what you are.”

She stopped short and there was a silence that could be heard in the room.

Mrs. Graham held out both her hands in one last supreme appeal, as she took a step forward.

“Gerard!” she whispered.

The passion-laden silence was broken by the opening of the door and the banal intruding of an everyday atmosphere.

A maid announced stolidly, “The car is here, Sir John.”

When the door closed behind her again, Mrs. Graham, who had not moved, who had only seemed to gather herself together till she had resumed her old calm poise, said quietly, as she continued to address Gerard, “Of course it has been a terrible shock to you. But please understand this; when I gave you up for your own sake, I believed it was for ever. For my part it is still for ever, unless you will it otherwise. I make no claim on you whatsoever, though if you ever want me, I shall always be there. Good-bye.”

She spoke very quietly and quite calmly. The little sob that broke the air came from Pat, as she shook Gerard’s arm.

“Gerard, can’t you say something? Don’t you see how she wants you?”

But Gerard had turned aside and, sinking down into a chair, had buried his face in his hands. He was physically incapable of responding to her appeal.

“Good night, Pat dear,” Mrs. Graham said. She gave one last look at the bowed, burnished head of the son who had disowned her, before she turned to Sir John. “I am quite ready now.”

After the sound of the departing car had faded into silence, Pat went back to the drawing-room, her eyes hard in her young face, which was still pink with the effort of forcing back the tears.

Gerard lifted his head and Pat almost gave a little cry at the sight of his haggard, ravaged face. But without a word she walked up to the table close by him and laid something small and glittering on it.

Gerard glanced from the ring to Pat’s face.

“What does that mean?” he asked hoarsely.

“It means,” Pat returned quietly, “I am giving you back your ring. It means I am no longer engaged to you.”

He started to his feet. This fresh blow was even more staggering, more unjust than anything that had gone before!

“You can’t mean it. You can’t be so unfair, just because—because— —”

“Because you are so cruelly hard, so unforgivably unjust to a woman, and that woman your own mother, you have no right to accuse anyone of unfairness. If you can be so non-understanding to one woman, you can be so to another. I don’t want to marry you any more.”

The young voice rang out coldly, judicially,

“I can’t bear it!” There was desolation and heartbreak mingled with indignation in his cry. “Only an hour ago I was absolutely happy. Now everything is in ruins, the whole world seems to have come to an end. Pat, Pat, you can’t mean it! You are angry now. To-morrow— —”

“To-morrow I shall feel just the same. It is far better to end it all at once. I couldn’t be happy for a day with a man who could feel as you do. I couldn’t live with anyone so narrow and so unkind.”

“But you said you loved me, such a little while ago!” he cried passionately.

“Oh, can’t you see?” Pat returned almost impatiently, “I did—at least I thought I did—but then I thought you were different. When she—your mother—stood pleading with you, and you turned away, I—I—something seemed to shrivel up in me. I felt I could have killed you! No—No—I don’t want you to touch me. I can’t help it—I suppose I didn’t really love you after all!”

For one instant the future of both of them hung in the balance. Even then, if he had forced the claim of his love, if he had said that he would try to see with her eyes, would try to see that she was right and that perhaps it was he who was wrong; if he had endeavoured to relight the fire that had rushed through her veins the first time he had taken her in his arms, by beating down her resistance; if he had seized and held her against his breast and defied her to break away from him, all their lives might still have been changed.

But he had suffered so many shocks that night, and he had not had enough experience of women to recognize Pat’s vulnerable point.

Hurt and wounded beyond endurance, he drew back.

“That ends it then. I won’t touch you against your will. Everything has gone now, even my belief in you!”

For a few seconds they stood looking at each other—young things who ought to have been in each others’ arms, hitting out, hurting each other.

The sound of the returning car sent Pat to the door. She did not want to see her father again that night. She could not bear anything more.

“Good night,” she said quickly, and ran across the hall and up the stairs.

She lay awake nearly all that night. She could not get Mrs. Graham’s anguished, beautiful face out of her mind, nor the breaking note in her voice when she had pleaded with her son, out of her ears. How could anyone have resisted her? How could anyone have persisted in condemning, in refusing to exonerate her?

For her own part her heart was filled with a wild, passionate sympathy for Mrs. Graham and with proportionate indignation for Gerard. How could he have spoken as he had? How could he have failed to be on his knees to her, as she herself was and as she felt he ought to be?

She told herself again and again she had done quite right in breaking her engagement. It could never have been possible for her to be happy with anyone so utterly without consideration and understanding as Gerard.

She did not regret what she had done. She had done right and, if necessary, she would do it again. But the assurance brought her no peace, and dawn was breaking before she at last fell asleep.

When she came down to breakfast the next morning, white-faced and weary-eyed, her father, who was already seated at the table, held out his hand and drew her down, kissing her with unusual tenderness.

“Gerard’s just gone,” he said. “I only saw him for a few seconds. He told me you had sent him away. Is that true?”

Pat nodded.

“And you don’t regret it? You didn’t only do it because you were angry with him?”

Still Pat did not answer his words. She only shook her head.

“I admit I am glad. He isn’t good enough for you. As Teddy Elliott said the other day, he isn’t big enough for my Pat.”

## Chapter 10

A little later that morning Sir John walked over to Myrtle Cottage. There was a new alertness in his step, a new determination in his eyes. He was the male going out to try and win his mate. And, as he went, middle-age fell away from him, leaving him as keen as a boy. He had said to Pat before he had started “If I can persuade Mrs. Graham to marry me, will you welcome her?” And Pat had answered, “You know I should like it better than anything in the world.”

He had been convinced of her answer beforehand, but it was only fair to her, seeing that now there was no definite prospect of her leaving The Court, to ask her if she would mind abdicating her position of mistress. He felt that this assurance of Pat’s would have weight with Mrs. Graham.

When Eleanor Graham came into the drawing-room she looked so white, so pitifully weary, she had so obviously not slept, that Sir John just went up to her and, without a word, took her into his arms and held her as closely and tenderly as he would have held Pat.

“Oh, my dear,” he said in a low voice. “It’s very evident it’s time someone took care of you. You are going to let me do it, aren’t you?”

For a few seconds she lay quite still, realizing what Heaven it would be to have someone to fight her battles for the rest of her life, what it would be never to have to struggle alone any more, never to be lonely again. She felt she was slipping into a sea of peace, of utter calm, as her eyes closed and deliberately gave way to temptation.

But she knew it was only for the moment—that the moment would not last. She had faced things out during the night, for she knew from what Sir John had hinted, when he said good night, what he intended to offer that day. And she knew the haven he was offering was one she had no right to enter. The barque on which she sailed must be like that of the Flying Dutchman— it must always be moving and must always journey without consort.

Very slowly she drew herself away from him, as though she wanted to keep the sensation of utter rest his arms had given her as long as she could.

Her eyes were soft as she looked up at him, and gently shook her head.

“I won’t pretend to misunderstand you. But it’s no use.”

“Do you mean you couldn’t love me?”

“No, I don’t mean that at all. No woman could help loving you. But I can never let the shadows of my life darken anyone else’s. It not only wouldn’t be fair, it wouldn’t be right.”

“The shadows wouldn’t darken my life or Pat’s, who wants you nearly as much as I do. We should only lift them from yours. It is not very easy for a man of my age to talk of love, but I do love you as I never thought it possible to love again when Alicia, my first wife, died. I have never looked at any woman since then. And I know she would like you to come to my home—if you only could.”

“If I only could!” Eleanor repeated. “Don’t you realize you are offering me what seems like Heaven? But I must not take it. You forget there is Gerard. When he marries Pat— —”

“He isn’t going to marry Pat,” Sir John said sharply. “He has left us. She has sent him away.”

“Oh, no!” Eleanor cried, swift protest in her voice. “She mustn’t do that. It isn’t fair to him.”

“Was he fair to you?”

“Oh, but he is still only a boy. Everything about him shows he is not yet a man. It isn’t fair to expect understanding from a boy who has had no experience to make him a man.”

“But he allowed himself to judge you with all the force of a man.”

“Ah—that! But older people, like you and me, know that all youth thinks it knows more than age, more than experience. Youth has the tragedy of the hardness and presumption, as well as the beauty of its own innocence. And it never knows its own ignorance or its own value till it has gone! Then it is too late to profit by either. It was I who was foolish to expect sufficient understanding from him to see my point of view.”

“Pat is three years younger, but *she* saw it,” Sir John said pointedly.

“Ah, but Pat is one in a hundred. Besides, a young woman is always years older than a young man.”

“Then you have no excuse for not being willing to come and make her home happier,” was his prompt rejoinder.

“That is a very sweet way of putting it. But you know Pat and Gerard will come together again.” She said the words with conviction.

“I hope not,” Sir John said quickly. “He is not good enough for her.”

In an instant his mother’s pride flared up. “Now it is you who are not fair! Because, as a boy, he has proved himself narrow—perhaps I am wrong even in saying that, perhaps he is strictly right in what he felt—that does not mean he is not worthy of any girl, even of Pat. His very ignorance of life proves his innocence. He has a marvellously clean record—apart from his parentage—to bring her. But perhaps,” with a sudden thought, “that tells against him with you?”

“Oh, Eleanor, don’t be so foolishly idiotic! Do you suppose I care a tuppenny damn for what his father was? And as for you—well, you are the only woman I have ever wanted to put in Alicia’s place. Doesn’t that prove what I think of you? Eleanor, don’t turn me down.”

He put out a hand and laid it on her knee. Quite naturally she laid her own on it.

“No, Sir John, it’s no good. You must believe me, I never intend to marry again.” She forced him to meet her eyes. “If I could marry anyone it would be you, but I can’t—ever. Your friendship has meant and means so much to me that I don’t want to lose it. Please remain my friend and forget you ever thought of anything else.”

Sir John saw he could do no good by saying anything more then. He realized that at the moment she meant what she said.

“Of course I have no intention of worrying you. But I don’t promise that some day I shan’t try again to make you change your mind. However, for the time, I’ll hold my tongue. Only what you have said decides me to accept an offer I received by this morning’s post that I have not yet mentioned to Pat. A friend who is going yachting round the Scandinavian fiords for a month or six weeks wants us to join him and his wife. A couple who were going with him have dropped out at the last minute. It would do Pat a world of good and take her thoughts off Gerard. But it means starting off at once, in fact, going to London to-morrow or next day.”

Mrs. Graham’s heart sank. The companionship of Sir John and Pat had come to mean a great deal to her. She would be very lonely if they went away. But she realized she couldn’t have it both ways. She had been offered and had refused their close companionship for life. She could not complain if she were to lose it now when she felt she wanted it more than ever. But, as she calculated quickly, they would be away during the greater part of the remainder of her time at Westlea.

But perhaps that was as well, in spite of her disappointment. If Pat were not with her, did not see her, she would the sooner forget her generous championship of her, which of course had been the cause of the breach between her and Gerard. And Pat and Gerard must make it up. She could not bear it if, through her, however unintentionally, Gerard should forfeit his happiness, should lose the girl he loved. She would talk to Pat, would persuade her to write and forgive him.

So when she said good-bye to Sir John she asked him to beg Pat to go and see her some time that afternoon, as she particularly wanted to talk to her.

But when Pat came, she found her far more determined than she had expected. Pat announced at once that she had asked Betty Bellingham and Teddy Elliott to tell everyone they knew that her brief engagement was ended.

She persisted quietly, but quite definitely, that she would not marry Gerard now. She said that even when she became engaged to him she had realized what a terrible wrench it would be to leave her father and her home.

“If I had really loved him, as I should love the man I meant to spend my life with, I shouldn’t have thought so much of that,” she said. “If I had really loved him I should have sided with him last night. I didn’t. I was so angry, so disgusted with him, so utterly disappointed in him, I could have struck him. No, don’t look shocked, my dear. I mean it. If I had been a man, I know I should have knocked him down.”

Eleanor looked at her anxiously. This was a side of Patricia she had not seen before. Her boyish upbringing, which had included more tutors than governesses, although it had not spoiled her femininity, had given her a certain masculine directness which came out spontaneously when she was moved or interested. Where she saw clearly she acted with determination. She did not realize that, in seeing Mrs. Graham’s side so clearly and sympathizing with her so whole-heartedly, she had allowed herself completely to ignore Gerard’s point of view. She did not grasp what a terrible *bouleversement* had happened to his world. She did not make allowance for the impossibility of a young man with Gerard’s rigid, admittedly conventional outlook, readjusting his whole mental attitude without travail, or, at any rate, without a long time in which to accustom himself to a new view-point.

Although she had already begun to experience a sense of loss in the knowledge that Gerard would never again hold her in his arms, that his

eager, honest, blue eyes would never again gaze into hers with a blaze of dawning passion, which had, for a time, kindled her own, that all the plans they had made for their lives together in the future had been broken and shattered to pieces, she was still quite determined.

Gerard had failed, failed badly. She had not only been angry and disappointed, she had been terribly ashamed of the man she had promised to marry. And she would never marry any man of whom she had just reason to be ashamed.

It was strange that Pat, usually so tolerant, usually so capable of seeing that there were not only two but three or more sides to most questions, should feel so intolerant towards her lover.

It was, perhaps, because she had endowed him in her own mind with so many virtues that, when he fell so heavily from the high level to which her thoughts had lifted him, his fall took on exaggerated proportions.

Or, it may have been a hint of latent sex-antagonism, an antagonism of which most people are unconscious and would even indignantly deny—the generous-hearted woman siding with another woman against the male, to the exclusion of everything else.

But, whatever its cause, Pat's lack of sympathy with Gerard, to the point of forcing her to break her engagement with him, was so complete that, at the moment, it was idle to try and make her change her mind.

After a time Mrs. Graham gave it up and the two women parted, strangely enough, with the first hint of coolness there had ever been between them.

## Chapter 11

When Mrs. Graham was at last alone, she realized with bitter self-reproach that the whole incident of her coming to Westlea had been a deadly mistake, had brought nothing but disaster and shipwreck to the one person in the world for whom she had sacrificed her whole life, besides bringing great unhappiness to a girl whose horizon had hitherto been cloudless.

By the indulgence of her own selfish, urgent desire to see her son, to speak to him, to discover for herself into what manner of man he had grown, she had undone the sacrifice of twenty years.

Nannie had been against it from the beginning. The old woman had warned her no good could come of it, only possible unhappiness. She had been right in her native common sense, as, Eleanor was bound to admit, she had been right in nearly all the counsels she had given her ever since they had been wanderers together on the face of the earth.

As she sat there alone in the deepening shadows, Eleanor's thoughts drifted back to the days when she had had nothing to fear, nothing to hide, when she had been a young girl still standing on the threshold of womanhood, still utterly unawakened, completely ignorant of all the real meaning of life.

She had been a penniless orphan of fifteen when she had been taken by her aunt, Miss Betty Hilliard, to live with her in her cottage in the north of Cumberland. The old woman was almost as innocent as her niece, and held that young girls should be kept from all sex-knowledge as long as possible. In the rather bleak village where she lived there were few, if any, young men except amongst the local farmers and, as the doctor and vicar were both in the seventies, Eleanor had never experienced the ordinary life, the accustomed flirtations and harmless love-passages that are the everyday small change of life with most adolescent girls.

Accordingly, when Cyril Gore took a cottage only a mile away for a month's fishing, he burst upon Eleanor Milliard's vision as a being from another world. He was strikingly handsome to the eyes of ignorance, which could not see the cruelty of the full lips under the golden moustache, clipped to conceal the encroaching silver; nor the incipient demon of madness, engendered by excessive drinking, in the blue eyes, set close together on

either side of a nose, once faultlessly chiselled, already broadening and thickening.

He carried his thirty-eight years well, his broad, magnificently planned figure was still comparatively youthful. To the inexperienced, innocent eyes of seventeen, he was a wonderful embodiment of romance.

When he had first caught sight of Eleanor Hilliard, wandering bare-headed beside the stream where he had rented his fishing, sheer wonder at her radiant beauty had swept him off his feet. Her skin, whitened with the purity of the Cumberland air, rose-tinted with the wine of perfect health and youth, was dazzling in its perfection to the man accustomed to the women of great cities, women of a class who, as a matter of course, looked on rouge and powder as a necessary part of the day's equipment. Her great, dark, hazel eyes were aglow with the joy of living, as she sang light-heartedly, half-walking, half-dancing along the edge of the stony stream silvering its way through its green-clad banks.

He had held his breath and remained in the shade of a clump of bushes until she was close upon him. Then he had stepped forward and his sudden appearance had so startled Eleanor that she slipped and would certainly have fallen into the stream if he had not caught and held her.

The feeling of that panting, barely-formed girlish bosom, which yet gave such promise of the future, pressed against him, awoke something which had slumbered for months in Cyril Gore's breast, and was the more avid for its long sleep and for its sudden awakening.

In that moment he knew that he must have this girl-woman for his very own—some day. In that first instant, as her great startled eyes gazed up into his, and the crimson lips, which he could see were virgin as a child's, quivered so close below his own, was born the determination to gather this fragrant woodland flower for himself. In imagination he saw the great eyes close in surrender, the crimson blood flood the perfect, pointed face, as he taught her the meaning of a man's love and passion.

At that moment his purpose was not evil. He recognized beauty and innocence. He wanted to grasp both and take them to himself. He did not realize that his very touch must soil and befoul the beauty he coveted.

The courtship had been a brief one. Miss Betty Hilliard, with all the romance and all the inexperience of an old maid who had lived the greater part of her life in seclusion, was thrilled by the love affair of her young niece and the handsome, distinguished-looking stranger.

There was no one in the village of any worldly knowledge or acumen to utter a word of warning.

And so, one lovely June morning, the gracious young lamb was dressed in white and decked with flowers for the slaughter. She was but seventeen, and though she had moments of wild repulsion, when her lover held her too closely or kissed her too passionately, she had no knowledge of men or of facts to give her any clue as to the bitter reality of the future.

Cyril Gore himself realized the necessity for caution until the bird was safely snared and, on the whole, he held himself well in hand during the month that passed between the first meeting and the wedding. For he was head-over-ears in love and he was prepared to do anything to secure the object of his desires. He had not attempted to win her, as had been his wont with most of the women whom he had dishonoured with his admiration, without marriage. He had realized at once that would be an impossibility. He was willing to pay the heavy price of matrimony to secure his victim, though, as he sardonically told himself, he would probably regret it within a week.

Eleanor's disillusion had begun on the very first night of their marriage. He had taken her to one of the big London hotels for a few days before starting for Paris and Switzerland.

Dinner was served in their private suite, and at dinner he drank glass after glass of champagne. By the time the meal was cleared away and they were alone and safe from any further entry of the waiter, the maniac that had been rapidly rising in Cyril Gore came to the surface as he became more and more intoxicated, not only with the wine he had drunk, but with the beauty of the child who was now his legal property, his own to do with as he would.

The first exhibition of his passion, as, with bloodshot eyes, he seized her and literally tore her satin bodice from her shoulders, revealing the slender curves of her girlish breast, so horrified her that, with a little cry of terror, she sprang from his arms and ran out into the corridor. In her terrified sense of outraged decency and modesty, she cried out for someone to come and rescue her from the horrible fiend, with the gloating eyes, who had taken the place of the lover whose sophisticated attraction had swept her off her ignorant feet, to her own bitter, irremediable fate.

But he had seized her and dragged her back before anyone could answer her piteous cry, the last cry she was to utter before she had sounded the depths of a hell incomprehensible to any but an ignorant, innocent girl.

When the morrow's sunlight fell across her ashen face, with heavy shadows under eyes that would never again look with anything but horror on the man who had chased from them all their innocence and youth, Eleanor Gore had become, as it were, a woman without hope. She was like one who had been numbed with so terrific a shock that life could never again become a vital thing.

She was so broken that she could not even rebel at first. She suffered, she endured, she accompanied her husband wherever he led her, and, as she boasted twenty-four years later to her son, she never whined.

There was, in fact, no one to whom she could turn. Her aunt had died a few months after her wedding, and she had no relations and no friends to whom she could tell the truth.

When she first knew she was to have a child, when they had settled down in the country house he had rented in Yorkshire, a new spark of hope flickered in her heart. It might make her husband more human to her, it might bring her some personal comfort.

But the knowledge of the coming child only infuriated Cyril, who was drinking more heavily than ever. It would upset his plans, interfere with his pleasure, for he still retained a mad kind of passion for his wife's beauty.

But the local doctor, Dr. Martin, frightened Cyril into comparatively decent behaviour and persuaded him as soon as the child, a splendidly healthy boy, was born, to go away for a time. And for a few months Eleanor was really happy. Relieved of her husband's odious presence, she had recovered something of her youthful spirits and light-heartedness. She adored her baby, yearned over him, worshipped him. To her he stood for everything that might make life, not only bearable, but even happy.

In her new-found peace she even was able to think less bitterly of Cyril; his cruelties, his viciousness became dimmed by the merciful mists of absence. Perhaps, when he returned, he would be better, kinder, he might give up the drink that turned him from a human being into a beast. She would plead with him, for the sake of the boy, who was not only hers, but also his, that he would try to control the temptation that had ruined him mentally and physically and had wrecked their lives.

Just at first after he had come home, Eleanor's heart rose, as it seemed as if her hopes might be fulfilled. In his satisfaction at seeing that her beauty had only matured to a more glorious fulfilment by reason of her motherhood, instead of being spoiled, he had been more considerate; he had certainly drunk less.

But the phase did not last long. As he realized Eleanor's devotion to the child he grew jealous of him. He used to hold it as a threat over her that he would separate them unless she obeyed him implicitly, unless she did all that he required of her for his pleasure. That phase was bad enough, but as the incessant drinking did its work more completely and more thoroughly, he took to baiting her through the child. He pinched his soft white flesh, laughing when the mite cried, and assured his mother that it was good to begin hardening boys from their earliest youth.

Later on he conceived the idea of forcing the child to drink wine, a piece of devilry which made Eleanor, the first time it occurred, attempt to leave the house, taking the child with her.

But Cyril himself caught and frustrated her, and from that moment he engaged servants whom he paid heavily to watch her so that she could not escape.

Looking back with all the experience of after-years to help her, Eleanor told herself she ought to have been able to manage somehow. She ought not to have kept silence. She ought to have told someone of her wrongs and of her miseries and demanded help. She must have been a resourceless fool. But twenty years ago, a girl who had been brought up as she had been, in the country, with all the simplicity of surroundings to be found in a village vicarage home and afterwards in the cottage of an old maid, had not much idea of resource or independence.

Once or twice Cyril had been ill, and then he had come for a brief time to his senses. He had confessed he was a brute and begged her to forgive him, promising her that he would be different. At first she had believed him, and, grateful for the promise of amendment, had forgiven him with a full heart. It was only with time that she learned nothing would ever really change him.

Then had come one awful day when he had drunk himself to semi-madness and he had plied the child, then about three years old, with drink so that he had staggered to the floor. Eleanor, nearly demented herself, had struck her husband again and again with her bare hands, shrieking at him, until in fury he had seized her and locked her out of the room, while he forced the child, whimpering in protest, to drink wine until he was sick.

The hideous scene had been interrupted by Cyril's falling down as he staggered across the room to unlock the door.

The same night he was taken ill with a recurrence of the fever from which he had suffered at intervals for the past three years.

Eleanor shivered as she lived over again the poignant scene she had described to her son, all the horror, all the temptation, all the agony of it.

She remembered her own feelings when the morning sun struggled through the crack of the blind and showed her her husband dead on the bed before her.

She had no feeling of regret then. What she had done was irrevocable. She felt the strange sense of peace that finality always brings, even though it may bring despair as its consort.

Cyril was dead.

Never again would he humiliate her with his degrading passion for herself, never again would he torture her through her beloved boy. No more was her idolized son in danger of following in his father's vicious footsteps, no longer was the health of his body, mind and soul in danger.

She remembered how she had looked at the bottle on the table beside her. She remembered thinking in a dazed way that she ought to hide it, get rid of it.

She actually had it in her hand and was moving towards the bathroom which led out of the bedroom, where she had lived through such hours of mental torture, with the idea of throwing it away.

But as she moved stiffly, after the long night's vigil, there came a light knock at the door and Dr. Martin entered the room.

"I was so anxious," he said, "I came over early, though it is not yet seven o'clock. How is he?"

But one glance at the bed answered his question.

He turned with a swift question on his lips and saw the bottle in her hand.

"Did you give him the medicine as Sir Moreton Reid directed?" he asked as he took the bottle from her. Then he saw it was full.

"What does this mean?" he asked sternly.

Before his accusing eyes her own faltered. "I—I— —" she began.

Then mercifully the room began to sway before her eyes and blackness rose to swallow and engulf her as she fell forward into his arms.

The following months of bitter humiliation were blurred in her memory—the inquest, her own steady refusal to say why she had withheld the drug,

the months in prison, the trial, the verdict.

It was then that William Napier, a friend of Cyril Gore's youth, who had visited them on two brief occasions since their marriage, had obtained a special permit to see the convicted woman. He offered to take the child and bring him up as his own, bring him up in ignorance of his mother's fate. But on one condition, and one only, namely, that she should never claim him.

She had cried out and protested. It was not fair, it was not just.

The rigid Puritan had been inexorable. He asked what chance would the boy have, known as the son of her husband and of herself? Cyril Gore's name was notorious. People knew of his viciousness, of his drunkenness. People were sorry for her, though they condemned her. She had been sentenced by her fellow countrymen to penal servitude for the manslaughter of her own husband. When she left prison she would be an outcast. She might not know it, but her husband had left practically no money behind him. He had been living on capital for years. If she did as he, Napier, advised, and gave him the care of her son, the child's life should never be clouded with the knowledge of his parentage. He would bring him up as any mother might wish her son to be brought up. No one should know who he was. He would give him his name legally, and he undertook to leave the child all he possessed. He further asked, if she did not consent, who would be likely to look after him while she was in prison? He had made enquiries but apparently there were no relations on either side willing or able to undertake the upbringing and education of the boy.

Tormented, driven into a corner, Eleanor at last gave way. Already her punishment for taking the giving or the withholding of life into her own hands was beginning. It was even demanded of her that the child, for whose sake she had morally committed murder, should be surrendered. She was being made to see that it would injure him, wreck his prospects of the future, merely to be known as her son!

Not all at once did she consent. It was only when she realized there was no way of escape, that there was no other method even for providing for her child that she gave in.

She undertook, with utter despair in her heart, to give him up to William Napier, promised never to attempt to make herself known to him or communicate with him, in fact, to become dead as far as he was concerned. In return, Mr. Napier undertook to send news of him once a year, both while she was in prison and afterwards, to some *poste restante* address.

Then she had disappeared into the nightmare horror of Oxford prison for women convicts.

It was then that her gorgeous hair turned white, during the days and nights of solitary confinement, solitary except when she was working in the laundry with her fellow convicts.

Those were the only hours which were bearable. The long hours alone in the dimness of her cell were pure torture, when memories crowded in on her, nearly unhinging her reason; when hopeless longing for the baby voice, for the childish arms she would never hear or feel again, nearly broke her heart, nearly destroyed her courage.

And constantly there was the steady tramp, tramp, of the wardress's heavy feet outside and always the dread of hearing her own wooden shutter slide, while an official eye obtruded on her privacy.

Always solitary—yet never alone!

Even as she thought of those old days, a little whimper of self-pity rose to Eleanor's throat.

Outwardly she was docile enough and easily earned her seven marks a day which secured her remission of sentence and release at the end of three years and nine months.

She had gone out into the world dazed, hopeless, broken, and at the gates had been met by the Nannie of her childhood, the woman she had pleaded, in vain, to have with her when her own child was born.

Nannie Jones had read of the trial with horror and had recognized in the unhappy heroine of it her own nursling. She had managed, by Northern doggedness, to get in touch with the Governor of the prison, in spite of all the difficulties this had presented to her, and she had learned the day and hour at which Eleanor was to be released.

And from that moment Nannie had never left her. She had a little home ready for her, where by degrees she built up the old spirit, gave back the courage of her darling.

Together they had worked to keep a roof over their heads, together they had lived simple, hard-working lives, sometimes in the town, sometimes in the country.

Eleanor had changed her name, having adopted her mother's maiden name before she had married Henry Milliard, the over-worked vicar of a Cumberland village.

It was while they were in London, some three or four years after her release, that a piece of good luck at last came to Eleanor.

In the same lodging-house a middle-aged woman, living alone, was taken ill, and for many weeks Eleanor and Nannie nursed her between them, taking it in turns to sit up at night during the worst of the illness. When she recovered, she insisted on both Eleanor and Nannie going away with her for a holiday to the sea, and it was only then they discovered that, in spite of her method of living, Mrs. Fulton was well off. She had been a humble creature, who had married a fairly wealthy man, whose wealth had oppressed her, and, when he died, she had returned to her own simple way of living.

She had clung to Eleanor and begged her and Nannie to remain with her, for she knew a recurrence of her illness was inevitable. As a matter of fact she died before the year was out, and when she died she left most of her money, amounting to about fifteen hundred a year, to Eleanor.

This meant the inauguration of a new scheme of life for Eleanor and Nannie. Eleanor decided she would take the opportunity of seeing all the beautiful, distant places of the world she had never hoped to see. For many years she travelled, seeing much, learning much, experiencing much, always returning to England once a year to get her precious letter from William Napier, with its curtly worded but faithful account of her son's doings and development.

It was through one of his letters she had learned of Gerard's yearly visits to the Mannerings at Westlea, a village at the foot of the Cotswolds. This knowledge had put it into her head to go there and, as a casual acquaintance, to meet him.

She felt it would satisfy her longing to see him, to speak to him, to hear him speak to her.

She had heard of Myrtle Cottage after a visit to the big local agents, Messrs. Dunton and Dunton, of Gloucester and had agreed to take it from the Spring for six months. She could not know, of course, when Gerard would be likely to go to The Court. But if she were to be well-established in the village before the summer and make the acquaintance of the Mannerings, surely then she would stand a good chance of seeing him, if he came again, as he had done for the past two summers.

She knew it was a gambling chance that she would meet him. Well, she thought, as she moved her head restlessly against the cushions of her chair, the gamble had come off. She had made friends with his host and hostess

without any difficulty. She had been the woman Patricia Mannering was most anxious to meet and to like her lover.

She had met him, talked to him, touched him. And, from the bottom of her soul, she wished she had not.

If only she could undo the past week! If only she had gone away before Gerard had come, or if only she had never thought of coming to Westlea! But— —

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on; nor all your piety nor wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.

## Chapter 12

With haggard, resentful eyes Gerard turned and looked back at The Court, as the car turned out of the drive into the country lane which led into the main Roman road leading to Gloucester.

It stood out, the early morning sunlight touching its grey stone walls to a warmer hue, against a background of trees in full summer leaf. On the thick old lawns gardeners were already busy with mower and roller; a maid, shaking a duster out of an open French window, was pausing to sniff the roses on a tree climbing round the woodwork; Nellie, Sir John's setter, was lying in a patch of sunshine, her brown nose resting on her outstretched paws. A perfect picture of a beautiful, gracious home, surrounded with every luxury, everything that makes life pleasant and desirable.

And behind that half-opened window at the end of the left wing Pat lay sleeping. Or was she awake? Had she, like himself, lain sleepless through the long hours of a night which seemed to have no end?

Could it be only eight days since he had driven in at that gate, so full of hope, so joyous, so content with the world and all that it held and offered for him?

His hopes had been more than fulfilled, his content and his triumph had been complete. The world had appeared a fair kingdom, all his for the conquering, with the girl he loved by his side.

And within one short hour that world had been shattered. His assurance in himself, in his own power to conquer and attain, had been wiped out. His conviction that his stock was irreproachable was gone. His belief that the girl he loved loved him, was dead. He felt he was sneaking out, the dishonoured son of a drunken maniac and a woman little better than a murderess, a man who had not been able to hold the love of a girl against the very first storm that had blown upon it.

But of one thing he was very sure. He would not try to shake Pat's decision now. She had told him she had been mistaken in her love for him, she had said she did not want to marry him, could not live with him. She had shrunk from him when he had tried to touch her. Well, that settled it. He would not bother her or plead with her. She had sent him away. He would go without delay. No woman should say that a man with his family history had

pestered her to remain faithful to a promise she had given and then had withdrawn.

He almost writhed as the car bore him rapidly out into the straight high road, descending from the Birdlip part of the Cotswold Hills, through a wide, spreading, prosperous valley to the old grey town, with its histories of Roundhead and Cavalier, with its spires and turrets, with its magnificent old cathedral that has stood grim and steadfast while generations of men and women have been born, lived, and passed into dust under its shadow.

He felt almost as if he were himself unclean. All the innocent pride he had taken in his own magnificent manhood, which had urged him to keep his physical body as fit as his mental faculties, seemed in the dust. He had the tainted blood of a drunkard and of the father of a drunkard flowing through his veins, and his mother had served for years in a convict prison, for manslaughter of her own husband!

How could he henceforward ask Pat or any decent woman to marry him? If Pat had stuck to him, spite of the new knowledge, it might have been different. He could never now plead with her to reconsider the cruel words of dismissal.

The very air, the cool, chill air of the early morning, seemed hot against his head as he sat forward on the leather cushions of the car, his hat flung on the seat beside him, his eyes feeling as if they were burning in their sockets.

As they tore through the villages and long-drawn-out suburbs of the town, he looked at the familiar landmarks as a man looking at them for the last time—Whitcomb, Hucclecote, Barnwood, Wotton, with the great mental hospitals and their tragic stories of broken, clouded lives, lying back from the road, the old thatched cottages giving place to neat, trim suburban villas, the comfortable larger houses of the middle classes, and then the square, turreted tower of the cathedral rearing itself solidly against the western sky.

The car turned sharply off and hastened up the slope to the station, only just in time to see the train slowly steaming away from the platform.

It was almost more than Gerard could bear. There was no train for more than two hours—two hours in which to kick his heels in place which he was feverishly desirous to leave behind, to escape from.

He tipped the chauffeur heavily, had his suitcases put into the cloak room, and set out to walk for the two hours which had to be got through somehow.

He made his way to the river, flowing sluggishly through the town, and walked along the banks, hardly heeding where he went in his blind misery until a glance at his watch warned him that unless he retraced his steps instantly he would miss the second train.

He ran the last part of the way, and arrived at the station panting, with ten minutes to spare.

He had barely taken his seat in an empty first-class compartment and the train had scarcely started, when the conductor passed down the corridor announcing the serving of the first luncheon.

Gerard nodded and rose from his place. He had had no breakfast and he was just aware that he was hungry.

He went into the luncheon saloon and sat down, and a plate of fried plaice was put in front of him.

“Anything to drink, sir?” asked the waiter.

“No, thank you.” Then a sudden light came into his eyes. “Yes, I will. Bring me a bottle of burgundy, please.”

“Certainly, sir—whole or half?”

“Half, please.”

By the time Gerard had finished his cheese and biscuits he felt distinctly better. He was a fool to have felt so hopeless! If life was going to be different from what he had hoped, there might nevertheless be something in it! He drained the last drop of the last glass of his burgundy. The taste wasn't half as bad as he had always thought it and, anyhow, it had helped him to feel—comfortable—yes, that was it, comfortable. Not sleepy, only pleasantly lax.

“Coffee, sir, and liqueur?”

“Yes.”

“What liqueur—brandy, benedictine, kummel?”

Gerard hesitated. He hated brandy. But benedictine? He had tasted that once. True, he hadn't liked it, but it had not made him shudder as brandy had done. Yes, he would certainly have a benedictine.

When he returned to his corner seat he leaned back against the cushions, still acutely conscious of the definite new feeling of comfort, and fell asleep.

He was still asleep when the train slowed into Paddington station and he woke with a start.

Still a little dazed, he hailed a porter, collected his belongings and got into a taxi.

As he drove through the old, familiar streets on his way to the Temple the early morning feeling of utter hopelessness and bitter disillusion returned. How grey and drab everything looked! How sordid was Praed Street, with its small shops, how weary and tired-eyed were the men and women standing in the open doorways, or dragging along the narrow street, how dirty was the roadway churned into mud owing to the recent heavy storm.

He shuddered.

How lonely it was!

What was he going to do with himself for the rest of the day? To-morrow he was starting for Paris. At least, he had been starting. He was not sure that he would go now. But if he did, how was he to get through the long afternoon and evening that lay ahead of him? He had told his friends he would not be returning to Town till the end of August or beginning of September, as it had been his intention to cross by the night boat on the same day that he left Westlea. And, after Paris, he had hoped—and when Pat had accepted him—had arranged to return to Westlea until the Courts opened for the Autumn Session.

There was no one who would expect him. Everyone would be either engaged or out of Town. What could he do with himself?

Suddenly, as the taxi drove along the Strand, slowly, owing to the congestion of the traffic, he hammered at the glass and then leaned out of the window and yelled as he saw Jimmy Benson strolling idly along, his monocle in his eye, a cane swinging in his hand.

Jimmy pulled up short and advanced to the kerb.

“Hullo, old bean, where did you spring from? I thought you’d shed London till September?”

“So I thought I had, but I’ve changed my plans. Get in and come back with me. I don’t suppose Mrs. Barnes has left a leaf in the tea-caddy, but she don’t like coffee. By Jove, I’m glad to see you!”

“That’s nice of you,” returned Jimmy genially. His memory was not long enough to bear malice. Anyway, if he remembered that they had last parted

not on the best of terms, he was not likely to show it, so long as Gerard had apparently forgotten it. “Had a good time away?”

“Fair,” Gerard returned shortly. “What have you been doing?”

Jimmy recounted his doings of the past week, until they reached the Temple, and helped Gerard to carry his suitcases up to his rooms.

They smelt shut-up and stuffy, and the blinds were drawn down. Gerard strode across the room and jerked the blinds up and threw the window open.

“There, that’s better,” he said, and flung himself down in a chair, wiping the grime left on his fingers with his handkerchief.

“Light up, Jimmy. Unless— —” with swift suspicion, as he noticed his guest was glancing at the watch, “you are in a hurry?”

“I’ve got ten minutes. Then I’ve got to meet a lady—can’t keep her waiting, you know. By the way, hadn’t you some lady in view when you went away? You let fall a dark hint or two, you know.”

He screwed his glass closer into his eye.

“Then I was a darned fool,” Gerard returned shortly.

“Sorry,” Jimmy said cheerfully. “Course of true love not running smooth, eh? I thought you looked a bit off-colour.”

“Drop it, confound you!” Gerard shot out. Then he put out a hand impulsively and gripped Jimmy’s. “Sorry, old chap. I didn’t mean to be offensive. I just don’t want to talk about my visit—see?”

“Righto. Sorry I trod on private property. Sorry for all the rest too, old bean.”

There was a glint in Jimmy’s eye behind the unnecessary monocle which showed he meant it. He skimmed on directly after.

“Wish I’d been free to-night. But I’m not. I’m going to the New Eclipse after the show at the Shaftesbury. Not in your line, I know.”

Gerard’s face fell. What could he do with himself if Jimmy failed him? His rooms seemed dreary, grey, dismal, and he knew the moment Jimmy took his cheery presence out they would seem hideously lonely and ghost-haunted.

“I see. Going alone?”

“No. With the Pellew sisters. I know they’re not your mark or I’d ask you to join us.”

“Would you—I mean, could you?” Gerard asked eagerly. Anything, anyone, was better than being left in these rooms alone!

Jimmy glanced at him, then looked away. “You know they’re not—not any more Salvation Army Lassies than they were.”

“If you don’t want me, say it and have done with it.”

Jimmy, cute enough, despite his careless drifting through life, heard the rough edge in Gerard’s voice, but he saw the haggard misery of the hurt blue eyes as well, and he refused to take offence.

“You’re wrong. The fair Polly still cherishes a flattering recollection of your charms. I shall be made to feel of no account if you join the merry party, but in the cause of friendship I’m willing to take a back seat. I’ve got a box at the Shaftesbury. Join us there at eight-thirty, and we’ll all go on together to the New Eclipse. It’s the brightest place I’ve struck yet. I warn you it doesn’t smack of the Sunday School! There’s a cabaret show that is the cleverest thing I’ve seen for years—straight from Paris. But—well, it’s Parisian! If you want to hide your blushes, don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

“I don’t care what it’s like,” Gerard answered recklessly. “I’m on.”

“Righto. Now I must be off. Eight-thirty sharp.”

After he had gone, Gerard looked round his rooms and picked up one of his favourite books on Heredity. But he could not follow the arguments. The points seemed jumbled and confused. He flung it down and tried another on Medical Jurisprudence. But his brain would not absorb the meaning of the words, and he read line after line without taking in the sense of one word of it.

At last he flung that down too, and picked up his hat, left the room, slamming the door behind him, and ran down across the court, out on to the Embankment, where the sun, shining through stormy thunder-clouds, was gleaming on the river. This, at any rate, was better than the crushing, suffocating atmosphere within his own four walls.

He stood for a moment, his hands on the wide stone wall, staring out across the tumbling water. How was he to go on bearing it? How was he to go on facing life with his new knowledge of his own history, with the loss of Pat, for whom he had waited and whom he thought he had won?

## Chapter 13

“Why, Mr. Napier, what has happened to you? You dance oceans better even than Jimmy now, and last time we met you were pretty rotten, you know!”

Polly Pellew’s eyes, great, blue, deceptively innocent eyes, with heavy black fringes, gazed widely into Gerard’s face, as she lay a little closer against his breast, and her hand clung a little more tightly to his.

The syncopated music, the many coloured, swaying lights, the atmosphere of eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-to-morrow-you-may-die characteristic of the place, had been gradually rising intoxicatingly to Gerard’s brain. Moreover, Polly, one of the prettiest girls present and certainly one of the smartest in the absence of costume, which would have been beautiful had there been enough to get a really good idea of it, had devoted herself to the enslavement of the man whose youthful good looks had won her fancy some months previously. She was older than she looked, and she was a little blasée where the men whom she could have for the winking at were concerned. The fact that Gerard had seemed quite impervious to her charms, that he had not recognized the bouquet of subtle invitation she had thrown at him, that, at some repartee of her own, which had drawn shouts of delighted laughter from the other men, Gerard had turned away with a sudden burning flame in his face, all this had impressed his personality on her. Several times since that meeting she had implored Jimmy, who was a thoroughly useful henchman, because he appeared to have a bottomless purse, to invite “that good-looking Mr. Napier, who blushes so funnily.”

She was delighted at meeting him again and, warned by her last experience with him, went distinctly more warily to work.

Jimmy chuckled at her conversation as they sat at a small table, drinking coffee and liqueurs, at the beginning of the evening. He met her eyes when Gerard was looking away and grinned broadly. In return Polly’s left eye closed slowly. The talk up to then had been quite suitable for a girls’ convent school.

Jimmy drifted away with Stella, who looked a demi-mondaine, but was not. In fact, in spite of being Polly’s sister, she was loyally and whole-

heartedly in love with a man who was slaving in the North-West of Canada to make a home for her, and when that home was ready she was going to it. Meanwhile, she danced, and sang in musical comedy whenever she could get an engagement. She had been out for a month now, but was thankfully starting on the following day in a No. 1 Touring Company of *The Street Dancer*.

Her language was often hectic, but that did not interfere with the general straightness of her way of thinking. She and Jimmy were great friends, and, at her insistent urgency he had more than once done his best to remonstrate with Polly on the variety and frequency of her lovers. Polly was never offended, but, as her morals were those of a non-domestic cat, his protests had little effect.

Polly had got up to dance with Gerard with some trepidation, for she remembered his last performance. He had been stiff and just a shade clumsy and her small, arched feet had suffered. But his daily lessons at The Court had borne fruit.

His eyes brightened at her praise.

“You really think I’ve improved?”

“It isn’t a case of improvement—you dance beautifully. It’s just heavenly to dance with you.”

She allowed her blue eyes to fall as she nestled closer, so closely that her fair head lay actually against his breast.

His arms tightened round her. Why not? She was young and lovely, she was showing very openly she liked and appreciated him. The girl he loved and wanted had turned him down. The wound stabbed afresh as he remembered the decision in Pat’s voice when she had said she did not want to marry him or live with him. Well, why shouldn’t he play the game that all young men seemed to play?

Polly was very soft, her fair hair was delightfully perfumed, her form, pressing against his, was rounded, yielding. He would be like the others. He too would eat, drink, and be merry. To-morrow let die who might.

When they returned to their corner Jimmy and Stella were already there, with a bottle of champagne on the table in front of them. Jimmy glanced at Gerard, then at Polly, and held the bottle towards one of the empty glasses on the table. But she pushed it back.

“No, Mr. Napier will get me some, won’t you?”

“Of course.” He beckoned to a hovering waiter and a few moments later the frothing, gold-bubbling liquid was being poured into two more glasses.

Gerard raised his to his lips. For a moment the old revolt at the mere smell of it made him move his glass quickly away. Then he lifted his head with a sudden jerk and, looking towards Polly, said:

“Here’s the best of good luck.” And he drained the glass at one gulp. Instantly the watchful waiter refilled his glass as Polly raised hers in reply,

“Thanks, and may we have many more dances together.”

“It won’t be my fault if we don’t,” he answered, grasping the hand she held out, and there was an ardour in his voice and eyes that had not been there a minute before.

Polly grew less particular as the champagne loosened her tongue, and presently she was laughing with a loud abandon which caused others to glance curiously at the table in the corner.

The crowd was too Bohemian for any loud laughter to attract much comment, but at that table the two girls were so extraordinarily pretty, if second-rate, and the one young man so astonishingly good-looking that curious eyes were turned on them again and again.

At first Gerard was uncomfortably aware of their conspicuousness, but as the evening went on and more wine was ordered, wine of which he drank his fair share, he became as indifferent to comment as the others.

It was Jimmy who drank less than any of them. Jimmy who grew more quiet as the hours wore on, and who glanced with distinct anxiety at Gerard’s flushed face and feverishly bright eyes. It was long after midnight and careful watch was being kept at the doors for the least sign of a suspicious entrant, so as to remove all sign of wine and spirit bottles if necessary, when Jimmy suggested they should all go home.

Polly glanced at Gerard with eyes suddenly keen and shrewd.

“Not yet, old spoil-sport,” she said defiantly to Jimmy. “Gerry and I are going to have another turn before any of us go home to bye-bye.”

“Rather!” Gerard said unsteadily, as he reached out a shaking hand for the glass Polly had just refilled. Jimmy put his out quicker and shifted the glass.

“I wouldn’t, old bean,” he said in a low voice. “You aren’t used to it, and you’ve had as much as you can comfortably carry.”

He drew back before the look in Gerard's eyes—defiant, reckless and utterly miserable.

“I know that,” he answered, as Polly and Stella both got up for a moment to speak to some passing acquaintance, “but I didn't know how it helped. I'm going soon. This is my last turn.”

He lifted the glass with unsteady fingers and drank it slowly, as though it were not quite easy to swallow, while Jimmy turned away.

It was obvious something was very wrong with Gerard. He had never seen him like this. He wished to goodness he had never brought him to the New Eclipse. Polly meant mischief. He knew her too well not to know the signs.

His own acquaintance with the Pellew sisters was a strange one. He had once helped Stella out of a bad scrape, and she had never forgotten it. He had a keen apprehension of the sterling qualities under her meretricious appearance and the man she was engaged to had been a sergeant in his own company in France. He had promised Ned Cutler, when he had gone out to try to make a home for Stella, that he would keep an eye on her. He had kept his word, and that had involved keeping an eye on Polly as well, although the sisters did not live in the same place. Few gave him credit for the platonic nature of his friendship with them, but it was a fact, nevertheless.

Polly was as pretty as a picture, amusing in a light, cheap way, and quite conscienceless where her own desires were concerned. Jimmy had laughed at Gerard in the past for avoiding her. Now already he wished he had not brought them together to-night, when Gerard was in an unexpected, desperate, strange mood.

Polly danced back to them, light as thistle-down. “Now, my Gerry, one last turn.”

But Gerard suddenly felt he dared not trust his legs. There was a strange cotton-wool feeling about his knees, and the lights were swaying a little before his eyes.

“No,” he said, as firmly as he could. “After all, I'm not dancing any more. I'm going home.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she answered cheerfully. “I'm ready too. You can see me home first.”

“I'll see you home,” Jimmy said quickly. “At least, we can all four go together. We'll drop you first, then Stella.”

“No, my son, thank you,” Polly returned easily. “Four in a taxi is sitting too familiar-like to suit me. You take Stella. Gerry’ll take me, won’t you, dear?”

“Course,” returned Gerard. “Only let’s go before I fall asleep. This beastly band and the lights are making me horribly sleepy.”

A few minutes later Polly and Gerard were driving in a closed taxi to an address Polly had given the chauffeur. Polly was cuddled against Gerard’s side, holding his limp hand between hers. She did not talk. She let her slender, scented, seductive body say the words she left unuttered.

When the taxi pulled up, Gerard made a move to get out, saying “I’ll get out first and open the door for you.”

She whispered against his cheek. “You are coming up just for a few minutes, aren’t you?”

He drew back. The cool night air was beginning its work.

“No, it’s too late. I’ll just see you to the front door.”

“You can’t leave me in the street,” she protested. “I may not be able to get in at my flat, which is at the top. Sometimes the key sticks.”

She stepped up to the taxi-driver and slipped something into his hand. Then she ran swiftly across the pavement and Gerard was obliged to follow her. He had not yet said good night. When he reached her, she was standing outside a small, painted door, her hand on the key in the lock.

“I paid off the chauffeur,” she whispered. “Come in for just five minutes. I want to give you a tiny souvenir of this evening. It’s been so wonderful to me.”

She opened the door and switched on a light. A moment later Gerard found himself in a small sitting-room, heavy with stale perfume and the smell from strongly-scented flowers. It seemed filled with cushions and draperies and small bright pictures.

“There, my dear, sit there for a moment.” She pushed him gently down on to a soft-seated couch, and placed an open box of cigarettes on the small table beside him. Very lightly she dropped a kiss on his fair crinkled hair and vanished through a door at the other end of the room.

Gerard leaned his head against the cushioned back of the couch and closed his eyes. How tired, how sleepy he was and how his head ached.

How heavy, how warm was the air! Every muscle relaxed and his arms hung limply by his sides.

What was that subtle scent so close to him, what was that soft pressure against his side, that fairy-like touch on his lips?

He opened his eyes with difficulty and struggled to an upright position and a husky cry broke from him as realization slowly came to him.

Polly had discarded her dress and, in a gauzy wrapper that barely concealed her ivory shoulders and beautiful bosom, was nestling against him, her soft arms flung about his neck.

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” she whispered, as her lips touched his again.

Gerard’s senses swam. There was a strange prickly feeling running down his spine, his hands felt hot and dry, his breath came and went, as his heart beat like a hammer against his ribs.

“I must go,” he gasped as he feebly tried to push her away.

But she clung the tighter. “No, don’t you know I love you? I want you to take me to Paris with you to-morrow. I’ll show you things you’ve never guessed at. I know Paris almost as well as London, and I love it. We’ll have a lovely week together. You will, won’t you?”

“No, no,” he protested weakly. “You are mad to think of it. Of course it’s impossible.”

“Am I mad?” she whispered, pressing her slender, beautiful form closely to him and seductively stroking his face. “Is this madness?” And with a slow long pressure she rested her lips on his.

Gerard ceased to resist. He yielded to the glamour, to the passion, to the intoxication of the moment. His arms closed round her with answering pressure and his lips gave back kiss for kiss.

Then suddenly he grew rigid, as he heard a church clock strike coldly, resonantly, three times. His senses, dulled by the alcohol to which he was so unused, began to waken and he shivered. What was he doing here in this strange room, at this hour, with this girl, whom he barely knew, in his arms? She had asked—was it a moment or an hour ago?—if it were madness. It was—it was horrible, wicked madness. With a swift movement he pushed her away and stood up, trembling from head to foot.

It was not so much the memory of Pat, though it is true the thought of her sweet, fresh, untouched face rose for an instant to his brain. It was sheer

terror. Terror of an experience formidable because irrevocable and as yet unknown.

It is not only girls who are still innocent who have fear as well as curiosity about the fundamental facts of life. Boys who have lived, as well as thought, cleanly, can be, and often are, just as afraid.

The deliberate smirching of a boy's innocence is nearly as great a moral crime as is that of a girl's. The psychological effect of a young man's first taste of a knowledge hitherto unknown can be just as stupendous, just as harmful, as that of a young woman's. And the woman who is the first to shatter a clean boy's ideal of all that clean boys believe of women, shoulders a heavy responsibility.

Angry, unable to understand his sudden turning from her, Polly stared indignantly at him, her light draperies falling away from her shoulders.

"Do you mean you are going away—now?" she demanded.

"Yes, yes," he said breathlessly. "I—forgive me. I must go. I shouldn't have come. Good night. Good-bye."

And he almost ran out of the room and down the steep, stone stairs that led to the street.

Polly stood still, staring at the closed door, the anger in her eyes gradually giving way to amusement. "Why, I believe he was *afraid*," she said aloud. And philosophically she went to her room and got ready for bed. But her small active brain was busy. She imagined herself in love with Gerard. It was a long time since she had met anyone so extraordinarily handsome, so virile, so personally desirable. Moreover, she was not accustomed to being repulsed.

All through the evening Gerard had shown no signs of wishing to repulse her. It had only been just now when—she smiled to herself in the darkness—he had apparently been very definitely afraid. Could it be that he really was as innocent, as ignorant of life as he seemed? If he were—the chase assumed fresh proportions of attraction.

She would ring him up in the morning. If she knew anything of men, she would not fail a second time.

Out in the street, Gerard drew a deep breath, inhaling the cool, keen night air.

His hands still felt hot and dry. He felt as a man feels when he has nearly been knocked down in the street and has only saved himself by a sudden

leap. But what had he avoided? What had he missed?

It was, of course, not the first time he had been face to face with sex temptation. But hitherto it had made no appeal to him. He had had no difficulty in turning away—coldly, even contemptuously.

To-night he knew quite well that he had only escaped yielding by a hair's breadth.

Of course he was glad.

And yet—and yet?

He found his face flaming as he remembered how lovely Polly had looked, how snowy were her shoulders, how alluring her seductive eyes.

Was he wrong and were other men right? Had he played the game or had he merely played the fool?

## Chapter 14

The next morning Gerard woke with a bad headache and a terrible taste in his mouth. A sense of utter depression weighed on him as he sat up in bed, the room spinning round him till his body had grown used to the change of position.

“Lord! What a fool I was last night,” he thought to himself as he held his hands to his splitting head. “What possessed me to drink all that beastly muck?”

The telephone whirred by his side. The lifting of the instrument jarred his head afresh and he answered irritably, “Hullo, hullo! what is it? Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Pellew. Thanks very much, I’m quite all right, thank you. Oh, I don’t know—I’m not sure if I’m going to-day or not. Lunch? It’s awfully good of you but I’m afraid I’m engaged. Good-bye.”

He hung up the receiver with a click. No, he wasn’t taking any! This morning he was quite sure he had been right in running away last night! Polly was very pretty—much more amusing than he had thought the first time he had met her, and she certainly had given him a cheery evening. Of course, most men would think he had acted like an utter idiot. Perhaps he had. But the training of a lifetime dies hard, even if one’s world has been shattered and turned upside down.

He got out of bed steadying himself for a few seconds, and made his way to the bathroom. A cold plunge soon made him feel different and he found himself longing for a cup of strong coffee. But Mrs. Barnes might or might not look in. She thought he was away, and, though she called two or three times a week to air the rooms, she might not come near the place all day.

As soon as he was dressed he went round to his club and had breakfast. Or, rather, he drank cup after cup of strong, hot coffee. He felt he could not touch food and he almost shuddered at the smell of a crisp, curling kipper as it was carried past him.

What on earth was he to do with himself now? Should he go to Paris or should he not? He had promised Stanley Walton, a club friend, some years older than himself, who had been at Aix, that he would join him in Paris that day or the next and that he would spend a week or so with him. Walton

would be definitely expecting him; would, in fact, have secured a room for him at the Grand. He supposed he might as well go. There was nothing to do if he stayed at home. He got up and lounged out of the club and went down to Cook's and took a ticket for the following morning. There was no necessity to travel at night now. He did not need to husband every hour of the day, as he had planned to do when he wanted to be away from Pat for as short a time as possible. The trouble was, on the contrary, how to get through the hours.

He walked down Piccadilly, his head clearing every minute, but the sense of utter depression increasing.

Passing the In-and-Out Club he stopped a small, elderly man with a wrinkled face and clever blue eyes shining behind a pair of thick spectacles, with a pleased exclamation.

"Hullo, Mr. Stevenson, fancy meeting you! I thought you were off to Scotland to-day."

"So I am. Starting to-night. Doing anything? No? Then come along for a turn in the Green Park. I'm only going to get some tobacco. Then I am free for an hour."

Gerard turned and walked by the side of the man whose brilliant brain had won his passionate admiration long ago, and a few minutes later they were strolling under the thickly foliated trees of the Green Park. Stevenson noticed almost at once that the boy's usual eager interest was lacking, and turned his keen blue eyes on him.

"You don't look as fit as at the end of term. Been seedy?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Humph! Been working hard?"

"No. I've been slacking altogether."

"Ah! You got my notes on the Granfield murder? What do you make of it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't thought of it, sir. To tell the truth, I had forgotten all about it."

Stevenson's quick eyes were on his face again. A week or ten days ago Gerard would not have forgotten a matter on which he had specially asked him to work!

“Then it’s no use asking your views,” he answered shortly, “if you haven’t got any.”

Gerard walked along in moody silence. The very mention of the latest unsolved murder case brought back with poignant vividness the scene at The Court which had changed his whole life.

“Look here, sir,” he said, after a few minutes, during which they walked in silence along the gravel paths, “I’ve been wanting to ask you something, only I didn’t expect to have the good luck of meeting you. What chance do you really think a man has whose father and grandfather before him were drunkards?”

“I’ve told you in my lectures what I think on that point. It is far harder for such a man to run a straight course than for a man with no such family history. But, until his will-power has become weakened by excess, he has the same use of that faculty as any other man. He can bring his will-power to bear, though it will be harder for him than for the ordinary man.”

“In fact, so hard that it’s little use fighting against what will be his own inevitable fate—provided he lives long enough!” Gerard said bitterly.

“That’s where you young moral extremists over-state your case! Heredity is a powerful factor in our development or failure. You know no one is a more fervent believer in the general principle than myself. But there are other factors. And there are cases where the very opposite of the more or less general rule is strikingly apparent. You can recall many historical examples. Take Frederick the Great, for instance. His father was a drunkard and insane. On the other hand, Peter the Great had a son who was a drunkard and insane. The laws of heredity do not seem to have worked there. Take again the case of Sir Walter Scott’s son—he despised his father’s literary power and was ashamed of the novels he produced; Mozart’s son hated music; Marcus Aurelius had a blackguard of a son, and Cardan’s two sons were irreclaimable criminals. Those and a host of similar cases prove you have to look for other factors than heredity as determining causes of character and conduct.”

“Yes, I know,” Gerard said slowly, as the gloom on his face lifted, only to resettle a moment later. “But it seems to me that alcoholism stands rather apart. Isn’t it Flemming who is so strong on that point and maintains that drunkards do transmit their disease, for it is a disease, to their descendants? And wasn’t it he—or was it Demaux—who declared that children might be liable to alcoholism if their parents were intoxicated at the time of conception, even though they were habitually temperate? And look at

Graves. A hopeless dipsomaniac at thirty, in spite of his brilliant brain. You know his excuse—his father died in a drunken brawl, and his grandfather in a lunatic asylum.”

“Why are you so bent on proving the sinister side of the misfortune—for misfortune it is?” Stevenson asked with characteristic energy. He did not like the look on Gerard’s face, the yellowish tinge in his eyeballs, the new sagging at the corner of the beautifully-curved mouth. “What’s a man given his will for? The man who gives way because he has not courage enough to tackle his own lurking dangers is a coward. A man’s physical fitness and power can be developed and increased by careful exercise. Take the capacity to endure hardship, to walk or run without fatigue, to play games without panting—all these can be developed by steady judicious exercise of physical muscles. Exactly the same thing applies to mental and moral muscles. No man can shirk the responsibility of doing the best for himself by hiding behind the plea of inherited weakness. Remember, I always put Will before all else, even before Heredity. If a man makes his own Will-to-conquer-weakness supreme, he need not fear the evils even of inherited taints.”

He spoke with deliberate point. He felt that Gerard had not raised the subject idly. It could not be that he was thinking of himself, for Stevenson knew well his moderate habits. But perhaps he was concerned for some man or woman he knew, and wanted to reassure them.

After Stevenson had left him, Gerard wandered aimlessly until it was lunch time, and once again turned in at his club. The fine morning had changed and a chill, steady drizzle was falling. The streets looked grey, and the passers-by dingy. It struck him that everyone was abnormally ugly. There seemed to be no colour anywhere. People were dressed in drab colours and their faces were drab and grey to match their clothes!

There was hardly a soul in the club. It was the very end of July, and every one who could get away had already gone to the sea or to the moors or abroad.

Gerard sat down, alone, to a grilled chop. It was tough and underdone—or so he told the waiter. He tried the cold beef. Dry and tasteless.

Suddenly he remembered that yesterday, spite of his misery, he had more or less enjoyed his luncheon, though it had been served in a swaying railway carriage instead of in a luxurious club dining-room. And yesterday he had had wine with his lunch.

“Bring me some burgundy—the best you’ve got,” he ordered sharply.

The well-trained waiter hid his surprise. This was the first time he had ever heard Mr. Napier order wine for himself.

A quarter of an hour later Gerard was wondering why the world had looked so drab and dreary. Of course, he was terribly upset and unhappy about Pat, but—yes, once again he was feeling as he had felt yesterday—comfortable. He reflected that the thing was to drink a little, not too much. Last night he had drunk too much. He wouldn't make that mistake again. But a glass of port with his cheese might go well. He needn't have it again if he didn't like it. What an ass he had been to decide after his talk with Stevenson that he would avoid danger from an inherited curse by running away from it. Stevenson himself had said—"Recognize it, meet it, fight it." What puzzled him was that all his life he had disliked drink—or thought he had. The only thing that could account for it was that during his youth the unconscious influence of his mother had been paramount. Now that he knew who she was, now that the knowledge of her personality was so antagonistic to him, her unconscious influence would cease and his father's would consciously begin.

The taste he had believed he had not liked was essentially pleasant, he decided, as he fingered the slender stem of the wine glass. The generous red wine sent a definite glow of satisfaction through his veins. He liked the sleepy drowsy feeling that stole over him. He would have one more glass with his cigarette in that big easy-chair in the corner. No one ever had that chair when Colonel Blake was in the club. But Colonel Blake was in Norway, and no one else had appropriated it.

In ten minutes Gerard was fast asleep, his heavy, fair head leaning back against the leather cushions.

The following day he left London without seeing Miss Pellew, in spite of her ringing him up again and suggesting another evening at the New Eclipse. This time he truthfully pleaded a previous engagement. For Jimmy Benson had run him to earth at the club in the late afternoon and, feeling partly responsible for his outbreak on the previous evening, persuaded him to go for a motor run to Windsor, where they dined alone at The White Hart, and only returned a little before eleven, when Gerard admitted he was dog-tired and ready for bed.

The next morning he went to Paris. He had been to the *ville lumière* on several previous occasions, but always with Mr. Napier. They had stayed at the St. James and Albany, and Mr. Napier's ways of spending the days were in strict accord with the unimpeachable propriety of the hotel where he

stayed. Of course, Gerard had gone to places like *Les Folies Bergères* and had been duly shocked. He could not think why it was people rushed to see such shows. A clean, decent play like *Monsieur Beaucaire* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was infinitely more entertaining and attractive!

But already he had nibbled at the rind of a fruit he had hitherto regarded as forbidden, and he had no protest to offer when Stanley Walton, a man eight years his senior, suggested that after dinner they should go out to *Le Tarascon* at Montmartre.

They dined at the Grand, Gerard arriving only in time to tub and change for an eight o'clock meal.

There were two adorably pretty, unaccompanied girls at the table opposite them, wearing black wispy dresses with no sleeves, and smart little hats on their blond shingled hair. Their bistred eyes quickly singled out Gerard, and the prettier of the two smiled at him in open invitation.

Stanley Walton laughed. "I can see we are in for a lively time! Your *beaux yeux* have already attracted the fairies opposite. Last night I had their smiles. To-night they haven't an eye between them for me! Well, though you don't come to Paris to spend your time taking lectures at the Sorbonne, be careful! Those young ladies are fairly notorious. And I advise you to watch it to-night. I've not been to *Le Tarascon* yet, but I'm told it's hot stuff even for Montmartre."

"I don't care," Gerard returned recklessly. The champagne which he had decided to refuse, but which he was drinking freely, and the glances from the bright *méchante* eyes opposite were doing their work quickly. He lifted his glass, smiled, and nodded to the laughing girls.

In an instant the prettier, fairer girl blew him a kiss from the tips of her fingers and Gerard heard across the ceaseless chatter of the crowded room, "*Quel beau type d'Anglais!*"

Walton turned to his companion with a cynical twist to his clever narrow lips. "You've come on more than a bit since I last met you, Napier! You had a reputation, you know, for being a bit of a St. Anthony."

Gerard's eyes were shining as he laughed back.

"I had a reputation for lots of things I've lost. What shall we do, Walton? Ask those two girls to join us?"

Walton knew the Paris of which the two girls were citizens, a Paris of which Gerard, who was well acquainted with the galleries, the monuments,

the churches and the history, knew nothing.

“No,” he said shortly, “Certainly not. I know something about them. I warn you once again to steer clear and confine yourself to smiles and sheep’s eyes. If you want to play the fool, choose something less sophisticated. Those two would skin you in a week. Hurry up, it’s getting late.”

Gerard finished his coffee and followed his friend from the room. As he passed the table where the two fair-haired girls with the painted crimson lips, and laughing, wicked eyes were sitting, one put out a tiny hand.

*“Mais est-il possible? Est-ce que Monsieur s’en va?”*

*“Je regrette beaucoup,”* Gerard replied in execrable French, as he flushed up to the roots of his fair hair, *“Mais j’ai un engagement avec mon ami, vous comprenez?”*

*“Hélas!”* sighed the girl. *“Alors peut-être demain? C’est possible que nous soyons ici. Au revoir, Monsieur le bel Anglais.”*

And to the accompaniment of a little tinkle of laughter that reminded Gerard of small silver bells, he hurried after Walton’s retreating back.

The show at *Le Tarascon* was all that Walton had claimed for it. At first Gerard was so shocked and horrified that, in his discomfort, his one desire was to escape. But everyone else seemed to be taking the improprieties that merged into indecencies as a matter of course, and gradually he settled down to it. There were staid, eminently respectable looking men, obviously the fathers of families, and some of these had wives with them, who laughed gaily at the impossible pleasantries or shrugged their shoulders at things that could not be put into words.

Of course these were in the minority. The gaily-lighted, decorated hall was chiefly filled with men with white faces, weary eyes, and sensual mouths, and with women of all ages whose main occupation was clearly written on their faces.

At the end of an hour or so Walton looked at Gerard curiously. “Ready to come away, Napier? One has seen this sort of show a hundred times before, though I admit there’s an extra bit of cayenne on it to-night. Shall we hook it?”

“Oh, we may as well stay now we’re here, mayn’t we? By Jove, Walton, look at that girl. Did you ever see anything so lovely?”

Walton turned and gazed in the direction of Gerard's glance. A girl had just come into the room, alone, and was standing gazing at the crowded scene—at the rows of small tables, at the groups of men and women, in pairs and quartettes, at the filled glasses and empty bottles, and at the small stage at the end where two clowns were fighting at the moment for a maiden clad with her own hair only, tied to a mimic tree. The new-comer was tall and slender, her shingled hair black as night, brushed back from a forehead that gleamed like ivory above enormous dark grey eyes. A cloak of black velvet, edged with ermine, and with a great ermine collar, was flung back, displaying a flame-coloured gown of some transparent material that showed every line, every curve of the *svelte*, perfect figure. Her careless, rather haughty glance swept slowly round the room, reached the table where Gerard and Walton were sitting, and then stopped.

A glint came into the great eyes, a slow, marvellous smile parted the pomegranate lips, showing small, exquisite white teeth. Then the girl took a step forward and, impelled by some force he could not control, Gerard rose to his feet.

That perfect creature, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, had smiled at him, was coming slowly towards him! A feeling such as he had never experienced in his whole life before rushed over him. Even had Pat herself been there, beckoning to him, he could not have resisted the flood-tide of that feeling.

Urged by something stronger than himself—stronger than all his principles and all the rules which had hitherto bound and controlled his life, Gerard went to meet the Unknown.

As the woman glided up to him and then sank down into the vacant chair at the table, Gerard's defences went down with a run. The fruit he had refused so often and so long was offered to him once more. This time the very desire to reject it had left him. With trembling fingers he took it, touched it with his lips and ate.

## Chapter 15

A month passed by and Gerard was still in Paris. It had been a month crowded with knowledge, filled with experience, clouded with shame, with a shame that drove him to seek forgetfulness in the method that every day became easier and more natural.

For a fortnight he had not allowed himself to think. He had drugged himself with the revelation of Jeanne's beauty, with the wonder that she, the toast of half Montmartre, had singled him out, had offered him what had been refused to hundreds of would-be lovers. He had spent his year's income prodigally. He had taken her to a luxurious hotel, after Walton had protested half-heartedly at being left in the lurch, he had hired a car, and had devoted himself to her entertainment. All this she had accepted as her due. She had, however, most unusually drawn the line at the gift of clothes and jewels. It pleased her to give royally.

As a matter of fact there was something royal, great, about Jeanne Lemaître. Brought up differently, in quite other surroundings, she might have been a great lady, with wide influence, with the power of a big personality. As it was, she was a great courtesan.

For a whole fortnight she was desperately in love with Gerard. For another week his attraction persisted, though on the wane. In the fourth week she met a tall, slender Italian, with a voice like an angel, and regretfully, kindly, but quite definitely, she told Gerard that that very day she proposed packing her boxes and leaving the hotel.

He did not take her desertion of him quietly. But her blank surprise that he should for a moment have expected a different fate silenced him.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she ejaculated, "I have given you two or three times what I give to most men. Three whole weeks I have been with you. La—la! Life is short. You must not be greedy, my friend. It has been gay. You have learned much, is it not? *Bien*, you will always be grateful to Jeanne. But it is not *comme il faut* to ask for more when it is said to you 'Enough'."

In any case, when Jeanne said "Enough" it was final. She passed recklessly, but also royally, through life. Her will was supreme. She came, she went, she gave or withheld, entirely at her own pleasure. And, true to her word, she left the hotel within the hour.

Gerard found himself the poorer by nearly a year's income for that three weeks, and rich beyond belief in experience and knowledge. His ignorance and innocence had been like a sponge—absorbing, assimilating all that was poured into it.

The night Jeanne left him he drank himself blind.

The next day he thought of returning to England, but he lacked the mental effort to make the arrangements. He stayed on, moodily walking about the City by day, drinking and attending doubtful shows by night.

It was not that he did not have long spells of regret and bitter self-reproach. There were days when he did not touch a drop of alcohol till night, days when he told himself he was a fool and a criminal coward to let himself go, days when he swore he would not allow the knowledge of his parentage and Pat's desertion of him to wreck his life, days when he vowed he would pull up, would never touch drink again, and would return to his normal life in the Temple, make good at the Bar.

Once or twice he even thought he would write to Pat, plead with her, beg her to revoke her decision, to give him a chance to win her again. But each time it swept over him, in a blinding rush, that he was no longer free to do that. By his own action he had put an impassable barrier between himself and her. He was no longer fit to ask her to marry him.

Pat's mate must be clean and straight, as he had been when he believed he had won her, before he had come to Paris. The man who had been Jeanne Lemaître's lover, who had soaked himself into forgetfulness, could not ask for favours from Patricia Mannering.

In outward appearance the month's dissipation had changed him almost as much as it had inwardly. His healthy clear skin had become clouded, his eyes were either dull or over-bright with excitement. The once beautiful mouth had become looser and the corners sagged as though the controlling muscles had lost their power. He slouched a very little—he had lost his youthful eager poise. He looked ten years older than when he had left The Court.

One afternoon he was lounging along the Bois after an aimless walk and was heading for the Place de la Concorde when he heard an eager voice calling him by name.

“Hello, Gerard, fancy meeting you here!”

And he found himself looking into Betty Bellingham's clear, astonished eyes. A little rush of pleased excitement ran through him as her voice

conjured up a vision of all the happy past—Pat, Sir John, the beautiful old Court, the joyous, carefree happy times they had had there together.

“It’s ripping to see you,” he said, holding her hand tightly. “Where did you spring from?”

“At this moment from the Gare de Lyon. I’ve just taken our trunks there. Mother and I are going on to Switzerland to-night. We spent last night at the Gare du Nord Hotel.”

His face fell. “Then you won’t be here to-night? I should have loved it if you would have dined with me.”

“Impossible, I’m afraid. Wish I could. I adore Paris and have not been here since my last term at school at Passy. But you can give me tea if you will and tell me your news.”

“I haven’t any,” he said hastily. “I’ve just been staying here for a few weeks, that’s all.”

He hailed a taxi and gave the order to drive to some famous tea rooms only a short distance away.

As soon as they found a table in the crowded room and he had given an order for chocolate and éclairs for Betty and a *limonade* for himself, he asked her for news of Westlea.

“You mean you want to know about Pat?” Betty answered with her usual directness. “What on earth did you two silly duffers quarrel about? Pat was as close as wax. Wouldn’t tell even me. Said you’d agreed to differ and so on. Of course, I haven’t seen her for ages. She and Sir John left The Court the day after you did.”

“Left The Court?” Gerard repeated.

“Yes, gone yachting somewhere off Norway. I’ve had a few picture postcards from her, but she gives me no news. Westlea has seemed awfully dull without them.”

Gerard felt a pang of bitter disappointment. It would have been something to have heard of Pat, even if he could not see her.

“And Teddy—how’s he?”

“Splendid, thanks. You know we are going to be married in November? At least, we hope we are. Mother and I are supposed to stay in Switzerland about two months. If she’s as much better as we expect, then Teddy and I will be made one!”

“Lucky Teddy,” Gerard said enviously as he glanced down at the sparkling, vivid little face. “How are the pigs going?”

“Fine. They arrived two or three days ago. Already Teddy is so absorbed in them that I’m suffering from incipient jealousy. Fancy having to take a second place to a white, fat pig! Whom else do you want to know about? Mrs. Graham? Oh, you didn’t care much about her, did you? She’s been awfully seedy lately. She looks a wreck. I’m afraid I shan’t see her again. She’ll have left Westlea before we get back. You remember Phil Mason? He’s devoted. We all declare that, spite of her white hair, it’s quite a scandal! And Miss Beasley—you remember her? She’s had ’flu badly. Jolly good thing. Kept her nasty tongue quiet for a bit.”

She rattled on, giving him news of the various people he had met in Westlea, as they had tea, and, as he sat there listening to her, it seemed as if he had passed into another world. Only such a little time ago her world of innocent pleasure, of small happenings, of simple, cleanly-lived lives, had been his world too. To-day he had passed right out of it, into a world murky with the ugly passions of life, dimmed with clouds of shame and of unresisted temptations. Could it really have been such a short time ago that he had wandered along the same straight paths as Betty Bellingham?

He raised his haggard eyes as several people who had been having tea in the crowded, popular tea rooms passed out, and he gave a little start as he recognized the two fair-haired girls who had smiled at him so invitingly his first evening in Paris—before he had met Jeanne. They paused as they passed his table and, after a swift glance at Betty, so obviously English and so obviously *du monde*, they merely said “*Bon jour, Monsieur le bel Anglais,*” and, with a flash of sparkling, laughing eyes, walked on out of the place.

Betty gazed open-eyed after them. “Friends of yours, Gerard?” she asked significantly.

“No, only acquaintances,” he replied.

“I see.” She looked at him more closely. For all her youth, Betty was not as inexperienced as Pat, who was the same age. She had been at school in Paris for a couple of years, and her eyes, never shut, had been opened fairly wide. And those very clear eyes of hers saw signs which made her frown a little. The Gerard she was talking to and looking at was not the Gerard she had known at Westlea. Some subtle instinct told her he had changed far more than was justified by the short time that had elapsed since she had last seen him. And yet he had seemed so glad to meet her, almost excited in his

pleasure. What was it that had happened between him and Pat? Whose fault had it been?

She stayed for a short while longer and then declared she must be going. She had promised her mother, who had been resting, to be back in good time.

“May I come with you?” he asked as he paid the bill and passed out into the street by her side.

“No, I think not, please. Mother is tired. You know how ill she has been? But if you will come to the station and see us off there, we should love it. I think the train goes about eight. *Au revoir.*”

“Thanks, Betty. It’s been good to see you. You don’t know how good. I’ll be at the station in good time.”

He turned away after seeing her into a taxi, with an aching feeling at his heart. She had brought with her an atmosphere of sweet, fresh wholesomeness which made him realize what a long way he had travelled since he had shared it. She had made him think of joyous, light-hearted games, of healthy exercise, of fields and pigs and of the open air.

When he remembered what his life had been for the last month, he felt a little sick.

## Chapter 16

Eleanor Graham did not remain at Myrtle Cottage to the end of her tenancy.

In the last week of August she received a letter from Pat, saying that she and her father were prolonging their trip and would not be back till the beginning of October. She said they would spend a few days in London at Brown's Hotel, where they always stayed, and she did hope Mrs. Graham would make a point of seeing them there. She said she was enjoying herself, and had only one regret over their extended holiday and that was that Mrs. Graham would have left the cottage before their return, unless she had meantime decided to renew her tenancy.

Pat's letter decided Eleanor. She could not face the loneliness of the country any longer. Perhaps, in London, which would be filled with people and movement and noise, she would lose something of the bitter restlessness that possessed her, might forget her son's eyes, filled with reproach, anger, antagonism, which seemed to be looking at her by day and night.

She could not sleep and often got up when it was barely light and wandered out into the open.

But the dull ache that oppressed her in her chintz-upholstered room followed her into the scented garden.

She often thought drearily to herself that she was one of those destined never to find even peace. To happiness she had said good-bye for ever on the day she had married Cyril Gore. But she had hoped that, with time, she would find comparative content. In fact she had been getting dulled by custom and resigned to her own lot until she had conceived the ill-fated plan of meeting her son as a stranger. Nannie had warned her it was a dangerous thing to do and that little good was likely to come of it. Moreover, Nannie had hinted that it was against the spirit of her contract with William Napier.

At the time Eleanor had refused to admit that. He had driven a hard, cruel bargain with her, which she had faithfully kept while he lived. Now that he was dead and Gerard was over-age, everything had changed. Besides, she had had no intention whatever of allowing the truth to come out. That had been a wretched accident which no one could have foreseen.

She had never meant to break her promise to the man who had brought up and financed her son.

But, once again, nothing but misfortune had followed in her wake. True, she had no means of knowing how great was the misfortune. She had no idea of the disastrous effect the knowledge of his parentage had had on Gerard. But she did know that through her he had lost the girl he loved. For the first time a doubt seriously occurred that perhaps she had done wrong in allowing her husband to die. She had been so sure that it was better for her son to be freed of his father's baneful influence that she had absolutely convinced herself that, if the means were wrong, the end had amply justified them.

All through those terrible years in prison, all through the years of hardship that followed her convict days, continuing through the years of comfort and ease assured by Mrs. Fulton's legacy, she had been so sure of her motives, so triumphantly convinced that she had secured the best for her idolized boy, that she had refused to allow any serious doubt at all to assail her.

Now for the first time, with his bitter, accusing words ringing in her ears, she saw her action in another light. Had the end, after all, justified the means? Instead of being an innocent instrument of fate, with a clear conscience, whatever the world might say in accusation and condemnation, was the accusation, was the condemnation just?

Was she, in effect, what her own son had thought her—a murderess?

She shuddered as she said the word to herself over and over again.

It was that hideous thought, that terrible doubt, which was making her haggard, which was keeping her from sleeping, which had planted that ceaseless ache in her heart.

Those who had condemned her in the past had known nothing of her real reason for withholding the drug. She was not going to hold up her love for her child to public discussion, to have him talked about, to have it known that, baby as he was, he had been drunkenly sick on his own nursery floor. The whole story was so sordid, so awful, she could not wash that particular piece of dirty linen in public. So the public had no idea of knowing what had been, to her, a supreme excuse, more—an absolute justification.

But Gerard did know, she had put all the facts before him and still he had judged her. She had laid bare her heart, her very soul, to him. And, spite of the knowledge of her motives, even in spite of the fact that he knew he was

the very child she had, as she had put it, “sinned to save,” he had condemned her more utterly, more completely than anyone else.

At times she felt she must write to him, must plead her own cause once more.

But she had told him that she would not again cross his life. She had told him that when she had given him up to Mr. Napier twenty years ago, she had undertaken to do it for ever. She had repeated that promise to Gerard himself and had said that, if ever he wanted to alter that condition of things, she was always there—waiting. No, unless he made a move, she would not, could not approach him.

But he had gone away without a word. He had not sent her any message since. He knew where she was, knew he could reach her with a letter in twenty-four hours.

Yet he had written nothing, had given no sign. She did not even know now where he was. And he was her own son! Yet she could not claim him, could not even communicate with him. Her promise must bind her, as it had bound her all these years.

But she could no longer endure the place where she had had such high hopes, where she had met with such disappointment.

Nannie was quite ready to go. She had always disliked Westlea, and was only too delighted to leave.

So Eleanor packed up her things, surrendered the keys of the cottage to the agent and returned to London.

She had never taken and furnished a house or flat there, for she had been a wanderer for so long. Even now she only took a furnished flat near Baker Street for a few months, as she had not made up her mind where she would go ultimately and what she would do. Sometimes she almost decided to go to Paris or America and settle there permanently. At others she felt she could not bear to live amongst a race not her own, and that she would stay where she was. Anyway, she decided she would settle nothing till the Spring. Then she would probably go to America. Some friends she had made on the Riviera were anxious for her to visit them in Florida and spend five or six months with them. Well, she would probably do that. It would be somewhere new to go, something fresh to see.

She longed to know if Gerard were in town or not. She even went so far as to ring up his telephone number from a public call office in an assumed voice, but she could get no answer.

On the first of October she had a letter from Pat saying she and her father would be in London on the following day and begging her to dine with them.

To her own surprise she found herself eager to the point of excitement at the knowledge she was to meet them again so soon.

She was shown straight up to Pat's bedroom, and gave a little cry when she saw the girl's sunburnt face.

"My dear, how splendid you look," she said, as, having kissed her, she held her shoulders with both hands and searched her face.

"That's more than I can say of you," Pat returned. "You look a wreck. What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm not sleeping very well, that's all," Eleanor returned evasively.

Pat pushed her down into a big easy chair and perched herself on the side of the bed.

"Because you are worrying," she said accusingly. "I asked you to come half an hour before dinner, because I wanted to have a good long talk with you. Dad wanted you first, but I said he should have his turn after dinner. Tell me, have you heard from—from Gerard?"

"Not a word," Eleanor said with a little hopeless gesture of her hands. "Not a word."

"Neither have I."

Pat's face grew sombre and the light faded from her eyes. During the two months she had been away a great deal of her anger with Gerard had faded. She remembered him as he had looked when he had come that brilliant summer day, her eager, splendid, handsome lover, on to the tennis lawn at The Court, his face aglow with happiness, his eyes alight with love.

She remembered his mingled pride and humility when he had asked her to give herself to him, she remembered their joyous week together, when they had planned plans and dreamed dreams for the future, when they had walked and danced and played together. As the passing weeks dimmed her indignation, something of the old glamour returned. Every now and again she recaptured an echo of the thrill that had shot through her when first she had yielded herself whole-heartedly to the innocent passion of his kiss.

She admitted now she had been too ready to judge, even as he had been too hard, too unsympathetic towards his point of view, as he had been towards his mother's. She felt she herself had been found wanting in understanding and tolerance. She, who prided herself on being broad and fair-minded, had been prejudiced, almost arrogant in her judgment.

She had more than half-expected him to write. At every point of call where forwarded letters were awaiting them she had felt her heart miss a beat when she had received her little pile of letters and hastily looked through them. And every time she had felt a pang of disappointment to see nothing addressed in Gerard's handwriting.

Eleanor saw the heaviness on the girl's face and realized that she had lost something of her old light-heartedness, and that, in spite of her healthy colour, she looked older and sadder than when she had last seen her.

"Do you mean he has not written to you at all," she asked.

Pat shook her head. "No. Of course, I told him I didn't want to see him again. But, somehow, I didn't quite expect him to take me so absolutely at my word. After all, we have been friends for years. I—there was no reason why we shouldn't go on being friends."

"Oh, my dear," Eleanor put out a hand swiftly and touched Pat's knee. "What a tangle of misery I have brought into both your lives. I, who love you both so much. Couldn't you—wouldn't you write to him?"

"I don't think so." Under her tan, Pat suddenly paled. "You see I have heard twice *of* him, though I have not heard direct."

Eleanor looked up quickly, her eyes eager. "Yes," she asked breathlessly. "From whom?"

"Betty Bellingham, for one. I had a letter from her this morning. It has been following me round Norway for the last three or four weeks. She met him in Paris, had tea with him. She said he was looking seedy and old, and, and—she hinted at something that Colonel Raven put plainly to Dad. We crossed over with him on the same boat yesterday. He was staying with us during the summer of last year at the same time as Gerard. He told us, amongst a lot of other gossip, for he's as fond of gossip as an old maid, that he had seen Gerard Napier at a doubtful place in Paris with—with a woman whose class there was no mistaking, and that he was—drunk."

Tears glittered on Pat's eyelashes as she whispered the word.

“Oh, my God!” Every drop of blood drained away from Eleanor’s face as, unconsciously, she put her hand up to her throat. “Not that!”

“I can’t bear to think it. I can’t really believe it,” Pat said heavily. “Gerard, who never drank a thing! Colonel Raven, of course, didn’t know we were specially interested in Gerard and said it quite casually, just laughing a little at him. Only Betty hinted that when Gerard had seen her off at the station in Paris, when she and her mother were starting for Switzerland, he was strange and not himself. I didn’t realize what she meant. It didn’t occur to me till Colonel Raven said what he did.”

“Oh, Pat, it would be too terrible if his father’s curse had descended on him after all. I just couldn’t face it! Only—only—surely they must be mistaken? Don’t you remember his dislike of all alcohol? He told me once he absolutely shuddered at the smell of spirits.”

“I know. I don’t believe it yet—I won’t. Only that Betty and Colonel Raven should *think* it, is—well, worrying.”

For a moment Eleanor closed her eyes. That would be the last burden! If all her sacrifice, if her whole life of suffering, freely offered to save her son from the harmful influence of his father, were to be of no avail—if Gerard were really starting on the road which might lead him to the same goal his father had reached, it would be more than she could bear.

But why—why, after twenty-four years should the curse begin to show itself? Why should it have waited till now?

In a blinding flash of horror Eleanor realized that, if it were a fact, it was because of the knowledge she herself had so unwittingly imparted to him. With sure, unflinching intuition she could see how his brain had worked. In his first blind misery, when he had discovered his parentage and when Pat had thrown him over, he had rushed, as so many men and women rush, to seek forgetfulness or at least dulling of sensation, in the remedy that leads only too often to ruin. He had found what he sought and then, with his pronounced views on heredity, had not attempted to stop his own progress downhill.

Goaded by the intolerable thought, Eleanor started to her feet. “Pat, we must do something—you or I. He cannot be allowed to drift alone. I know too well where such drifting leads to! Only, it’s so difficult for me. He—I might only make him worse.”

With bitter regret she remembered how Gerard had seemed almost to dislike her from the very beginning, even before he knew of her relationship

to him, or anything of her story. Anything she might say or do might only hinder, not help him.

“I wish we knew where we could get at him,” Pat answered. “I telephoned to his old rooms to-day, but the man who answered me said that the rooms had been sub-let to him for six months, and he did not know where Mr. Napier was staying. He had heard of the rooms through an agent. So that is a blind alley.”

“Anyhow, that looks as if he is back in London. But why should he give up his Chambers? I understood you to say he was so devoted to the place.”

“So he was. I can’t understand it. Besides, if he was going on with his work at the Bar, it was the one place for him. I—I am awfully unhappy about it all.”

Pat’s voice quivered as she turned to the older woman, who answered quickly:

“You don’t feel so bitterly towards him as you did? Oh, I know it was only on my account. But it is just because that was the reason that I have felt so wretched about it.”

“Of course, I think as I did. I mean, I still think he was terribly cruel to you. Only I didn’t make enough allowance for him. I think his point of view was all wrong—but still he did honestly think what he did. I see now I was not fair.”

A violent knock at the door made them both start, and a moment later Sir John called out, “Are you going to keep Mrs. Graham up here all night, you bad girl? It’s long past eight.”

“Come in, Dad.”

Pat jumped up and opened the door. As Sir John’s eyes fell on Eleanor’s pale, worried face all his old longing to protect her came over him afresh. If it had not been for Pat’s presence he certainly would have put his arms round her. As it was, he took both her hands and kissed them.

“You don’t know how glad I am to see you again. Has Pat asked you to come down with us to The Court to-morrow?”

Eleanor shook her head.

“Well, she asks you now. Will you come? We both want you badly.”

Her eyes were soft as she looked up at him. It was good to have someone to care for one—to want one. If only things had been different, how

thankfully she would have accepted all that his eyes were offering.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. I mean it,” she said, as he began to expostulate. “Perhaps a little later on. But I really must stay up here for a time.”

“Well, I hope we are all too hungry to argue now. Come along down to dinner, and we’ll see if dinner won’t soften your harsh determination.”

And he held the door open for Eleanor and his daughter to pass out.

## Chapter 17

Teddy Elliott was delighted to have The Court open once more. He was missing Betty badly, and though his interest in his Middle-Whites was increasing daily, the fat, grunting pigs did not take the place of young human companionship.

He called in after dinner on the night Sir John and Pat returned and found them smoking over the Squire's study fire.

"It's just ripping to see you both back," he said, gripping Pat's hand so hard that she cried out. "And how splendidly well you both look."

"We are both very fit," returned Sir John. "And jolly glad to be back. There's no place on earth like one's own home."

He smiled contentedly at the two young people sitting on the big leather couch. There had been a time when he wished Pat would like Teddy Elliott more than as a good pal. It would have been so suitable. He would have kept her near him. She would in time have been Lady Pelton, wife of the seventh Baron. He himself liked Teddy out of the common. In spite of his assumed laziness he had plenty of brains and might some day use them. He was living at home now, not at all entirely from choice. But his father was a failing old man who adored his only son. Teddy himself was quite capable of making good in a wider sphere, but so long as his father wanted him so badly, he was ready to live at home and centre his interests in the estate. Betty fully agreed with him and said she was more than willing to live with her father-in-law so long as he wanted them. In the time to come she had ambitions for Teddy, but he was still young enough that he could afford to wait.

Sir John suppressed a sigh as once again he wished that Pat had seen her mate in him. Now, of course, in any case it was too late, for Teddy was to marry Betty Bellingham within a few weeks.

"Are you at home now for good?" Teddy asked, turning to Pat.

"Yes—and no. We shan't be going away for long. But I've promised to go up and stay with Mrs. Graham for a few days next month. And Dad and I are going up again at the New Year, just for two or three days."

“In fact, you’ve acquired the gadding habit!” Teddy said cheerily. “Well, I hope I shall be in London myself before long. You see,” with an unusual shyness that sat rather charmingly on him, “Betty and I hope to get married at the end of next month.”

“I am so glad,” Pat answered heartily. “Betty wrote and told me the Swiss air was doing wonders for her mother, so I hoped you would be able to arrange things before Christmas. When did you last hear from her?”

“This morning. I’m glad to say Betty herself is a little bit homesick, or, as she calls it, Teddy-sick!”

“Bless her,” Pat said, as she flung her cigarette end into the fire. “What a lovely bride she’ll make. I got her my present when I was in town, an evening cloak of blue velvet with an ermine collar, in which she’ll look adorable. I’ve got a present for you too, but I shan’t tell you what it is till it comes. It should be here to-morrow.”

“Thanks awfully,” Teddy said as he glanced at the striking clock. “Now I ought to be going, I suppose, I only came for a few minutes because I just felt I had to come over and tell you how glad I am to know you are back. But I have to be up very early to-morrow. I’m going down to meet the Bore.”

“You mean to see it?”

“No, I don’t,” Teddy replied, rising. “I mean meet it. I’m going with Charlie Bailey. You know, he’s that queer old sailor living at the docks, that I sometimes go punt-shooting with.”

“You are really going to meet the Bore in a boat?” Pat turned to him, her eyes, that had been looking so tired, suddenly shining. “You lucky man! Where and when?”

“At Stonebench and early. We have to be down there before nine, so I’m starting about six-thirty, and meeting Charlie at the lock gates, where he’ll have the boat ready. We are going to paddle down to Stonebench to meet it there.”

“Oh, Teddy, let me come too! I’ve always longed to. Dad, you wouldn’t mind, would you?”

She turned to her father, who was looking distinctly dubious.

“What do you say, Edward? Do you think it’s safe?”

“With Charlie Bailey? Absolutely. He wouldn’t take even me if it weren’t. But, you know, Pat, it’s different for a girl. The chances are we shall ship a lot of water, and you’ve no idea what it’s like. Thick with mud. I’ve met it once before, you know, and got soaked. Everything I had on was ruined, just caked with thick brown mud.”

“I don’t care. I’ll put on old rags. I’ve always longed to meet it. It looks so thrilling. It’s a wonderful sight, even from the bank, and I’ve always wanted to face that great on-sweeping wave and meet it on its own ground, or I should say on its own water! Look here, Teddy, unless I shall be awfully in the way, I truly want to come. I’ll be at the gate at six-thirty, and you can pick me up. You will, won’t you?”

“Of course, I’ll be only too delighted. I’m sure it’ll be safe enough with Charlie, though I wouldn’t trust you with another living soul. But I warn you again you are practically certain to get very wet and very dirty.”

“And I don’t care a D!” Pat laughed back at him. “I’ll put on old clothes and a mackintosh. Then it’s settled. To-morrow at six-thirty.”

The next day was bright and cold, with a strong south-westerly wind blowing which, Teddy pointed out, was all to the good. It would help to swell the great tidal wave and make it even more imposing.

Pat loved the tang of the air as they drove swiftly along the deserted roads and through the still sleeping town, down to the lock gates. They had found a huge burly man with grizzled hair and beard waiting for them.

“Morning, Charlie,” Teddy said cheerily. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve brought a lady.”

The sailor looked at Pat up and down, from her small leather hat to her thick brogued shoes, and a slow grin came into his face.

“I’ll take her and gladly, only, miss, mebbe you’ll spoil that nice skirt o’ yourn.”

He spoke with the broad yet soft accent of the West.

Pat put a hand into his horny paw.

“No, I won’t,” she laughed. “I’ve got a mackintosh rolled up here,” holding out a small bag. “And some sandwiches and hot coffee in a thermos.”

“Your young leddy’s all right,” said Charlie Bailey with a wink at Teddy. “Now, sir, and miss, we’d better be starting. I want to get as far as

Stonebench, or we shall miss the best of it.”

He piloted them to the *Red Rose*, a small, steady boat, very unlike the light skiffs and out-riggers to which Teddy was accustomed. Teddy insisted on taking an oar, while Pat took her place in the stern and took charge of the rudder.

It was very cold at first, until the early October sun had time to warm the air, and Pat was only too thankful for the thick pilot-coat which the sailor had flung down in the bottom of the boat, and for her share of the coffee she had brought in the thermos.

As they drew near Stonebench, the banks, usually deserted, became more and more alive with people who had walked, cycled and motored, both from the city and the surrounding districts, to see the Bore.

It is a sight which, in that part of the West, never loses its attraction, and people walk for miles and accept any sort of conveyance to witness the famous Bore which is to be seen twice a year at the Spring and neap tides.

Pat had often seen it from the bank and had even then been thrilled at the sight of the relentless onrushing wave, carrying everything before it in a victorious sweep, bearing on its broad brown bosom small uprooted trees, dead dogs and cats, even goats and pigs, which had strayed on to the banks and been caught unawares by the sudden rush of waters.

But that was nothing to the thrill she felt as they reached the spot designed by old Bailey and rested on their oars.

Theirs was the only party venturesome enough to meet the Bore, and they were the cynosure of all eyes on the banks.

Bailey said he had better take the tiller, while Teddy took both oars.

They still had some ten to fifteen minutes to wait and remained paddling gently to keep their position in the middle of the river, while Pat took from her bag a magazine containing an article on the origin of the Bore, which she insisted on reading aloud, declaring it was good for them all to take a scientific as well as romantic interest in the stirring adventure.

“Listen to this,” she said, as she began:

“The Bore is a curious phenomenon which occurs in a very few rivers, of which the Severn is the most important. The word itself is a curious one and its origin is not definitely known. Some authorities think that it is connected with the German “bor”

meaning “height or eminence,” or—which is the more likely—with the Icelandic “bara,” or wave raised by the wind. Old English writers called it “higre”—Old French “eauguerre,” or Water-War. The only other river in Great Britain which boasts a tidal wave is the Galway, which is a very small affair compared with the famous Severn Bore.

“In France the Seine is visited by a tidal wave, which flows vigorously as far as the quaint and picturesque little town of Caudebec in Normandy, which is the favourite point for tourists to witness the “barre” or “mascaret” as it is called there.

“The “Barre” gives its name to a small pilgrimage chapel hidden in the trees close by, called Barre-y-va, because, literally, the Barre goes there!

“But though this is a sight well worth seeing, there is no tidal wave comparable to the Severn Bore nearer than that on the Hooghly in India.

“The origin of the wave is a particularly interesting one and is due to the formation of the channel where the river enters the sea.

“In tides in the open sea and at the mouth of a river, the intervals between high and low water, and again between low and high water, are nearly of equal length, that is about six and a third hours. But the farther up the river one goes, the greater becomes the disparity between these periods. The flow of the tide gets shorter and shorter, while its ebb is proportionately long.

“This is specially the case with a river, whose channel at its estuary is broad, but which suddenly converges. Moreover, in an estuary of this description, the range of tide becomes enormously augmented as the estuary narrows. At the entrance of the Bristol Channel, into which the Severn flows, the range of Spring tides is about eighteen feet, while at Chepstow, higher up, it is something like fifty feet.

“The Bristol Channel itself offers a grand expanse of water, up which the tide sweeps. At Sharpness Point the Channel very suddenly converges to comparatively narrow limits, forming the Severn proper. At low water all this part of the Channel, and for many miles inland, is a succession of low sand banks, with tiny streams trickling between them.

“Then the incoming tide reaches Sharpness, with its magnificent bridge, which stretches right across the Channel, it is compressed and forced into very narrow confines, and rushes madly like a boiling torrent, up the river bed, racing through the bridge at a speed of some twelve miles an hour.

“As the tide sweeps farther inland, into the still narrower limits of the river, it gets higher and higher until it assumes the appearance of a wave in the vicinity of the little town of Newsham. This wave then increases in height and force until it reaches Stonebench, a village a little more than four miles below Gloucester, where the Bore is seen at its best.”

Pat stopped reading, for she felt she had lost the interest both of Teddy and of old Bailey, and the magazine fell from her hands to the bottom of the boat.

“Just listen to the silence,” Teddy said quietly. “Isn’t it strange?”

There was, indeed, a curious hush and stillness in the air as if nature herself were waiting and expecting something to happen. The grazing horses and well-fed cattle browsing near the banks suddenly lifted their heads and, warned by some subtle instinct or some sound so faint and distant it could not be perceived by human ears, slowly but definitely began to move away from the banks to the farther parts of the fields.

“I’m feeling so thrilled,” Pat said, turning to the old sailor with a smile.

“Not frightened, miss?”

“Frightened!” she said scornfully. “Of course not.”

“That’s the spirit, miss. I wouldn’t bring Mr. Elliott here, let alone a young leddy, if there was aught to fear. Hist! I hear him.”

He lifted his head, his keen ears detecting some distant sound which neither Pat nor Teddy could yet distinguish.

Pat leaned forward and put a hand on Teddy’s knee for a second.

“I wish Gerard were here,” she said in a low voice. “It is the sort of thing he would love.”

“Why don’t you ask him to come down then?” he said in a significant voice. “Of course, I don’t know why you sent him away. If it was just a quarrel, think it over again, Pat.”

For a second her eyes clouded. Then she lifted her head, as the old sailor had done. "Hush," she said softly, "I hear it now!"

In the far distance a dim, low roar was heard, as of a great pent-up beast, raging to be let loose. Then it faded gently away, as a bend in the river deadened the sound, only to become audible a few seconds later, this time nearer and louder.

Accompanying the low roar of the waters was a human sound, faint at first, gradually growing and swelling louder as the spectators, dotted at intervals along the banks, took up the cry "Flood—Oh! Flood—Oh!" till the voices and the waters were inextricably mingled.

"Oh!" Pat drew a deep breath. "This is worth coming for!"

"There he comes!" cried out Bailey. "Now, sir, get ready to pull directly I give the word. And when I do, pull like hell—beggin' your pardon, miss!"

As Pat watched with fascinated eyes she saw sweeping round the distant bend of the river what looked like a solid wall of brown water, with a curling white-foamed crest. And as it moved relentlessly towards them the roar of the water grew deeper and the cries of the spectators louder and louder—"Flood—Oh! Flood—Oh!"

One last breathless moment and the wave, which to those in the small boat in the still sluggish water appeared to tower above them, was upon them.

Pat gave a little cry. Surely that great brown wave must descend on them and swamp them? But, as the old sailor roared out "Pull!" he set the nose of the *Red Rose* straight to meet it, and the boat rose gallantly, triumphantly, over the first crest of the wave, down into the hollow beyond; up again over the next crest and into the succeeding dip.

Then came the moment of which Teddy had warned Pat. The wavelets were too short for the boat to fall and rise and the water burst full into her, drenching them all three from their waists downwards.

The Bore itself was past, but the tide was sweeping rapidly onward at the rate of eight miles an hour. With skilful handling old Charlie turned the *Red Rose*, and told Teddy to paddle gently, just to keep her course true. The boat was carried along on the bosom of the tide for some miles, before the force of the water lessened sufficiently to steer the *Red Rose* safely to the bank and effect a landing.

When Pat turned to say good-bye to the old sailor, she gripped his hand, and said, with a smile that was thanks enough in itself, "It is the most exciting thing I've ever done. I've loved every minute of it."

"And you don't mind your spoiled clothes?" For the mackintosh had failed to protect her skirt, shoes or stockings, and they were all heavy with the brown mud that had been held in solution by the foaming water.

"Not a bit. I'd spoil a dress a day if I could get such a thrill. Good-bye and thank you ever so much."

But Pat had to pay for her pleasure. As a result of her soaking she caught a bad chill and was in bed with a high temperature for a few days.

And as she lay upstairs in her own room she slowly came to a decision that had been lying dormant at the back of her mind for some time.

She would pocket her pride. As soon as she was well, she would write to Gerard and suggest that because they were no longer engaged, there was no reason why they should not continue to be the friends they had been for years. That would open the way. The next move would be up to him. If he came down to see her; if—a slight, tender smile rose to her lips in the darkness—if he admitted he was sorry for his cruelty to his mother; if—but Pat got no further than that. That was looking too far ahead.

It crossed her mind several times, during those days that her experience of the Bore had been very like what had happened to Gerard. For years his life had flowed in a slow, steady stream of contentment, success, pleasure and happiness. Then had come the knowledge of his parentage and inheritance in one crushing blow, and the peaceful waters of his life had been changed, churned up—muddied.

That last was the thought that hurt.

And she, who should have stood by him, had thrown him over, had turned aside and left him to fight the turbulent current alone and—if all that Colonel Raven had hinted at were true—unsuccessfully.

But she would stand aside no longer. It was obviously time that some one held out a hand, and who so right a some one as the girl who had once promised to be his wife.

She turned over in bed with the smile still on her lips. After all, Pat was only twenty-one. To twenty-one the difficulties of life are very easy of solution. Of course, things would come right some time. And on the morrow she would take the first step to set them right herself.

She wrote and, a week later, her letter was returned through the Dead Letter Office.

## Chapter 18

“Happy New Year to you, sir.”

Gerard gave a little cynical laugh as the sound of the old greeting, exchanged between the local bootblack and a regular client, floated up to him from the street.

He was standing at the window of the rooms in Terrent Street, Bloomsbury, where he had been living for some weeks, his hands thrust deep in his trouser pockets, as he stared down through the murky glass into the chill, dreary street, where bits of paper were being blown about by the searching east wind. A Happy New Year!

Was there such a thing as happiness? The bootblack, who had been the first to say “Happy New Year,” had one leg; his client was a hunchback. Could they be happy?

The costers, pushing their carts through the street, looked pinched with the cold. Were they happy? The young women, with their hand-bags and attaché cases, their calves and ankles gleaming redly through their inadequate artificial silk stockings, drawing their scarves and rabbit furs closer round their throats, looked weary-eyed, if business-like. Were they happy?

If they were, they were illusioned fools and their illusions would be shattered later, if not sooner.

What was the good of everything? What was the good of anything? Sooner or later some demon got hold of you, stripped you of every ideal with which you might have started life, and left you with the bare bones of realism.

His eyes were dull and colourless, the lids faintly pink and puffy. His skin had lost its ruddy healthiness, and his lips seemed to have acquired a permanent droop at the corners. His shoulders were hunched forward, as though it were too much trouble to hold himself upright.

There were the remains of a late, a very late breakfast on the table. The tablecloth was soiled with the stains of many meals, and the china was chipped and time-worn.

The one point of comfort in the distinctly sordid room was the fire. A huge fire was blazing, redeeming the room from unmitigated ugliness.

Presently Gerard turned away from his unsatisfactory contemplation of the outside world and sank down in the big, shabby, leather chair before the fire, and reached out a hand for the paper which lay on the table amongst the chipped china. He paused before he picked it up, and looked at his hand. It was shaking just a little. A deeper cloud settled on his face.

“That’s rotten,” he muttered. “Only what does anything matter?”

He tried to read the paper, but failed to find anything that interested him and, after a few minutes, flung it down. He got up and walked about the room restlessly, glancing every few seconds at the sideboard on which stood a couple of bottles, one full, one half-empty, and a siphon.

“No, I won’t,” he thought to himself, jerking his head up. “I’ll wait till after lunch. I won’t. Oh, my God, if only I could go back! If only the last six months had never been! If I had never known, Pat and I might have been married by now. We might have been away on our honeymoon!”

He sank down again and buried his face in his hands. What an abominable mess he had made of his life. Such a few short months ago it had looked so fair, so promising, with everything to live for, everything to look forward to and enjoy. Then— His face flamed dully. Then he had been clean-living, clean-minded. To-day he was soiled, body and soul. Then he had had a great deal to offer. To-day he knew he had nothing.

He flung his head up suddenly as he cried aloud in his utter misery,

“Oh, curse, curse, curse! Damn everything! Damn everybody!”

Then, as always, when realization of where he was trending came to him, a great tide of resentment against his mother flooded his very soul.

If he had never known of her existence, if she had never betrayed the true story of his birth and parentage, none of the sordidness and ugliness of his present life would have come about. Pat would never have thrown him over. He would have been her husband. Sir John would have been his father-in-law, he would have been well started on what all his friends had prophesied would be a brilliant career at the Bar. He would have had everything to live for, work for.

Even if, in the years to come, he had learned who his parents were, the sinister effect of their inherited influence would probably have had no effect.

He would have been so surrounded, so safeguarded by barriers of benign influence that his father's curse might never have touched him.

It was she, his mother, the woman who had given him birth, who had been the evil genius, the destroyer of his life.

His haggard eyes wandered to the bottles on the sideboard where comfort lay.

As he half rose in his chair the door opened and a woman came in. She looked her age, about thirty-three or thirty-four. Her dark hair was henna-d, which made her skin look older by contrast. She was handsome in a reckless, devil-may-care way, but her good looks needed a better setting than her somewhat shabby coat with its cheap fur trimmings.

“Morning, Gerard.”

Her eyes softened in an indescribable way as they fell on his desperate young face. “Got the blues I can see.”

“Badly. It's this beastly east wind, I expect. What brings you round here at this hour? But don't think I'm not deuced glad to see you.”

He dragged up a second chair in front of the fire and Vivian Vane unfastened her coat as she sat down.

“Well, I've had an offer of work, and I wanted to talk it over with you.”

“That's good. Let's drink to your success.”

His eyes went homing to the whisky bottle. This was a genuine excuse. Vivian had badly wanted work. It was an occasion to celebrate if she had got what she wanted.

But Vivian pushed him somewhat ungently back into his own chair.

“No, Gerard, not at this hour. Anyhow, not till we've talked it over.”

She took a cigarette from a box lying open on the table, and lighted it with fingers stained nearly orange with nicotine, and pulled at it luxuriously as she leaned back.

“Ah, that's better. Before I tell you about me, tell me what's up, specially?”

There was a look in her eyes, as she lay back and let them dwell on his face, which no man had ever brought to them until she had known Gerard Napier.

As a young girl she had married a man who had been a brute to her. After three years she had left him and had taken a post as mannequin in a second-rate but well-known establishment. Her magnificent figure—at a time when fine figures were still admired, and before woman's object had been to effect a silhouette reminiscent of two boards nailed together—had attracted that male attention for which that particular establishment catered, in addition to the legitimate occupation of selling clothes.

She left the mannequin business for another, which increased the recklessness of her normal bearing, the devil-may-careness of her dark, hungry eyes.

Then came the War and Vivian Vane did as so many women did, found herself and worked like a slave in a hospital for wounded Tommies.

With the Armistice her work and her new peace were over. She was penniless and she had to start life over again with a completely fresh code and new set of ideas.

She nearly starved for months before she capitulated. Then for a year or so she was in comparative clover. The man, a bank clerk, with whom she lived, was a decent sort and would have married her if he had not had a wife living. She herself was free, as her husband had died during the War. But Vivian's good luck was not to last. The man died, leaving her all he had, which was only two or three hundred pounds, for he had spent the yearly income he earned. On this Vivian had lived till now, and now, as she had told Gerard more than once, she was "right-up against it."

She and Gerard had met by chance. One day, when she was crossing a crowded street, she had slipped and nearly fallen. A taxi, unable to pull up, was almost on her, and she certainly would have been run over had not Gerard caught her and dragged her on to the kerb.

She was shaking from head to foot, and was obviously upset, and after a moment's hesitation Gerard had suggested she should go into the big tea house immediately behind them and have some strong coffee.

When they emerged half an hour later he had already promised to see her again and take her to a theatre.

A curious friendship had followed, which had held no hint of love-making. Gerard, for the time, had no interest in women as women. His *affaire* with Jeanne Lemaître had been vital for him while it lasted and when she had walked, *sans cérémonie*, out of his life, he had tried to drown

thought with promiscuous love-making, the recollection of which filled him with shame.

After his chance meeting with Betty Bellingham in Paris he had decided not to go home for a time, and had written to a firm of agents to let his chambers furnished for a year.

As a result of his orgy of expenditure on Jeanne and others, he had to go slowly for the rest of the year, and he wrote instructions to his bankers to send whatever remained of his balance to a *poste restante* address in Paris.

He had lived in a small, fourth-rate hotel and had only returned to London at the end of November. It was on the second day after his return home that he had met Vivian Vane.

But though it had never occurred to him to make love to her, he had, all unconsciously, made a violent appeal to her. There was something about his wrecked youth that appealed to the best of her, a great deal about his magnificent manhood, marred though it was rapidly becoming, that appealed to the worst of her.

She wanted him for her very own, as she had never wanted any male thing. She wanted to draw his sunny-haired head to her breast, to stroke his face, to whisper close to his ear that she loved him. Not with the sheer animalism of Polly Pellew and her kind, but because she wanted to give as well as receive. She felt the unspoken forlornness of the man who was still half a boy, and she wondered how it was that anyone so obviously of another world from her own, should be so friendless, should so aimlessly waste his time in surroundings which she felt, rather than knew, were utterly alien to his upbringing.

As she sat and gazed at him now, the longing to gather him into her arms and kiss away the cloud from his eyes and the wretchedness from his drooping mouth was almost overwhelming.

“There’s nothing specially wrong to-day,” he answered, “Nothing more wrong than usual.”

“Look here, Gerard, you wouldn’t like to tell me, would you? I mean about yourself and why you are rotting your time away—here?” Waving her hand round the big but sordid room. “Anyone can see with half an eye you are not used to this sort of thing. If you’ve quarrelled with your people, can’t you make it up?”

“No,” he answered shortly. “There’s no going back for me. It’s too late.”

Her suggestion had been entirely unselfish. If he did go back he would be lost to her. Her eyes flashed behind their heavy fringes.

“But you can’t go on like this for ever, you know. You’re too young. This is a beastly hole for anyone like you.”

“I know.” His tired eyes glanced round the room, taking in the griminess of the twenty-year-old wallpaper, the dinginess of the tablecloth, the ugliness of the battered coffee-pot and chipped china. “I don’t quite know why I go on sticking it. I turned in here when I came back from France last November. A man I knew in Paris recommended the rooms, and somehow it has been too much trouble to move out. But I must make a change some time.”

“Can’t you afford anything better?” she asked bluntly, as she helped herself to another cigarette.

“Oh lor, yes. These rooms aren’t cheap, anyway, for this neighbourhood. And, as a matter of fact, I got a big and unexpected bonus on some shares last week. It isn’t that. It’s the trouble of looking out for something fresh.”

“Let me do it for you. A man’s no good at that sort of thing. Let me look out some decent rooms, then you can inspect those I select and decide.”

“That’s awfully good of you. But I don’t like to bother you.”

“Bless you, it’s no bother. I shall like doing it for you,” she added softly as she put out a nicotine-stained hand.

Gerard took it almost affectionately. There was something about her comradeship, about her grasping of some of the sharpest nettles of life, which appealed to him. She had certainly helped him through some very bitter hours, and lately he had begun to miss her if a day passed without meeting her. He knew her story, or as much of it as she chose to tell him, but she knew little of his. Pat could not be spoken of to any other woman, and the rawness and smart of his wound was still too recent for him to be able to speak of it to anyone. He had become used to Vivian’s companionship. They spent four or five evenings a week together at a Bohemian restaurant, or at a play or at the pictures. He had grown accustomed to her.

Every now and again he had half made up his mind to look up Jimmy Benson, to let him know where he was, but a curious disinclination to return to any of the old paths, to pick up any of the old threads, had hitherto prevented him from putting his half-formed ideas into practice. As for his old work, he would never return to it. That had gone with all the rest. Some day, of course, he would do something, but he would not go back to the Bar,

where, any day, some acquaintance might recognize in him the son of Cyril Gore, drunken maniac, and of Eleanor Gore, murderess in intent, ex-convict.

“It’s good of you to offer to help me,” Gerard said. “But what about your own work? Would you have time to hunt for rooms?”

“Yes, because my work wouldn’t start till next week. The one thing I don’t like about it is that, if I take it on, I shall have to leave London.”

“Leave London?” Gerard looked up with genuine dismay in his eyes.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding her head. “Would you miss me?”

“You know I should,” he returned quickly. “You’ve been a real good pal, Vivian. I know I’ve often been like a bear with a sore head, but you’ve never seemed to mind; you’ve never resented it.”

“Well, you see I’ve had a sufficiently rotten life myself to recognize that your sore head has often come from a sore heart,” she said, with a little twisted smile. “If you don’t want to answer questions, I’m not going to ask them. Only don’t think I can’t see that things are very wrong, and I—well, I’m damned sorry, and I wish I could help you.”

“You do help—you don’t know how much. You’ve been one of the best friends I’ve ever had.” He spoke with something of his old eagerness.

Vivian’s heart gave a great leap as she let her eyelids droop over her flashing eyes. Gerard was in a more human mood than she had ever known him. Should she play for her own hand now? She had asked him already if he couldn’t go back to where he belonged and he had answered “No.” She had done the straight thing in doing that. Now why shouldn’t she think of herself, cast the dice for herself?

“Our friendship has meant a great deal to me,” she said in a soft voice. “It was a lucky day for me when I slipped in the street and nearly fell into your arms! It seems impossible to think it was only about two months ago. We’ve got to know each other so well. That’s why I wanted to talk over this offer with you. I ought to take it, for it’s good pay, but I don’t want to leave London—and you.”

A curious warmth stole into Gerard’s heart. It seemed to him in his most bitter moments that every one he had ever known had cruelly deserted him and that Pat had been more cruel than anyone. He knew he had dropped out of his own circle by his own action, had deliberately kept away, but, surely, if anyone had cared enough, they could have hunted him out, could have traced him somehow? It was impossible for him, after everything that had

happened, to approach Pat. But surely she might have written? They had been friends before they had been lovers. She might have taken the trouble to find out if he was dead or alive. He was not to know that she had written and that her letter had been returned.

No one wanted him—even Jeanne had tired of him in three weeks. No one cared for him. But this woman, battered by life, with an intimate knowledge of the ways of many men, wanted him enough to be unwilling to accept well-paid work, since it meant separation from him.

“Then don’t take the job!” he said suddenly.

Vivian brought to bear all her knowledge and experience. Why not? Men enough had treated her as a plaything. Why should she not get some of her own back? Why should not a man save instead of ruin her? Besides, she loved Gerard with a woman’s fierceness, with a mother’s tenderness. She would make him happy. She would force him to be happy.

“I tell you, I don’t want to. But I’m afraid I must. I’m down to my last five-pound note. Barnes offers me five pounds a week, dresses and expenses, if I’ll tour for six months in *The Maiden All Forlorn*.”

“But you can’t act, can you?” he asked.

“No, not that I know of. But I can wear clothes—or rather, I can look jolly well in next-door-to-no-clothes. You know, my friend, though it may have escaped your notice, I have a particularly fine figure. Barnes specializes in women with fine figures for his shows. I shall hate it, of course, but— —” she shrugged her shoulders expressively.

“It’s rotten that you should have to do such a thing. Look here, Vivian, don’t. I told you I’d got in several hundreds last week. Let me be your banker.”

“You dear, generous thing!” She gripped his hand but released it instantly. “I can’t do that, you know. I couldn’t live on you, when there was a job I could do quite well, waiting round the corner for me.”

“Bunkum. You’ve helped me no end, being a pal and that sort of thing. Why shouldn’t I help you?”

“Because— —” She drew in a deep breath. Then she took her courage in both hands. “Because a woman who intends to run straight as I have done for the past eight or nine years with—with one exception, and who intends to run straight, can’t take money from a man, unless he is, or is going to be, her husband.”

The words hit Gerard full. His mind was acutely clear that morning, or he would not have been so wretched. He realized their exact significance, took in all that they meant, within a few seconds.

Vivian's husband? He, who had been engaged to Pat, who loved Pat?

But Pat had turned him down, had sent him away. Pat had said she did not love him, could not bear him to touch her. Besides, he was not fit to touch her now. He could never, never go near her again. That was all in the past. The days when he visited The Court, when he danced with Pat and Betty, when he frequented their world, knew their friends, talked their language, were over, and finished. He had deliberately sought—no, he corrected himself, he had been pushed into the muddy paths of life and, if ever he picked himself up, he would still have the mud sticking to him.

Pat—and Vivian!

Pat, sheltered, serene, protected, loved. Vivian, a shuttlecock of life, badly treated first by her husband, then by other men; Vivian, with her attempts to run straight, with her long record of service during the War. Vivian, with her knowledge of the ugly, seamy side of life. Could contrast go farther?

Yet Pat had failed him. Vivian had stood by him.

Suddenly he lifted his head.

“Well, why not?” he said sharply.

She did not understand him.

“Because, in spite of my life, I am not willing now to accept money-help from any man, especially from you.”

“I didn't mean that, I meant why shouldn't you marry me?”

Vivian cried out. The ball had come rolling to her feet, well-nigh without effort. She was almost frightened.

“No, no. I couldn't really. It wouldn't be fair. You are younger than I and my life, in patches, has been ugly. I shouldn't have said that.”

“Yes, you should,” he said doggedly.

“No, no. Look here, Gerard, you are different from most men. I could trust you. I know you are damned lonely and I know I could help you a lot. But you are too young to marry a woman of my age. I—I—it's not easy to say, but, if you like, we'll live together for a bit and see how we get on?”

The hint of contradiction stiffened him.

“No, we won’t. My life is ugly now too. We shouldn’t have to confess to each other. If you care to take it on, I’m willing. I’m not pretending to be in love with you. But the girl I love has chucked me for keeps. You’ve had a rotten time, and I’m just fed up with myself. We can at least be sorry for each other.”

So Vivian learned what she had expected. To her own astonishment it hurt—badly.

“Yes, yes, oh, I know it’s splendid of you to offer to marry me, but that other girl—do you care such a lot—still? I mean, if she has chucked you?”

For a moment Gerard’s eyes hardened.

“Look here, Vivian, if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk about her. I just had to tell you what I did. But she’s right outside everything. She has never seen any mud. Please God she never will. You and I have. We’ve rolled in it. That’s why we should make good partners. It isn’t much I’m offering you, but perhaps it’s better than what you’ve had.”

His eyes had lost all their eagerness and had grown haggard again.

“You are offering me heaven,” she answered recklessly, “and I’m going to take it. You—you—won’t go back on it?”

“No, I won’t go back. Perhaps if I have someone with me I shan’t want so much of that,” nodding his head in the direction of the sideboard. “I never used to touch it. Now I can’t keep off it. It’s stronger than me. Stevenson is all wrong. He says Will is strongest of all. It isn’t—I dunno. Perhaps he’s right. I don’t seem to have any will or anything. I’ve got no grip left. Oh, Vivian, I’m so damned miserable!”

He turned to her with a little heartbroken cry and Vivian opened her arms.

In another moment she was crooning over him, the courtesan wiped out, the mother trying to comfort the wounded male who is for ever child, who never quite grows up as a woman grows.

## Chapter 19

The months that had passed since she left Westlea had dragged slowly for Eleanor.

Constantly she was on the verge of leaving London, leaving England and, as constantly, she changed her mind and decided to stay where she was. She felt she must hear something definite about Gerard before she left the country for good. She knew, of course, she might be able to trace him by employing a private detective, but she shrank from that. Surely he must make some sign to someone before long? He could not be so hurt that he had determined to disappear for always from his old ways, his old set? Sooner or later someone would run across him, would hear of him.

But as the weeks wore on and still no news came of him, she began to wonder whether, after all, she would not employ someone to find him.

In spite of everything, she was his mother. He was her son. Although she had surrendered him in childhood, although he had repudiated her in manhood, he was still bone of her bone. Although she had relinquished and he had denied her claim on him, the claims of the flesh still held. She had conceived him, had carried him under her heart, her agony had brought him into being, her supreme act of self-immolation—for she had come back to her own serene assurance that her act had been a righteous one—had secured for him his twenty-four years of clean, upright, happy life.

She got into the habit of frequenting the Temple and the places in its vicinity, hoping against hope that some day she might meet him, might see for herself that her fears for him were unfounded, groundless.

But his old haunts were the very places Gerard most rigorously avoided by day, although now and again by night, with his coat collar pulled up and his soft hat pulled down, he would wander in and out of the Courts where once he had been a happy, hopeful, ambitious dweller and worker.

Every letter that reached Eleanor in Pat's handwriting set her heart throbbing. Perhaps it would contain news of Gerard? But Pat knew as little as she, and as time passed it was obvious that she was as wretched as Eleanor herself. In her self-reproach the girl even looked on herself as the author of Gerard's fall from his old ways and his old career. She grasped at every excuse to go to London. Like Eleanor, she felt she might come across

him some day, and when she was in Town she refused to take a taxi unless absolutely obliged, declaring she preferred walking, found it more interesting.

Sir John was not in the least deceived. He knew and loved Pat far too well not to understand her increasing restlessness, or to misread the growing quiet of her ways, the deepening shadows in her beautiful eyes.

They were both up in Town again for the New Year, stopping at their accustomed hotel. Teddy and Betty were also there, spending a week in London on their return from their honeymoon month in the South of France. Sir John had taken tickets for a matinée for the three young people for their first afternoon in London, as he was particularly anxious to have a talk alone with Eleanor.

He had invited himself to tea and experienced the same old absolute satisfaction he had always felt when with her, as he sat over the fire in her comfortable small drawing-room and drank her tea.

“It’s good to be with you again, my dear,” he said, laying his hand on hers. “I do wish you would change your mind and let me always be with you.”

She shook her head.

“No, it’s no use. I couldn’t now—less than ever, when I see what the mere knowledge of my existence has done for my son. I seem to bring ruin and unhappiness wherever I go. I am terribly afraid I have brought ruin to him.”

“Then you still have heard nothing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she returned hopelessly. “It is the uncertainty of what has happened to him that is the worst. Of course, he may have gone abroad again, and, while we are worrying, he may be quite well and happy. But it’s the fear that he is going under alone, while I am here, only longing—aching to help him, that is so awful. Oh, Sir John, why did I ever, ever go to Westlea?”

Tears stood thick in her eyes as she turned to him.

“My dear, why do any of us do anything? We act according to the light of to-day and yesterday. If we had the light of to-morrow as well, we should all act as immortals. One can only do what seems right at the moment.”

“Yes, I know, but I am not sure that I did. Nannie, bless her wise old heart, never wanted me to go, warned me I was playing with fire. I was

deliberately, consciously selfish, because I so terribly wanted to see him again, and it is my selfishness that is being, quite properly, punished.”

“You could never be really selfish,” he expostulated, wishing he had the right to kiss the tears in her eyes away. “It was the most natural thing in the world for you to long to see him.”

“I wonder if anyone but a mother can understand how overwhelming the longing was? Remember, I had him for nearly four years before I gave him up, knew just what it was to feel his adorable baby hands round my neck, patting my cheeks, to listen to his attempts at speaking, first tiny words, then bigger ones, to watch him crawl, then walk, then run. I was so proud of him, of his beauty, of his intelligence, of his love for me. And then when suddenly I was taken away from him and knew I must give him up for ever, I really nearly did go mad. How I longed, till I broke with longing, to hear his voice, to feel his baby hands, to hold him tight, tight, against me. It may sound affected, but it’s true—my heart used to feel as if it were bleeding with longing for him.”

“Poor, poor Eleanor.”

She dashed the tears away with her hand as she said, “I know it’s futile and foolish to recall all that. It’s only to justify myself to you and to myself for trying to satisfy the longing just to see him, after Mr. Napier was dead. But I really broke the spirit of my bond with him, and it seems inevitable that, if one breaks any bond, written or unwritten, one must always pay the penalty. But it seems just as inevitable that one can never confine the punishment to oneself. Other people have to pay too. This time it’s Gerard and Pat and you.”

“Eleanor, you are letting yourself get morbid. Of course, every act of life has some consequence. The very act of eating a meal has its consequences of good or bad digestion! Walking across a room takes you somewhere—it may even result in your falling down and breaking your leg! But you don’t refrain from eating or from crossing a room for fear of the consequences. The attendant risks of everything we do are an integral part of life.”

“I know. I told you I was foolish. But you are quite right, and I must not let myself get morbid as well.”

“I have to read the Riot Act to Pat too,” he said cheerily, as Eleanor smiled at him with quivering lips. “I am afraid she bitterly regrets sending him away. She cares for him more than I thought, more than she thought.”

“You mean—you think she would be willing to make it up with him?” she asked eagerly.

“I am quite sure she would,” he answered gravely. “In fact, though she says very little, I am sure she will never be happy until she does. That is why I wanted to talk with you before you meet her. She wished to come here with me to-day, but I persuaded her to go out with Teddy and Betty, and I promised her I would make you lunch with us to-morrow.”

“I’ll love to, of course.”

“That’s good. I told the Elliotts I’d invite them too if you were free to come. They are longing to see you.”

“I shall like to see them too, dear children. I suppose they are blissfully happy?”

Sir John helped himself to one of the cigarettes she pushed across to him and lighted it.

“Absolutely. It’s delightful to see them. Betty seems to have lost the little air of cock-sureness which was the only thing that kept her from being perfect, and Teddy’s air of importance and responsibility and the number of times he finds it necessary to refer to ‘my wife’ are too entertaining for words!”

“They are dear things, both of them. They have remained very faithful to me, for I heard from both of them when they were on their honeymoon. But to come back to Gerard. Sir John, have we all been wrong in letting him slip away without any attempt to keep in touch with him? He—I—Oh, one doesn’t know what may not have happened to him. You see, I can’t help remembering all the time what your friend, Colonel Raven, said of him and, with his father’s history, I am terribly afraid.”

“Of course, I understand that,” he answered. “I’ve begun to wonder too. What would you like me to do? I know Pat would like me to take definite steps to try to find him. Is that your wish as well?”

Eleanor sat without answering for a few minutes. She was looking definitely older, Sir John thought, as he watched her. Quite as beautiful as ever, but the spontaneous buoyancy which all the troubles of her life had not entirely quenched until now seemed to have disappeared. She looked tired, thin, hopeless.

“Yes, I think it is,” she said at last. “I’ll talk it over, with Pat to-morrow and if she feels about it as I do, I think I should like to take the risk of

vexing him. It is a risk, I know, but I don't feel I can go on bearing the uncertainty any longer."

"Well, we'll leave it at that. You and Pat shall have your talk to-morrow afternoon, and if you decide you would like him traced I'll go to a firm of private detectives at once. Meantime, don't lose heart. Remember the lad has a very sure and steady foundation to work on. If he has gone on to the rocks for a bit, he'll right himself. I'm sure of it."

His words and optimism comforted Eleanor as well as the prospect of at last doing something, and it was with something of her old brightness that she discussed the newest plays and advised Sir John on what to see and what to avoid.

Lunch at Claridge's the next day was a very cheery affair, for the three who were most anxious seemed determined to put their worries aside and to make the occasion one of fêting the young bride and bridegroom, who were frankly riotously happy.

They were outspoken in their comments on Eleanor's appearance and told her, as they smoked over their coffee, that she was not "half the woman" she had been at Westlea, and declared that her best cure would be to go and stay with them in their new home.

"Of course, father will fall in love with you," Teddy said gaily. "He is always regretting that he was so seedy when you were down, so that he hardly went anywhere. He is much better now and will surely lose his heart. But as he's seventy-seven, he's fairly safe!"

"You never know," Pat put in. "Old Mr. Bates—the undertaker, you know, Mrs. Graham, married old Eliza Jennings last week. He was eighty-one and she seventy-three."

"Good for them both!" said Sir John. "I admire their pluck!"

After lunch they separated, arranging to meet together at dinner, for Pat had persuaded Eleanor to go back with her to Brown's Hotel and spend the rest of the day. Sir John had an annual meeting of his club to attend, and Teddy and Betty had agreed to pass an instructive afternoon at the British Museum.

They found it more entertaining than they had expected and their browsings in the Egyptian Section made them promise themselves that, if possible, they would go to Egypt the following winter and spend a few weeks up the Nile, seeing the wonders of Luxor, Assuan, possibly even of Khartoum.

They remained until it was dusk and then decided they were so hungry they would find the nearest tea shop and have tea, instead of waiting till they got back to the hotel.

Suddenly, to Teddy's amazement, Betty gave a little cry and, letting go of his arm, dashed across the narrow side road leading into Oxford Street and ran after a man walking with his hands in his coat pockets, his shoulders drooping forward.

"Gerard!" she cried, as she seized his arm and stopped him. "Gerard, where on earth have you been hiding?"

The gloom on Gerard's face, plainly revealed by the street lamps, lifted marvellously. For the moment he forgot everything, except that one of his old friends was beaming at him, holding on to his sleeve with kindly, friendly hands.

"Betty! By all that's pleasant," he cried, holding both her hands. "This is the second time I've met you by chance. Where have you jumped from this time?"

"The Museum," she answered, her keen eyes scanning his face. "Teddy and I have been improving our minds. Here he is. Teddy, isn't it just ripping to see Gerard again?"

"Rather!" Teddy's own happiness made him ready to think everything and everyone ripping. "We've all been wondering where you'd got to. Where are you off to now?"

"To my diggings. I live near here," Gerard answered, forgetting in his pleasure he had anything to hide.

"Splendid," Betty said gaily. "Take us back, there's a Christian. I hate tea shops and I'm longing for tea. Now don't say you can't. I know you always had a genius for tea. If there's no bread and butter, we'll send Teddy out for buns."

At the first suggestion of tea she had seen Gerard's face fall. But she had her pretty dark head screwed on very securely and she felt that if they let go of Gerard this time, they might not find him again and she guessed at Pat's desperate unhappiness and anxiety, although Pat had said very little.

"Oh, I say, I don't know if I can manage that; my rooms are pretty rough."

"Nonsense," she said, giving Teddy's arm a surreptitious pinch. "We shan't mind that, shall we, Teddy? I am certain that any rooms good enough

for you to live in will be good enough for us to have tea in.”

“Rather,” Teddy added, playing up, as he always played up to “my wife.” “It’ll be like old times. We’ve no end to tell and to hear. So lead on, Gerard, my boy. I can see Betty has set her heart on eating buns in your rooms, so you may as well give in at once. Unless, of course,” with a sudden idea, “we are intruding, and you are expecting some one else?”

Gerard hesitated. Here was an excuse to hand. But he so longed to get news of Pat, it would be so refreshing to talk to some of his own kind again, that he could not resist it.

“No, certainly not,” he said, after a barely perceptible pause, “I’ll be delighted to see you, only I warn you my landlady is not used to catering for the likes of you and Betty. The only thing I can promise is a roaring fire. She knows that there is one thing I raise the roof about, and that is a dead fire. But we’d better take in our own cakes. There’s a decent shop round the corner, almost next door to my rooms.”

A few minutes later, their hands filled with paper bags, they were climbing linoleum-covered stairs on their way to Gerard’s rooms.

The first impression, as he flung open the door, was one of cheeriness as a great blazing fire, with a kettle hissing on it, welcomed them, but when he turned on the electric light, Betty began to realize why he had hesitated over inviting them to tea.

Her quick eyes spotted the stains on the tablecloth, the dinginess of the china on the uncovered tin tray, the lack of attraction in the pale loaf and dab of butter on the cracked plate.

“I warned you,” Gerard said quickly, as though he felt what she was thinking. “This isn’t the Temple, you know. Mrs. Jones just dumps the things down about four, and leaves me to do the rest for myself. There are some more cups in the cupboard. Take your things off, won’t you, while I get them out and make the tea.”

While he moved about the room quick with nervous movements, Betty watched him covertly, but intently. She could see that all the signs she had noticed in Paris some months ago had deepened and strengthened. He was paler, less healthy looking, his eyes were more haggard, his hands, as they placed the cracked cups on the table, shook perceptibly.

She would not allow her eyes to meet Teddy’s. She must not let Gerard guess she saw or felt anything amiss.

She flung her fur-trimmed coat on to a chair and sent her small smart hat after it.

“I see you’ve got a toasting fork,” she said, picking up a wire affair and brandishing it. “Give me the buns, Teddy. I’ll toast some while Gerard is making the tea.”

While she sat on the floor toasting cheeks and buns at the same time, apparently intent on her job, she was keenly, almost uncannily alive to Gerard’s movements.

Every now and again he started to walk towards the sideboard, only to pull himself up and turn backwards. While Teddy talked valiantly of all he and Betty had seen and done in Switzerland—valiantly, because now that he saw Gerard clearly he was dismayed at the change in him—Gerard’s eyes kept wandering to the bottles standing on the side table in untidy disarray.

Then what she had suspected before was true. Gerard was *drinking*. Gerard, who had hated spirits, who had not cared for wine, was drinking. It was really that which accounted for his altered looks, his changed manner of living!

Had Pat known of this? Was this why she had sent him away? Had he been a secret drunkard all the time?

No, that was not possible. Gerard was too transparently frank for that.

Then it must have been the result of her sending him away. A rush of pity at the thought that unhappiness had driven him to this horrible thing made Betty very gentle and tender as she turned to him.

“Well, Gerard, when did you come back? No one seems to have heard anything of you since I met you in Paris last year. What have you been doing with yourself since?”

“Oh, I stayed out there quite a good time afterwards. I only came home in November.”

“And what about the law and your medical jurisprudence studies?” she asked, giving her attention to buttering the last bun.

“Oh, I chucked all that five or six months ago.”

“You don’t mean that you are not going on with it—that you are not going to practise?” Teddy asked quickly.

“That’s exactly what I do mean,” Gerard answered almost sullenly.

“But, I say,” Teddy went on, taking the cup that Gerard had just poured out and was handing to him. “What’s the idea? You were so keen on the Bar. And you’re the very man for it.”

“Was—not am. Look here, you two,” Gerard said quickly, as though acting on a sudden impulse, “you may as well understand—at least as much as you can. I had a terrific shock last year down at Westlea and Pat chucked me. That made an end of everything. I’m not the man you knew. I’m a different person altogether. That’s why I never come near anyone, why I never shall go near any of the old lot. This is a sort of last time, and that’s only because Betty insisted. I don’t belong to your world any more. I belong to this,” waving an unsteady hand round the sordid room. “And, what’s more, I’m going to get married before long to someone who belongs to it too. Now you know. And if you like, you can go now, at once! See?”

His voice was shaking and Betty felt that tears were very near the surface, ready to break through the bravado of his attack.

But she was game. She met him with absolute matter-of-fact nonchalance.

“No, you don’t, old thing. You don’t turn us out till we’ve had our tea. You know your own business best. But, don’t forget we are all pals—Sir John, Pat, Teddy and me. You ought to know you could count on us all.”

With a smothered exclamation Gerard got up swiftly and, going over to the sideboard, poured out a stiff peg of whisky and drank it neat. Then he went back to his place at the table, sitting a little more upright, as though he had got the stiffening for which he had been craving.

“I know you’re a splendid sport, Betty. But you’ve got to understand we belong to different spheres of life now. I don’t want to meet any of you again. See? It makes it too damn difficult.”

Teddy shot out a hand and gripped Gerard’s, which was steadier now.

“You know that’s not playing fair. We are all pals, and if you’re—well, bothered, why not let us help? I’d come to you if I was in a hole.”

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t. Besides, I can’t get out of my hole. It was there always—waiting for me. I might have missed it. But I didn’t. I was pushed in right up to the neck, and now there’s no getting up or out. All you’ve got to do is to forget me and that you ever knew me.”

“You know we shan’t do that,” Betty said soberly, trying to force down a bit of bun that was sticking in her throat. “Nor Pat either.”

“Oh, don’t talk of her!” Gerard cried, almost angrily. “She doesn’t care. She’d have written if she had.”

As Betty was unaware that Pat had written, she could not answer this. She was only wishing that she was older, more experienced, knew more, so that she could deal with the tragedy in Gerard’s eyes, answer the bitterness that rang in his voice. She felt so young, so helpless. And yet it could not be right not to take hold of Gerard somehow, drag him up, out of the bog of misery and failure in which he was so obviously floundering.

“Well, we’d all have written if we’d known where to find you. Don’t you want to know how Pat is? You’ve got to hear anyhow. She’s well enough, but she’s quite different from what she was. Ever since you two quarrelled she’s been another girl, quiet and not a bit happy, I’m certain. I may be saying what I’ve no right to, but I believe she’d be ready to make it up, whatever the row was about. Why don’t you write to her and ask her?”

For a moment a wild light flashed into Gerard’s eyes, only to fade out as recollection came.

“It’s too late. Too late. I told you I had tumbled into my own special hole, and a beastly nasty one it is, too. That’s all there is to it and that’s all I’m going to say. Besides, you forget I told you I’m going to be married some time soon, to someone who understands the nastiness of the muddiest holes—we’re going mud-larking together!”

He laughed. But his laughter brought tears to Betty’s eyes.

“Oh, Gerard! I wish whatever’s happened hadn’t happened. We were all so happy together. Teddy and I are still so happy we want everyone else to be the same. It’s—it’s—yes, I will say it, it’s damnable.”

“I know that,” Gerard answered recklessly. “But don’t waste any sympathy on me. Keep that for the people who live nice little clean lives and who keep on the nice dry roads. I’ve lost the right to your sympathy.”

Suddenly Betty burst into tears. Gerard looked at her in dismay.

“Good lor’, what’s that for? Not for me, surely, Betty?”

“I can’t bear it,” she sobbed. “I don’t know what’s happened to you, but you’re mad, you must be, to talk like that and to live like this. Give it up, Gerard, and come back to us. We’ll all help. We—we want you, don’t we, Teddy?”

She held out both hands, the tears streaming down her face. With a smothered cry Gerard seized her hands and held them against his lips as the

door opened and Vivian Vane walked in. Her eyes hardened as she saw the tableau.

“I’m sorry if I’m interrupting,” she said, with the hint of an accent that was so unmistakable, and staring insolently. “I didn’t know you were expecting friends, Gerard. Shall I go away and come back later?”

“Of course not. Let me introduce you. Mrs. Vane—Mr. and Mrs. Elliott.”

Teddy held out his hand, after an instant’s hesitation, and Betty bowed stiffly. Instinct told her who the woman was and what she had been. The years of self-denying service had not been able to wipe out all the traces of years of ignominy.

She looked at Teddy, without attempting to dry the tearstains on her cheeks. She chose to ignore the fact that she had been emotional or that there had been any approach to a “scene.”

“I think we must be going, Teddy. It’s after five. Will you please give me my coat?”

Without a word he helped her into her coat and handed her her hat. Then she turned back to Gerard with all the tremendous dignity of the young, newly-married woman.

“Good-bye, Gerard. Now we know where to find you, we shall look you up again. And you must dine with us one night before we leave Town. What about to-morrow?”

Gerard hesitated. The temptation to accept was great.

“Do come, old chap,” Teddy said with a low voice. “We’ll go to a play after.”

Vivian felt her heart turn over. In a flash she saw Gerard being taken away from her. She recognized Betty for what she was, with her slim grace, her quiet patrician air, with her simple clothes and assured manner, as she recognized her young husband as a denizen of a world she had never known.

If Gerard went back into his old world, the world of these two calm young things, what chance would she have? She had won him fairly. She was not going to risk losing him now.

“Don’t forget, Gerard, you have promised to take me out to dinner to-morrow,” she said significantly.

Gerard flushed slowly, painfully. He knew he had not promised any such thing. But it was quite true he had forgotten.

“I’m sorry. It’s awfully good of you, Elliott, but I’m engaged. And—and—don’t bother to write or anything. As a matter of fact, I’m leaving these rooms in a day or so. I saw some this morning I nearly decided on. I mightn’t get your letter. Good-bye.”

His eyes, wounded, sore, yet defiant, like the eyes of a hurt child, tried to meet Betty’s, and failed. But Betty had seen them and her momentary indignation at having all her own and Teddy’s good intentions flung back at them, faded. She held her hand out and gripped his firmly.

“No, I won’t say good-bye. It’s only *au revoir*. Keep up your spirits. Things have a knack of drying straight.”

Then she passed the woman, with her shabby, meretricious clothes and air of bravado and defiance, with a cool, curt bow, murmuring a brief “Good afternoon,” and went out of the room, followed by her husband.

When they were out in the street they paused for a moment and looked at each other.

“Teddy, I can’t bear it. I shall cry again,” Betty said. And proceeded to carry out her threat.

“Yes, it’s pretty rotten,” Teddy said soberly. “What do you make of it?”

“Make of it?” Betty repeated. “Why, it’s obvious. He’s drinking like a fish and that awful woman has got hold of him. She must be the woman he—he is going mud-larking with! That woman—after Pat! Oh, Teddy! What are we to do about it?”

Teddy realized even more of the tragedy than Betty. For he could tell from Gerard’s appearance and from the constant manner in which his eyes wandered to the sideboard, with its tell-tale bottles, how great a hold the drink demon had got on him.

“I don’t know that we can do anything ourselves,” he answered. “But I think we’d better tell Sir John all we’ve seen and guess. He may have some suggestion to make. I know Gerard thinks no end of him. He might have some influence.”

“Or Mrs. Graham,” Betty said suddenly. “She’s so—so *wise*. She’ll be at the hotel, for I heard Pat ask her to spend the afternoon. Let’s tell her. And let’s be quick,” she added, taking his arm and hurrying forward. “Let’s take a taxi. I feel I can’t bear to wait. If we wait till to-morrow he may be done. That woman will have taken him away, so that we shall lose him again. Let’s *hurry*.”

## Chapter 20

After Teddy and Betty had gone, Gerard sank down on the chair before the fire without a word.

“Cool young woman—that,” Vivian said, taking her hat off and flinging it down before she pulled up another chair to the fire. She sat down and, putting her feet on the fender, hitched her skirt an unnecessary inch higher. “Who is she?”

“The Honourable Mrs. Edward Elliott. Her husband will be Lord Pelton when his father dies.”

“My! We do know grand folk, don’t we! Great friends of yours?”

She looked at him curiously. She could see he was upset by his recent visitors and she was anxious to reestablish her own influence.

“Oh, more or less.”

“Well, I don’t know that I admire their manners. She was barely civil.”

“People are not in the habit of gushing on a first introduction,” he answered with a sudden hint of anger. “Betty Elliott is one of the best.”

“Is she by any chance the girl you were engaged to?” she asked with swift suspicion.

“Who? Betty? No, certainly not. But look here, I told you I wouldn’t talk about her. I mean it. I had to tell you that I cared for someone else, but I told you I wouldn’t discuss her. I won’t have it, I tell you.” His voice rose uncertainly.

“All right,” she answered soothingly, realizing that his nerves were rasped and raw and that, unless she was careful, he might say something irrevocable. She was furious that he should speak as if the other girl were a thing apart, not to be discussed or even spoken of to her. But she was clever enough to hide her feelings. She did not believe in cutting off her nose to spite her face.

“I didn’t mean to get your goat. I won’t speak of her immaculate highness, bless you. I want you to forget her. Come, Gerard, don’t let those

fine friends of yours upset things. Only yesterday everything was so serene, and we were such good pals. Forget them.”

He stared into the fire as though he hardly heard what she was saying, and did not answer. She leaned forward and gave his arm a little shake.

“Wake up. Did you mean what you said to them? Are you really going to take those rooms we saw this morning? You know the woman said she wouldn’t keep them after to-morrow.”

“I may as well,” he answered wearily. “They are better than these. One thing is, they couldn’t well be worse.”

He leaned back against the leather cushion of the chair. How his head ached. How he wished Vivian had not come just now. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, with the thoughts of Pat that Teddy and Betty had conjured up.

“Well, then, you ought to write to-night. Or, better still, one of us might go round this evening and tell her. I think it’s a pity to let them go. Besides—there’s plenty of room for me there,” she added in a low voice.

Gerard did not answer, but his muscles set a little rigidly. Vivian in rooms with him! Vivian, his wife, sharing his home, his meals, his everyday hours, when his whole soul was filled with longing for Pat; Pat, with her gracious sweetness, her clean, boyish outlook, her bigness, her wind-swept mind!

What was it Betty had said? That she believed Pat might be willing to make it up? Yet what was the good? If Pat knew all there was to know, she would not be willing even to speak to him again. Oh, how his head ached! How utterly rotten everything was!

Vivian sat on, more than a little dismayed by his silence and she cursed the ill wind that had sent those two from his old world just at this moment, before she had him safe in her keeping. For the moment her attitude of two or three days ago was wiped out—the tender mother-attitude of comfort and protection.

To-day she was concerned entirely for herself. She hated the prospect of touring with Barnes’ company, although it was one of the best chances she had ever had. She had toured in his companies before, when the terms had not been nearly so advantageous. She did not want to leave London. She did not want the weariness of travelling day after day or the discomfort of moving from one set of rooms to another.

She had been seeing herself as Gerard's wife for three whole days—she had realized the security, the companionship, the *safety* that marriage with him would mean. At last fortune had started her wheel full turn in her favour. She would be a fool not to profit by it. She set her teeth. She must exercise all her tact and patience, must make use of all her experience to keep Gerard safe until it was too late for him to escape.

She forced down her impatience and said soothingly, "Poor old man. Something's upset you pretty badly. What you want is a peg. You are always downhearted when you need a bracer. I could do with one myself. Sit still while I get one for both of us."

She got up and, crossing over to the sideboard, poured out two generous glasses of whisky and soda, and came back to the fire.

She stood for a moment facing him. Then she lifted her own glass to her lips as she handed him the other.

"Here's to us, Gerard. Here's to our future life together, here's to the happiness of two who need a bit of sunshine badly. My love to you—darling."

Gerard took the glass she offered and said mechanically, "Here's to us," and drained the glass.

Within a few minutes the spirit did its work and Gerard was lying back in his chair feeling almost at peace with the world.

Vivian had flung a shabby cushion on the floor and was sitting leaning against his knees, her hand holding his, stroking it like a child's.

And as his eyes closed and some of the lines of weakness and misery faded out of his face, she smiled.

Whisky was the means by which she could hold him until she had him safe. She would not hesitate to use the weapon that Fate and Gerard himself had put into her hands. Afterwards she would see that he did not drink to excess. It was waste of good money and prevented a man from working. But for the time being it was a useful means to a desirable end.

In a few minutes Gerard's head dropped sideways and his hands went limp beneath the caressing touch of her fingers as he fell asleep. Vivian sat on, cramped, but unwilling to move. She did not want Gerard to wake. The longer he slept the more likely he was to wake up in a mood favourable to herself.

Every now and again an ember fell from the fire with a miniature crash and each time Vivian turned her eyes anxiously to see if the sound had disturbed Gerard. But he slept on, his head slipping more and more to one side.

Presently there came the sound of a knocking at the street door. But, as it was nearing the hour at which the various lodgers might be expected back from their work, she did not for one moment connect that knock with Gerard.

She heard a murmur of voices at the front door and then the sound of footsteps, which stopped on the landing outside. Directly after there came a sharp rap on the door which was flung open and the landlady announced in a raucous voice, "A lady to see you, Mr. Napier."

Gerard woke with a start and sat up blinking for a few seconds, while Vivian did not attempt to let go of his hand. Then with a low cry he stood up, dragging his hand from Vivian's as he gasped, "Mrs. Graham!"

Eleanor, for it was she, took a step forward, still keeping her hands tightly clasped in her muff. It was all she could do to keep from crying aloud at the change in the man who was her son. The man before her was white-faced, puffy-eyed, his hair was untidy and ruffled from his recent sleep, his clothes looked uncared for. When she had seen him last he had been an alert, eager, splendid looking, immaculately-groomed boy. The very atmosphere around him seemed tainted, the very air smelt of spirits and of stale tobacco. Who, or what, had done this cruel, unpardonable thing to him?

Her eyes fell to the woman still sitting on the cushion at his feet. Her lips tightened. What possible right had such a woman, with that look in her eyes, those lines round her painted lips, to be alone with her son, leaning against him, caressing him, obviously more than ordinarily familiar with him? Could it be that she was the woman he had told Betty he was going to marry?

As though in answer to the unspoken question, Vivian stared back, wondering who on earth this woman could be, this woman with the white hair showing beneath her black velvet hat, with the "alive" eyes, as though there were a hidden light behind them, bringing with her the same indefinable air of assurance and poise that Gerard's earlier visitors had done, only in a more marked degree.

As she stared, fear began to mingle with the insolence in her eyes. Had this someone else from Gerard's old world come to try to take him from her?

"I know it is very late to pay you a visit," Eleanor said to Gerard in a low voice, "But I very specially wanted to see you this evening."

"You are very good," he answered in a forced tone. "I have had quite an influx of visitors to-day. Teddy and his wife were here an hour or so ago."

"I know," Eleanor returned. "It was they who told me where you were living. I am sorry if I have come at an inconvenient hour, but Betty told me you might be leaving here soon, and I was so anxious to see you that I risked it. I—I shall not keep you long." She looked deliberately at Vivian.

But Vivian did not stir. She felt fascinated. What was the subtle undercurrent between these two that savoured both of familiarity, and antagonism? It was obvious the new-comer wanted her to go. Well, let her want. She had no intention whatever of moving.

Gerard broke the uncomfortable silence.

"May I introduce you—Mrs. Vane, Mrs. Graham."

Vivian nodded from her cushion. Still she did not move.

"Good evening," she said curtly. "Pleased to meet any friends of Gerard's."

Eleanor met her eyes steadily. She must appeal to her directly, as it was obvious she had no intention of going.

"I hope you will not think me discourteous, Mrs. Vane, but this may be my only opportunity of seeing Mr. Napier. Would you allow me a few minutes alone with him?"

Vivian compressed her lips. So that was it! She was to be got out of the way while Gerard was taken away from her? Not if she knew it!

"I am very sorry," she returned with a touch of insolence, "but Mr. Napier only has one other room—a small and uncomfortable bedroom. You wouldn't suggest that I should wait there, in the cold, I suppose?"

A hint of hauteur flashed into Eleanor's eyes at the tone.

"No, I do not think that would be seemly."

Vivian laughed hardly. "I thought you wouldn't. As Mr. Napier and I are great friends, wouldn't it be possible to talk to him with me here? I can read a book and will try not to listen."

Eleanor controlled her temper with difficulty as she turned to Gerard, who was looking excessively uncomfortable, fidgeting from one foot to the

other.

“I am sorry to press the point, but I fear I must. I have something very urgent and important to say to you. It is the first and will probably be the last favour I shall ever ask of you. Will you take me to your bedroom where we can talk for ten minutes?”

Impelled by her eyes, Gerard turned to Vivian, “If you will excuse me — —”

But Vivian leapt to her feet, stung by the contempt in the older woman’s glance.

“Oh, if I’m not wanted by you either, I’ll go. I’ll go round and settle about those rooms and say you’d like to move in on Monday. I’ll see to it. You can expect me back in half an hour. *Au revoir*, old dear. I suggest we dine at the Troc or some gay sort of place later on. We shall both want cheering up. Good-bye, Mrs. Graham.”

She bowed with exaggerated politeness before she stooped to pick up her blue suède hat, which she rammed down carelessly on her henna-d hair. Then, with a final “I shall not be more than half an hour, remember, darling,” she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her noisily.

Mother and son remained standing, looking at each other, her heart filled with bursting pity, his with unspeakable resentment. This woman, this Mrs. Graham, for he could not yet bring himself to regard her as his mother, had been the author of all his miseries, all his failures. Until she had swept into his life with her devastating revelations, he had been as happy, as content, as hopeful a man as any in all England.

His resentment was strong in his voice as he said “Won’t you sit down?”

The tone chilled her. It was going to be even more difficult than she had feared! But she must not show her discouragement at this early stage.

“Thanks.” She flung back her dark furs as she sat down and forced a smile. “I am afraid you are very surprised to see me.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect you,” he answered shortly.

“Not after Teddy and Betty had been here—not after what you must know they would tell me—me and Pat?”

A slow flush stained the whiteness of his face as he answered recklessly,

“Well, of course, I didn’t know they would see you so soon. I suppose they told you I was a sort of lost soul—a pariah, had become unfit to know

and so on?"

"No, that wasn't what they said at all and you know it couldn't have been. Neither Teddy nor Betty is censorious nor cruel. They are both your friends. But they did tell me things which made my heart ache, so that I felt I could not bear it, things which made me break my promise to you and come to see you, knowing I should be unwelcome." She could not quite keep the bitterness out of the last words.

"Of course, it's very good of you to bother. But, while I hope I am not rude enough to say you are unwelcome, I frankly don't think that meeting is likely to give either of us any pleasure."

Tears pricked at the back of Eleanor's eyes and her lips quivered.

"Oh, Gerard, don't meet me in that spirit. From what those two children told me, I know you are in trouble, and I want so badly to help you. I could, if you would only let me."

"Help me?" he answered drearily. "It's too late to do that now."

"Why should it be," she said urgently. "Gerard, you know you must believe me, when I repeat I never meant you to know who you are or who I am. It was just a ghastly, unfortunate accident, an accident that I would give the rest of my life to undo. But why should you feel so bitterly to me? It isn't as if I had made any claim on you. I never have and never shall. If, when you learned who I was, you had wanted me, that would have been a different thing. We might have become good friends. But you didn't. The fact that I am your mother has roused no natural feeling in you for me. We'll admit that. But to me—you—you——" her voice nearly broke, "you are still my boy, my son, and I want, more than anything in the world, to help you to get back to your old place in life. As I know everything that has caused you to—to slip from your own high ideals, indeed I could. Can't you let me help as—just as an older friend who cares for you and who has seen so much of the temptations and weakness and wickedness of life?"

Gerard shook his head. "No. I know it's good of you to want to help, but it's too late."

"Oh, no, don't say that. Think how terrible it is for me to hear you say it. Think how bitterly it makes me regret yielding to the mad impulse to see you with my own eyes, though, before God, if I had guessed that anything could have happened to betray the truth to you, I would have died sooner than have gone to Westlea."

“Well, you did go, and I do know the truth,” he said hardly. “I do know who my mother and father were and what they did. Nothing can undo that now. Can’t you realize it is—it is, oh, impossible for me even to see you without remembering everything.”

The words, uttered swiftly, bitterly, struck her like a blow. She realized he was as hard, as incapable of understanding or of forgiving as he had been so many months ago. She had meant to plead with him, to appeal to him, but he was making that impossible. She could see she could not reach him that way.

She held herself a little more erect and her voice grew a shade sterner, as she said slowly,

“And the fact I tried to make you see, to make you understand, when I defended myself to you before, that I did what I did, not for myself, but to save an innocent child from ruin—and that child yourself, does that still carry no weight with you?”

He almost groaned aloud. He was longing for her to go. The remembrance of the old story was so terrible, he only wanted to forget it. He found himself wishing wildly that Vivian would return and deliver him.

“Oh, why will you keep asking what I think? What does it matter?” he asked desperately. “I told you before and I haven’t changed.”

The hope with which she had come died down in her heart, as she saw his eyes quite deliberately seek the clock.

“You are very hard,” she said, and her voice was as bitter as his.

“Well, you forced me to say it,” he returned, “but I don’t suppose you really came to ask me that.” With another glance at the clock.

“No,” she replied sternly. “I did not. I did not come to speak about myself at all, but about you. Betty told me some things which I found difficult to believe. That—for instance.” She pointed with her gloved hand at the empty glasses and then at the bottles on the sideboard.

Gerard looked at her defiantly. “Well, why not?”

“Why not?” she answered scornfully. “Why not? Because it is inexcusable, unforgivable. Six months ago you were practically a teetotaller. You said you hated the very smell of whisky. To-day your room reeks of it.”

Some spirit of cruelty which he could not control, though, even as he spoke he told himself he was an unpardonable cur, urged him to answer.

“But can’t you see why? In those days I believed myself the son of decent parents. Now I know my father was a drunkard and my mother—well, we both know what you did. You know how firmly I believe in the laws of heredity. Directly the first temptation to drink came, when I wanted something to drown my unhappiness, it was inevitable I should take the same road my father did. It did help, it helps enormously. I find I can forget all I want to forget for a time. Anyway, it was ordained. I’ve only merely followed out my fate.”

“So, if you carry your absurd and ridiculous arguments to their logical conclusion, you must some day also be guilty of manslaughter or, as you regard it, murder, because you are my son?”

“Oh, not necessarily. That is quite different. Murder or manslaughter might be, generally is, fortuitous, more or less an accidental result of circumstances, which might never arise a second time. That is very different from an inherited habit.”

Pity for the unhappiness in his brooding eyes kept back the indignant answer which rose to Eleanor’s lips at his flippancy. With an effort she spoke in her ordinary tones.

“We are only wasting time saying hard things to each other and all the time my only desire is to try to make up to you for the wrong I did you at Westlea.”

“Oh, I don’t blame you for that,” Gerard interrupted. “I realize you never meant me to know anything. I’m not so unfair as to think that. I know it was as you say—just an accident that I learned the truth, though it was an unlucky accident from my point of view.”

“I know it was,” she said in a low, urgent tone, “and, as you admit my innocence of intention, won’t you go a step farther and let me try to undo the results of that unlucky accident? You are so young, you have all your life before you. You can fight and conquer now. But if you give way, without a struggle, to the weakness which made your father what he was, you will give yourself no chance. Gerard, by everything you used to care for, I plead with you to make a supreme effort now, to give up that cursed drinking before it is too late.”

He was silent before the passionate pleading in her voice and his eyes fell before the appeal in hers.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, “if I could now. You don’t know what the craving is.”

“Not by experience, of course,” she answered, a faint hope reasserting itself, as she realized she had not antagonized him further. “But I know, through having lived with your father. And I also know—because in the old days, friends of his who knew him as a boy told me, that as a lad he had many splendid qualities. It was only when he had given way to the curse for years, that everything in him that was decent was sapped and ruined, and he became the irresponsible maniac I knew. For God’s sake, Gerard, take warning by his example, and give it up before it’s too late, before it’s got a hold on you which you might not be able to break. I—I couldn’t bear it, if your father’s story were repeated in you.”

There was silence in the firelit room as Eleanor waited, waited, praying her words had reached him.

“Even if I did, if I could, I’ve lost everything now,” he said at last, sinking lower in his chair. “Six months ago there was no happier man in England. I seemed to have everything. Then at one blow, in a few minutes, everything was swept away from me, my personal pride, my belief in my decent parentage, my ambitions, the girl I loved. I lost everything in one moment.”

“But you need not have done,” Eleanor returned gently. “You could have retained your ambitions, your personal pride and self-respect. The only thing you need have lost was pride in your parentage. As for Pat, you let her go without a struggle. Oh, I know that in her first feeling of chivalrous, almost passionate pity for me, she was ready to hit out and hurt anyone who hurt me. She was angry with you because she thought you hard and unjust. But she loved you.”

“I don’t think she can have done,” he answered in a smothered voice. “She gave me back my ring, she said she didn’t want to see me again. When I tried to touch her, she—she shrank from me. It wasn’t imagination. She couldn’t bear me even to touch her!”

Recollection of how Pat had looked, how she had recoiled from him, sent the blood rushing to his face.

“Ah, that was that night when she was still quivering with compassion for me. But surely you are not so ignorant of life, as to think for one moment that a girl’s love and pity for another woman could really stand against her love for a man, provided he was a man worthy of it? If, instead of running away, you had refused to go, if you had insisted on talking things out, if you had tried to make her see your point of view, for even I admit there is a great

deal to be said for your point of view, you could have won her back. It was up to you to win her back!”

Gerard quivered under the sting in her voice.

“Even over that, I had a point of view too, remember. Things are different now, I know. I have done things I—I regret. But then I had done nothing to be ashamed of. I honestly felt what I did and it seemed to me horribly unfair that because she didn’t feel as I did about—about you, she should throw me over as though I were of no value to her, and—and—I tell you, did not even want me to touch her!”

For a moment Eleanor hesitated. What was the wise, what was the right note to strike? If she sounded the wrong one, she knew she might make a fatal, an irrevocable error, from which she could never recover. Suddenly it came to her that her best chance lay in hitting—in hitting hard.

She answered him with simulated scorn. “So it was *pride* which made you give her up without a struggle, *pride* which made you give up your old life and your friends, *pride* which made you take to drink, to letting everything that is decent and straight slide, *pride* which made you take to making friends of women like the woman I found here?”

“Well, at any rate, she has been a good pal to me,” he answered defiantly.

“So would Pat have been if you had let her. Can’t you see how contemptible you have become—what an utter coward you have been?”

At that word he sat up, his eyes blazing, goaded into vitality at last.

“I—oh— —”

“Well, aren’t you?” Eleanor shot out, as she held herself erect, her hands so tightly clasped in her muff that the kid of her gloves split. “Is there any other word that fits you? You admit yourself you had everything in the world, youth, strength, money, position, a career, the dearest girl in the world as your promised wife. Then you received a blow to your pride—nothing more, and in a moment you threw up everything, love, honour, decency, threw it all up without even putting up a shadow of a fight, and now you try to evade your own responsibility under the contemptible excuse of heredity!”

His eyes flashed in answer to hers as he answered swiftly. “You are assuming a great deal in saying that.”

“No, I am not. You told me yourself only a few minutes ago you took to drink as a consolation, as a means to forgetfulness, and that directly the

temptation came to you, you had to yield to it because yielding sooner or later was inevitable. Well, I may not be a clever woman, but I do know you are talking arrant nonsense when you say that. The mere fact that you always disliked wine, even shuddered at the smell of spirits, proves your theory all wrong. In your case the giving way to drink is nothing more nor less than auto-suggestion. You have deliberately twisted your foolish fetish of heredity into an excuse for giving up any sort of struggle.”

“Well, I admit what you say up to a point. But it’s got its hold on me right enough now. It’s too late now to give it up.”

“At the end of a few months’ indulgence? Nonsense! It only requires a strong effort of will.”

“You don’t know what the craving is like. No one does who has not experienced it. It’s like a fever in one’s blood. I admit that though there are still times when I hate the taste and smell of it, yet my very fingers itch to get hold of the bottle. There are times when I do make up my mind to try and give it up, but it is always too strong for me. The longing grows till I can’t bear it. I’ve just got to have it.”

Eleanor felt him raising a wall wherever she attacked. But she refused to accept defeat yet.

“That is where you are utterly wrong. You have *allowed* yourself to dwell on the thought of your longing for it, instead of fighting it, till you imagine your longing. The very fact that at times the taste and smell revolt you proves that the craving is not real, is not genuine, but is only induced by suggestion. As for your theory of inheriting it, why, if the taint had really been in your blood, it would have come out long ago; it would not have waited to show itself till you learned your father’s story.”

“No, it’s you who are wrong,” Gerard insisted with sudden irritable obstinacy. “It’s like a poison germ in one’s blood, inherited as surely as features and colouring are inherited. It was only that the occasion for the cursed disease—for I admit it is a disease, to prove its power had not offered, until after I knew the story of my parentage. Don’t forget I have made a study of heredity and know what I am talking about. Besides,” with a little cry of desperation, “I have learned now the comfort it can give. Even if it doesn’t make one forget entirely, at any rate, it blunts everything one wants to forget.”

“But what a cowardly way of avoiding ugly facts,” Eleanor rapped out. “A man fights them. He does not drug himself into oblivion of them! Besides, for a moment, admit your argument of heredity. Don’t forget you

had two parents. The one was a hopeless drunkard. The other—though I say it, was a woman worthy of any man's respect. Even the very thing for which you so utterly condemn me, was the bravest thing I ever did in my life. I *know* that in myself I am a woman any son might be proud of. If you believe so firmly in the forces of heredity, why should you not just as well inherit from *me* as from your father?"

In her earnestness she held her muff, that hid her shaking hands, against her breast. With an impatient movement Gerard got up, made a movement towards the sideboard, and then turned back. He spoke more quietly, as though he were putting some strong control on himself.

"We are only arguing round and round in a circle. Will you forgive me if I say I would rather not continue talking about it any more? If you won't think me very rude I would rather be alone, Mrs. Graham, or perhaps I ought to say—Mother!"

For an instant Eleanor felt a physical blow had been dealt her. The word which she had hungered to hear on her son's lips, the word she had prayed, had longed that she might hear some day before she died, uttered in love, had been spoken to her at last, and spoken like that!

She rose too and, for the moment, tall as he was, it seemed, as she confronted him, as if she were the taller of the two.

"No," she replied sternly. "I will not allow you to use that word to me. For over twenty years I admit I have longed to hear it. For over twenty years I have heard it whispered in my dreams and I have awakened to find myself holding out my arms, and crying aloud 'My son, my son.' But I will not allow you to use that word to me now. You are not worthy to say it!"

All the defiance, all the hurt anger faded out of Gerard's face. He was beaten at last. Without a word he sank down into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

A sob rose to Eleanor's throat, and for a moment her face was quivering and broken. She took a step forward, her whole soul yearning towards her son in his humiliation. She longed to take him in her arms, to press the head that she felt was aching against her breast, to kiss the hurt from his eyes. Who had so great a right as she?

But, with a self-denial that only an almost superhuman love could give, she refrained. The time had not yet come when Gerard could admit her within his defences. If she were to help him it must be, still, from the outside. She felt there was no personal softening towards herself, no longing

or desire for hers to be the hand to help lift him up. If she made one mistake, took one false step now, she might lose all that she had set out to gain.

He did not see her outstretched hands or the yearning hunger in her eyes. He only heard the quiet, controlled voice saying:

“When I go back from here I shall see Pat. She would have come with me, only her father wanted her to wait till I had seen you, and I agreed with him. Gerard, this may be the last time we shall ever meet, because, unless you come to me, I shall never again come to you. So I must say now all I want to say. But, before I go and before I say good-bye, I want to give you a message from Pat.”

Gerard lifted his head suddenly and his eyes made Eleanor’s heart contract once again.

“Pat sent me a message?”

“Yes, I did not want to give it to you till I was sure I was justified in giving it. You see your father ruined the life of one innocent girl, and, if I can help it, his son shall never do the same thing to any other girl. Pat is too fine to have her life spoilt. Though she is unhappy now, she can forget. Do you want her message?”

Gerard nodded. “Please,” he said thickly.

“She asked me to tell you that she had forgotten—nothing. And that she is still waiting. You can read into that message all the unhappiness, all the regret and all the hope you like.”

Suddenly her calm gave way and all the aching longing of her soul, her yearning for him broke through.

“Oh, Gerard, my boy, don’t you think, whatever I’ve done, I have suffered enough? For your sake I have been an outcast, hiding under a false name, half my life. For your sake I spent nearly four nightmare years in a common convict prison. Perhaps what I did was wrong, but I did it for you, so that out of my wrong-doing good might come to you. If you go on as you are doing, I shall know that what I did and what I suffered has been done and suffered in vain, and might have remained undone. For—oh, won’t you see it, you are degrading yourself as completely as ever your father could have done. Gerard, for God’s sake, play the game!”

He raised his head and stared at her, lifted for the first time out of himself.

“Don’t you see that, however much you may repudiate it, you owe me a heavy debt? You owe me for the shame of my trial, for the horror of my prison life, for my years of loneliness and exile. I claim the payment of your debt in the only way you *can* pay it. Instead of doubling that debt, as you are doing now, pay it back like a man! Retrace your steps, win back your place in life, fight the coward in yourself and make yourself worthy of the woman you are now ashamed to call mother!”

As her voice rang out like the voice of one inspired, Gerard’s head sank lower and lower till his face was hidden from her. There was no movement towards her, no sign that her appeal had reached him. For seconds that seemed hours Eleanor stood watching him, her eyes a blazing glory.

Then she did the bravest, wisest thing of her whole life. She turned and quickly, without a word of farewell, went out of the room and left him alone.

## Chapter 21

Outside the door Eleanor stood still. She felt a little sick, as though she were going to faint. She had kept such control on herself, had forced herself so relentlessly to the part instinct had guided her to play all through her interview, that now that the tension was lifted, something seemed to snap in her vitality.

Suddenly she felt weak and trembling, and tears sprang to her eyes. Had she done right? Had she been too harsh or was the spur she had applied the best method to reach him? Was she right in leaving him now? Would it have been better if she had stayed, in case he had turned to her, on the chance that he might want her to help him?

She laid her hand on the knob of the door again. But before she turned it she withdrew her hand. No, she would not go back. There flashed through her mind an old French proverb, "When in doubt, refrain."

It was because she had not "refrained" last year that all Gerard's troubles had come upon him. If he wanted her he could reach her. If he did not, then she must not force herself on him again.

Slowly she made her way down the badly-lighted staircase and at the top of the first flight paused once more. Just entering the front door was a woman wearing a blue suède hat that she recognized. Until this moment she had forgotten Vivian Vane and the part she presumed she was playing in Gerard's life.

Betty and Teddy had told her that Gerard had said that he was engaged to be married. When she had first seen Mrs. Vane leaning against his knees, caressing his hand, she had jumped to the conclusion this was the woman to whom he was engaged. But she had forgotten about her during their discussion over his drinking and his relations with Pat Mannering.

This woman obviously had some hold over him, and if he had really promised to marry her, all her hopes for bringing him and Pat together again might founder.

The woman looked up and recognized her.

"I see I have timed my return just right," she said, almost jauntily. She had settled with the landlady of the rooms she had advised Gerard to take,

and had arranged that he should move in the following Monday morning. Moreover, she had told the landlady that within a week or so she also would be going to live there as she and Mr. Napier were going to be married very shortly.

Putting it into words, telling someone else of her engagement, had seemed to make it safer, more assured, and she had come back quite prepared to do battle with Mrs. Graham or anyone else who might try to take Gerard from her.

She smiled quite pleasantly at Eleanor in her new-found self-assurance.

“Yes,” Eleanor answered quietly. “You have. I am glad I have met you, because I should so much like a little talk with you. Am I mistaken or are — are you something more than a great friend of Mr. Napier’s?”

Vivian flung up her handsome head as she returned with ill-concealed triumph.

“You are quite right, Mr. Napier and I are going to be married very soon.”

“Ah!” Eleanor stopped for a second before she went on, as she gathered all her strength together again. So there was then another fight ahead of her, a fight for her son instead of with him. “I wonder if you would come and join me in a cup of tea? I noticed there was a tea shop quite close here when I came.”

“Thank you, but I had my tea an hour ago.”

Already her tone was harder. This was some ruse — Mrs. Graham had not been ready to invite her to anything when she had first seen her!

“Won’t you have another? I am very tired, and have not had any. Please, Mrs. Vane, don’t refuse me.”

It was hard for anyone to refuse Eleanor anything when she looked and spoke like that, and, considerably to her own surprise, Vivian found herself saying — “Oh, very well then; only I cannot stay long. Gerard will be expecting me.”

“I won’t keep you long. I promise you.”

Together the two women passed out into the street, where the winter air struck cold and damp and, with a little shiver, Eleanor drew her furs closer round her neck.

A minute's walk brought them to a brilliantly-lighted Lyons' shop, which they entered and, after a hasty glance round, Eleanor led the way to a table at the farther end of the room where they could talk without being overheard.

There was a fair sprinkling of people sitting at the marble-topped tables, with cups and steaming tea and coffee and plates of cakes and scones in front of them, but it was just that time of semi-slackness between the regular tea-hour and the hour when the clerks and shop assistants rush in for a meal before going home or to some evening entertainment.

"Will you have tea or coffee?" Eleanor asked, as she laid her muff and bag on the chair beside her.

"Coffee, please."

Eleanor beckoned the waitress and ordered two strong coffees and toasted rolls. Then she turned to Vivian, who had been watching her curiously, wondering what her first move would be.

"You say you are going to marry Mr. Napier," she said quietly. "Do you realize how old, or rather, how young he is?"

"Oh! I know he is younger than I am," Vivian returned carelessly. She knew she held the trump card, and was now frankly inquisitive as to what this woman, with the beautiful face and quiet controlled air of refinement, was going to say to her.

"He is only twenty-four," Eleanor said.

"Oh, I thought he was older than that. Then— —" with a touch of defiance, "he is ten years younger than I am."

"I thought that was about the difference. And, of course, you know he does not love you?"

The blood flamed into Vivian's face, and she answered in a low curt voice of anger,

"Why should you say that? How can you possibly know?"

"Because I know he loves with all his heart the girl he was engaged to last year."

"But she chucked him."

"Yes. But it was in a fit of anger, which she believed to be justified. If Gerard had not taken her at her word, if he had not rushed away, she would have forgiven him."

“Well, if girls do things like that, they have got to pay for them,” Vivian answered roughly, as the waitress put the coffee and rolls in front of them. “You can’t suggest I have done anything dishonourable. Gerard was quite free when he asked me to marry him, and I was free to accept him. You can’t blame me for that.”

“No,” Eleanor said deliberately. “Of course, I don’t. But I shall blame you if you hold him to it. Mrs. Vane, do you think for one moment you can make a boy of his age and of his sort happy?”

Vivian looked at her defiantly. “Well, do you think he is happy now? Would he be drinking as he is, would he be living as he is, if he were?”

“No, he is most unhappy, but chiefly through his own fault. He had a great shock a few months ago, and, instead of meeting it bravely, he met it like a coward.”

Vivian put her cup down with a little clatter.

“Don’t dare to abuse Gerard to me! You have no right to say that.”

“I am not abusing him. I am only stating a fact. And no one has so great a right as I have to discuss him. He is my son.”

“Great Scott!” Vivian sat and stared at her. This had never occurred to her. Gerard had never spoken of a mother. In fact, she had definitely understood from him that both his parents were dead. But if she really were his mother, why had she not said so when she first came to his rooms? Why had she addressed him as Mr. Napier?

“You may believe me,” Eleanor went on, as though she read the doubts chasing through Vivian’s mind, “though only three or four people in the world know it. I am telling you so that you may understand I really have the right to say what I am saying. As Gerard’s mother, I beg you, I plead with you, to give him up.”

Ah, there it was again, only this time put in plain words—the attempt to take Gerard from her!

She met Eleanor’s gaze with hard eyes.

“Of course I refuse. Oh, I know quite well all you are thinking of—not only that I am older, but that I am not good enough for him!”

“Well, are you?” Eleanor interrupted. “Remember I am a woman much older than you and we women can guess a good deal about each other by just looking at each other. I don’t want to hurt you or to say anything cruel

or unkind, but I can see your life has not been—how can I put it gently?—not sheltered, like the lives of girls and women my son has been used to.”

Vivian leaned forward a little over the table, her hand clenched on the cold marble.

“You mean I have seen a lot of the ugly side of life? Well, if I have, whose fault has it been? Not mine. But a man’s. A man who drove me to the beastliness of what my life was for years. Oh, I don’t deny it or lie about it. Why should I? Remember Gerard has seen some ugly bits too, now. But why should I remain in the mud of life? I was once as straight and clean as this girl you talk so much of and that Gerard cares for. He’s been candid with me. I know he loves her, not me. But he’s given me the chance to get right out of the sordidness of life for good and all. Why shouldn’t I take it? Why should you try to take my one chance away from me, push me down again? Why should you, I say?”

She spoke with swift, concentrated passion.

“I will tell you,” Eleanor answered. “Because I love Gerard.”

“Well, so do I,” Vivian answered recklessly. “Oh, I am thinking of myself, I don’t deny it. I know perfectly well all that I shall gain by marrying Gerard. But I have seen him nearly every day for months past and he’s utterly miserable. The only times he’s been at all happy have been when I was with him. I know he’s drinking, but that’s because he’s so damned wretched. He only started to drink because he was unhappy and now he can’t give it up. Sometimes when I’ve seen his eyes I—I could have howled myself. Do you know, two or three days ago he was crying in my arms? I knew what it was for well enough. It was with regret for all he had lost, all he has made up his mind he can never get back to.”

The pain at Eleanor’s heart at hearing put into words all she guessed was almost unbearable.

“And do you think you can help him to get back to all he has lost if you marry him?” Eleanor asked in a voice that shook a little.

“I could try.” Suddenly a smile softened the hardness in Vivian’s eyes and her painted lips parted. “You see, there is one thing you are losing sight of all the time. I love Gerard, too.”

As Eleanor searched her face a slow blush rose to Vivian’s face under the rouge, and Eleanor had a glimpse of the woman who had served for over four years in a Tommies’ hospital.

She put out her own hand swiftly and laid it on Vivian's, lying simply on the table.

"I believe you do," she answered. "But the point is—do you love him enough?"

The smile faded from Vivian's eyes as she turned them almost resentfully to the other woman.

"What do you mean?"

To any one of the men and women in that ordinary shop, drinking their cheap tea and coffee, eating their accustomed cakes and scones, the table at the end of the room offered no different spectacle from any that might be seen at any table in any such shop at any hour of the day. Two women talking earnestly over some subject, which might be no more vital than a new gown or the latest play or the household arrangements of one or the other. True, one was obviously of the half-world, or had been at some time of her life. The indefinable "something" which can never be quite wiped out was there. The other was as obviously a "lady," beautiful, well, but quietly, dressed. That was nothing unusual. In these days of social fusion men and women of so many different worlds have interests which touch at so many points. There was nothing to mark that their meeting or their conversation was anything out of the ordinary. And yet, had the other men and women in the shop but known it, a little drama in which the whole future of one man and at least two women was being played out.

"I mean," Eleanor answered, in a low voice, "that if you love my son enough, you will give him up. Knowing what I do of him, if you have his promise, I do not think he will break it. It would have to be you to release him. Mrs. Vane, we both love him, so surely we must both think chiefly of him? Whatever he has done in the past five or six months, up to last July Gerard was as clean and pure a boy as lived. I know he has gone a long way downhill. I can see it for myself in a dozen ways. But it has only been for a few months, it isn't as if it had lasted for years. He could pull himself up now in the right surroundings. He could give up that cursed drink, he could get hold of his manhood, pick up his dropped career. He could make himself fit once again to ask the girl he loves and who loves him to marry him. They were made for each other. He will never really love anyone but her. Won't you give him up, so that some day, when he has won back, he can be really happy?"

"But why should I?" Vivian cried passionately, struggling against Eleanor's appeal. "Why should you ask me, expect me to make such a

tremendous sacrifice? You say you are his mother, yet all these months neither you nor his precious girl has lifted a finger to help him. What have you ever sacrificed for him yourself that you should ask me to do this tremendous thing?"

"I will tell you," Eleanor answered quietly. "And you shall judge if I have sacrificed anything for him or not. This is only the second time I in twenty years have told the truth to anyone, but you shall hear it."

Briefly Eleanor told the story she had told in the drawing-room at The Court. Even shorn of all its details, with only the bare bones of the story recounted, the drama, the tragedy of it, gripped and held Vivian Vane so that, almost, she was holding her breath. When Eleanor stopped she said in a stifled voice,

"You went through all that for him?"

And the eyes that were staring at Eleanor were the eyes that had smiled into the eyes of dying heroes, that had glazed with tears in sympathy with a sobbing wife or mother or sister.

"Yes. Do you still think I am asking you to do more than I was willing to do for him?"

"No." She shook her head. "But isn't it queer what women will do for men? You did all that for just one man."

"No, for just one child," Eleanor corrected.

"It's the same thing. He was a boy then, but he was going to be a man. And now you are asking me to give up everything in life I want for the same man. It isn't fair that two women's lives should be sacrificed for one man."

"Oh, my dear," Eleanor said. "Isn't the life of every woman, except the really worthless women, and even some of them, sacrificed to some man or some men? I grant you not always in a big way, but in small things. It is always the woman who cares for the man for ninety-nine hours out of every hundred. In the hundredth hour the man may look after the woman. In that hour he may safeguard her money, or help her in her career or do some big, simple thing, but in all the little, everyday things that make up life, that call for continuous little self-denials, it is always the woman who cares for the man. No woman can escape the universal law of sacrifice."

Vivian sat still, her eyes staring straight in front of her—her surroundings, the tired-eyed men and women at their marble-topped tables,

the white-capped and white-aproned waitresses, even Eleanor herself, forgotten.

She was looking at the future as she had been seeing it for the past few days. Herself with Gerard, sharing his home, honourably, as his wife, sharing his hours, his play, his money. Never again would she have to work, never again would she have to sell herself.

All this golden future, all those rosy dreams she was being asked to give up. No one could force her to do it. She knew that Eleanor had spoken the truth when she said that Gerard would not go back on his word to her. Why then should she give him up?

Then she remembered her own past, the men, one after another, who had figured in her life. The woman she was proposing to become the wife of a boy who was still clean-minded enough to be filled with shame for his own brief life of dissipation of a few months. She was quick enough, experienced enough to know that three-parts of his unhappiness and morbidness were due to bitter regret for the ideals he had forsaken.

There flashed into her mind, for no relevant reason, the memory of a boy who had died in her arms. Gerard had always reminded her in a vague way of him. He had had a fine, sensitive face and his voice had held the ring and intonation of Gerard's. He had said, when asked, that he had no friend or relation he wished informed of his serious wounds. He had lain on his narrow cot without complaint and without ever telling anything of his life or of his people. Of all the nurses in the ward he had always liked Vivian best, and when his last night had come, he had contentedly laid his head against her shoulder and, without ever giving away who or what he was, he had slipped away to join the many thousands of his comrades on the farther side of the Silent Door.

Vivian had always guessed there was some tragedy behind his silence. She had been more heart-sick over the death of that boy than over that of any of her patients during all those years. She had loved him. But she had loved him as a mother. And she knew in her heart that her love for Gerard held much of the same quality.

Her eyes gradually focussed on Eleanor's face as her thoughts came back to the present. She sat with her shoulders hunched forward.

"Do you really realize what you are asking me to do?" she asked at last.

"I think I do. I know it is a bigger thing than I did."

“If I do it, do you know what it may mean for me? It means that I shall go back to the beastliness I hoped I had left behind?”

“No, no!” Eleanor said swiftly. “You need not. There is always something else.”

“Not always for women of my sort.”

“Your sort? What is your sort? I only saw one woman when I first saw you. But, though you may not know it, you have been showing me quite another. You say you’ve known a lot of the beastliness of life. But I am sure there has been a time when you’ve known the beauty of it.”

“Yes, during the War. I worked for four years in a Tommies’ hospital. I saw enough beauty and nobility then to last me a lifetime.”

“And after that,” Eleanor said softly. “You say you can even *think* of returning to the ugly side? Oh, no, you couldn’t—not ever again!”

As Vivian looked at her, she saw that Eleanor’s eyes were filled with tears.

“I know—I feel sure you are going to prove your love for Gerard,” Eleanor went on. “But, oh, don’t spoil your sacrifice by—by spoiling yourself. That would mean something else I had to take on my conscience, and my load is heavy enough already.”

Suddenly Vivian smiled at her, the smile that belied the indefinable “something.”

“Isn’t it queer? A few moments ago we hated each other. Now you’re speaking as though you were really sorry for me, and I’m thinking you are what I should like to have been. I think I’d like to shake hands with you.”

In an impulse she could not control Eleanor leaned forward and, careless of the possible glance of anyone else in the shop, she kissed her.

Vivian drew in her breath and then fumbled in her bag and drew out a crumpled sheet of notepaper and a pencil. She wrote for a few minutes and then held out the paper to Eleanor. “Those are two telegrams which I will send when I leave here. I promise.”

Eleanor read: “Barnes, 2 Victory Chambers, Shaftesbury Avenue. Accept contract. Will start Monday morning. Vane.”

On the other side of the paper was written: “Gerard Napier, 71 Terrent Street, Bloomsbury. Engagement off. Joining Barnes’ Company Monday. Too busy to see you again. Good-bye. Good luck. Vivian.”

As Eleanor handed her back the paper in silence, Vivian got up, scraping her chair along the tiled floor.

“Well, I’ll be off now.”

“Won’t you give me your address first?” Eleanor put a card on the table. “That address will find me for the next three months, and anything sent to me at The Court, Westlea, Gloucestershire, will always be sent on to me. Will you write to me some day?”

“I don’t promise. Perhaps I will, but perhaps I won’t. I don’t expect we shall ever cross each other’s paths again. I ought to hate you, but I don’t. Good-bye.”

She nodded curtly and turned and walked quickly out of the shop.

Eleanor remained sitting in her place, feeling very weary. She had won, but the victory did not leave her with the satisfaction she felt it should have done. Had Gerard never known who he was, he would never have entered the world where Vivian and her kind were to be found. Vivian would never have had visions of a sheltered, secure life with him, and would never have had those visions shattered. The stone she had cast into the pool so long ago was still sending out ripples in eddying circles. Would they never reach their final boundary and cease?

## Chapter 22

Letter from Patricia Mannering to Gerard Napier:

“Gerard, may I come and see you? I wanted to come to-day with Mrs. Graham, but both she and father asked me to wait. I want to see you dreadfully. I want to ask you to forgive me, for I was as hard to you as I felt you were to your mother. I have been so dreadfully unhappy, and I know you have been unhappy too. Can’t we wipe out the past few months and go back to where we were? Dad and I are going back to The Court in a few days. Will you come with us and finish the visit that was cut short last year?”

“I did write to you a long time ago, but my letter was sent back. If only you had had it perhaps things might have been different. Do write to me, Gerard. I am longing to hear from you and to see you again.

“Yours always,  
“PAT.”

Letter from Gerard Napier to Patricia Mannering:

“Pat—you darling. I must not say my darling now—not yet. No, I will not see you, because I should hate you to see me as I am. I will never see you unless I feel I dare. The sins I have committed against your sweetness and innocence I can never wipe out, because I can never undo them. I want you to understand what I mean, though I can’t put things more plainly into words. But, being you, I think you will understand. That part of the last miserable few months I shall always have to ask you to forgive me. But I can promise and I do promise that all that sort of thing is finished for ever. It is the other thing of which I cannot be sure, though I intend to fight with all my power. I mean now never to touch a drop of drink again. But I can’t be certain that I shall succeed. Even now, while I am writing to you, thinking of you, wanting to win back your respect, it’s all I can do not to throw down the pen and rush across to the cursed bottle of whisky which seems as if it were looking at me, winking at me, beckoning to me.

I thought I would throw it out of the window, then I knew that was only running away, not fighting. It may beat me in the end. If it does, I'll never come near you again. Now I know what a beast it makes of a man I'll never let myself spoil your life, or any woman's life. If I beat it I'll ask you to let me come and see you. Till then, Pat, don't tempt me to break the oath I swore last night —I swore I would never come near you till I was certain I was absolutely cured. I don't know yet whether I shall win or lose. But now that you have given me a hope that I might perhaps win you again if I beat that devil, I'm going all out. I'm not even going to write to you, and I'd rather you didn't write to me. If ever I know I can honestly and honourably ask you and Sir John to allow me to come again to The Court, I'll write. I won't write again till I can. Don't think me ungrateful. I am not. I am on my knees in gratitude to you for your beautiful message. But Mrs. Graham told me yesterday I was a coward. If she had been a man I know I should have struck her then. But I see now she was dead right. I have been and am still a coward. You might tell her that, at any rate, she has put fight into me, and I'm going to do my best to make her take back that word. That is why I am going to face it alone.

“I love you. I love you. Some day, God helping me, I'll sign myself your lover. I dare not to-day.

“GERARD.”

## Chapter 23

Eleanor started up eagerly as “Miss Mannering” was announced, and Pat entered her small drawing-room.

“Well?” she asked breathlessly. “Have you heard?”

Pat nodded as she loosened her fur coat. “Yes, I have brought you his letter. There is a message in it for you.”

She took a folded letter out of her bag and handed it to Eleanor, whose eyes were dim before she was half-way through it.

“I did the right thing,” she said tremulously, when she had finished reading. “Can’t you see I did? I hurt him horribly, but I got him to his feet.”

“The thing that I can’t bear,” Pat said, “is that he should be left to fight alone. I am sure that Dad and I could help. If he still really loves me, and he says he does, surely I could help him better than anyone?”

“No, no.” Eleanor’s eyes were shining as she turned the letter over in her hands as though she loved the feel of it. “Gerard is absolutely right. He must fight it out alone. If any woman, even you, were to see him in his present degradation and were to watch his falls—because, however he tries, he won’t get back to where he was without some backward steps, he would never feel the same sense of self-respect. Can’t you see? When you last saw him he was everything that a man should be, ought to be. To-day he is so much that he shouldn’t be. If you are ever to feel towards him as I should like my boy’s wife to feel, you must never see him till he has won back to his old place. If he had to know in the future that you had even once seen him the slave, not the master, of drink, if you had ever seen him with shaking hands or stupid in his speech, he would know you could never quite forget it. That is one thing which no woman ever can or does forget, however much she loves. Of course, you want to be with him and to help him. But, for his sake, you mustn’t. He is absolutely right.”

“I see what you mean,” Pat answered slowly. “Only it seems so terrible to leave him alone. Couldn’t you—perhaps?”

The light died out of Eleanor’s eyes.

“No,” she answered sorrowfully. “I should be the very last. If I were an ordinary mother, if he felt to me as if I were indeed his mother, of course I should be the right person. But, you see, he doesn’t even like me. I reached him the other day. I got right behind his defences, and his sense of justice made him see I was right. But he likes me less than ever. If he felt I were watching him, he would grow to hate me, even if he does not already. Irritation with me would drive him into doing the very thing he wants to avoid. Besides, I promised I wouldn’t ever see him again unless he asked for me. I broke my promise before, I daren’t do it again. I can do nothing.”

The desolation in her voice brought Pat to her side on her knees.

“Oh, my dear, I know how you are feeling about it. But I am certain everything will be all right. Gerard will come back to us some day—he must, and it will be you who will have done it. He wouldn’t have written that letter three days ago.”

“No, perhaps not. And it’s a letter I am glad he has written. I am proud of him that he was able to write and that he wants to fight back alone. But, Pat, I will tell you how we might help him, though he must never know we have interfered. You know how much he thinks of that lecturer, Professor Stevenson? It ought to be easy to find where he is—surely any telephone book would tell us—why shouldn’t I go and see him and tell him everything? He might be able to help him, so long as I made him promise never to let Gerard know.”

Pat sat back on her heels, her beautiful face bright with hope.

“That’s a splendid idea. Gerard thinks such a tremendous lot of him. I know he lives somewhere in a flat off Chancery Lane. Oh, Mrs. Graham, when will you go and see him?”

Eleanor glanced at the telephone on the table by her side. “Why not ring him up now and try and make an appointment?”

Pat quickly found Professor Stevenson’s number and, within five minutes, Eleanor had made an appointment to see him at four o’clock that same afternoon.

From the first moment she entered his room Eleanor did not wonder at Gerard’s admiration for George Stevenson. He conveyed, to an extraordinary extent, an impression of conserved energy and vitality, and of a vast grasp of things, due as much to sympathy as to knowledge. She had expected to find it difficult to tell her story, to explain why she had come,

but, after the first moment's embarrassment, she found herself talking to him as if she had known him for years.

He sat with finger-tips pressed together, listening intently, his clever, grey-crowned head nodding from time to time in comprehension.

"Ah," he said, when she ceased with a brief account of her last interview with Gerard. "I am so glad to know what has happened, why he dropped like a stone out of all his old paths. Of course, I could see something was very wrong when I met him by chance last summer, the very day I was starting for Scotland. I have asked two or three mutual acquaintances since if they knew anything of him. But all I could hear was that he was supposed to be abroad. Poor lad, poor lad."

"Thank you for not saying 'Bad lad'." Eleanor said with a faint quiver of her lips.

"My dear lady, no one of Gerard Napier's type is really bad. The story that he learned from you would have made no impression on many a man, other than to make him feel a deep sympathy for you. But it provided a definite shock for him. You and I, being older, and knowing more, think it extraordinary, even absurd that it should have such an effect. But one can never tell how the delicate instrument that is human nature will respond to any given reaction. In years to come, as Napier is really a normal person *au fond*, he will marvel more than anyone else that he was so strongly, so adversely affected."

Eleanor's spirits were rising. Professor Stevenson seemed to take it for granted that Gerard's lapse must only be a temporary one.

"The thing is to get him back to his old ways, amongst his old surroundings and friends— —" she began.

But Stevenson interrupted briskly. "The thing to do is to get him back and to work harder than he has ever done before! You were quite right to come to me. I'll keep an eye on him and the best way I can do that is to have him here with me for a time."

"Oh, Professor Stevenson!" Eleanor faltered.

"I had built high hopes on Napier and I don't want to see him fail," the Professor said after a swift glance at her. "That lad has a future before him. Now, how am I to get hold of him without letting him know I have heard of him from you? I'll think of some method of persuading him that I learned his address through some old fellow-student who had seen him go into the place where he's living, or somewhere of the kind. Anyhow, I'll think of

something that will be reasonable. Leave it to me, Mrs. Graham. I'm fond of the boy. I'll do what I can."

"And—shall I hear?"

"If you will give me your address I will let you know what I hear from your son. After that I can't help thinking it would be better—that I should be able to be more natural in my dealings with him, if I am able to forget that I had got into touch with him in any other than the way I shall suggest to him. You see, my object will be to make him forget the past few months, to feel at home with me. If he likes to tell me the story of those months himself, well and good. I shan't pretend to him I know anything."

"I see. And I am sure you are right. You won't expect me to thank you, because you know quite well I can't."

She was standing ready to go and directly afterwards she held out her hand in farewell.

Stevenson looked at the door as she closed it behind her.

"If there's a word of truth in the law of heredity that I've believed in and taught all my life, Gerard Napier, with that blood in his veins, might become—anything."

At the very moment that Eleanor was with Professor Stevenson, Gerard was in his own room sitting at the table with a bottle of whisky in front of him. His face was ghastly, his eyes bloodshot. For two nights he had hardly slept, although he had walked by day till he was so tired he could scarcely move. He knew that physical exercise was one of the best antidotes to the morbid craving that had conquered him, so he took a train down to Richmond and then walked each day till he could walk no farther. The first day his own exaltation in his determination to shake off the fetters of his enslavement had enabled him to resist, without undue discomfort, the natural desire for wine with his evening meal. He had drunk lemonade, and told himself that perhaps the fight was going to be easier than he thought and that, after all, lemonade was a very palatable drink.

It was afterwards that the first real tug came, when he settled down in his arm-chair to read. His eyes kept wandering to the whisky bottle. Just one peg! It might be better, instead of knocking off everything at once, to do it gradually. If he were to make it a small drink and not have a second, it could hurt no one!

He put down his book and got to his feet. Then, before he had taken a couple of steps, he stopped.

He had vowed to himself he would drink nothing. Was he going to fail at the very first fence?

He sat down again and tried to go on with his book. But his eyes turned, urged by an irresistible fascination, to the sideboard and the half-filled bottle.

At last he got up and turned out the lights. Then he almost ran across to his bedroom and locked the door, as though to shut out a tangible evil which was ready to follow him.

The greater part of that night he lay awake, fighting the almost overwhelming desire to allay that craving that was tearing him. One step across the passage, into the other room, and relief, forgetfulness, comfort, would be within his grasp.

But he did not take that step. For that night he won. But he got up exhausted and haggard, feeling a chilly, nervous wreck.

Breakfast, with its jug of steaming strong coffee, pulled him together and, soon after nine, he was again out in the open.

For a few seconds he hesitated. Should he go and see Vivian? Should he ask her why she had suddenly sent him that letter which had set him free? She, at any rate, would be human company for a time. He stood at the end of the side street which would lead to her lodging. Then he turned and went swiftly to the nearest tube station. Once again he would try to walk off the demon of irritability and unrest. Of course, he would be a fool really to attempt to see Vivian. By some merciful chance she had given him back the word he had spoken in a moment of desperation, had given him back the right to try to win Pat again. He would be only asking for trouble if he were to try and see her now.

Yesterday he had determined to fight his enemy alone. To-day, he felt with a pang of hopelessness that he should never succeed. He had wanted to conquer the craving that was sapping his manhood and intellect, and then go back to his old life, take up his old studies, start on the career which had been open to him. It had all seemed so easy with that new high resolve which had come to him.

To-day all the exalted determination to conquer seemed shattered. He only felt very tired and utterly hopeless. It was probably no use trying, anyway. Why not give up the struggle therefore at the beginning? The forces of heredity had been too strong for hundreds of better men than he. Why, then, should he succeed where others had failed?

He remembered Mrs. Graham's—no, they were his mother's words, she had said she was a woman any son might be proud of, and why should he not inherit from her instead of from his father? The trouble was, he didn't think her a woman to be proud of. He hated what she had done. Besides, he felt no sympathy with her. He might have felt drawn to her, while still disapproving, but he did not. He only felt a subtle antagonism, almost dislike.

With his brain cleared by hours of abstinence from drinking, he realized that there must be a great deal that was attractive and fine about her, or Sir John and Pat would not be so devoted to her. But her attraction did not touch him. With a sudden wave of poignant self-pity, he asked himself bitterly, "How could it?" Seeing that it was owing to her he had lost everything and was the lonely, miserable, nervous wreck and outcast that he was.

He tramped over the Park, forcing himself to every step. He was longing to get home, longing to shut out the cold and the depressing mist, longing for some physical bodily comfort to counteract the desolation of his mind.

He had his lunch at a small restaurant and then turned towards the rooms which had been his home for the last few months. Every step he took he increased his pace. Every step took him nearer warmth and comfort.

He ran up the stairs, two at a time, and felt a strange sense of satisfaction as he entered the grimy, shabby room, with its blazing fire, sending flickering lights in every direction, lights which seemed to focus on the gleaming bottles on the sideboard. With a little sigh that was half a sob, he lifted up the bottle and set it down on the table. He almost fondled it as he took out the cork and smelt it.

No! No! He thrust the cork back in again and got up and went and sat down in the big chair by the fire. He would not touch it. He would not. He had sworn to himself he would never touch it again. He had promised Pat that he would give it up, if it were humanly possible.

But—was it?

His landlady brought in the tea-tray and dumped it down and asked if he would want anything else, as she was going out.

"No, thank you," he replied. "I will go out as usual for my dinner, if I want any. You needn't come up again."

After she had gone he moved over to the table. He had forgotten to put the kettle that stood in the fender on to the fire. It would take some time

before the water could boil. Meantime he wanted something. He must have something.

Once again he took the cork out of the bottle. In that harmless-looking, pale-coloured liquid lay peace, forgetfulness, assuagement of that ghastly empty feeling that almost unbearable restlessness.

He poured out half a tumbler and added a mere dash from the syphon. His hand shook as he lifted the glass and set it down: "I won't. I won't," he cried aloud. But even as he said the words he lifted the glass once more and drained it.

Within a few minutes such a sense of well-being stole over him that he was leaning back in his chair with an almost beatific look on his face. What a fool he had been to think of giving up the one unfailing consoler! Why should he deny himself that easily obtained comfort? What luck that there was a new bottle in the cupboard as well as that on the table!

Before nine o'clock Gerard was fast asleep in his chair with a silly smile on his face, and on the table were standing two whisky bottles, one half full, the other empty.

## Chapter 24

It was late spring and the garden of The Court was at its most beautiful. All the many flowering trees, the golden laburnums, the red and pink and snowy-laden mayes, the mauve-bunched lilacs were all luxuriating in a riot of colour and of fragrance.

Pat, a much older-looking Pat, was walking up and down the lawn with a bundle of lace and silk in her arms, while Betty, the proud owner of the bundle, watched them with smiling eyes.

“Getting heavy, isn’t he?” she said as Pat at last sat down on the seat by her side.

“He is, indeed. He looks perfectly splendid.”

“He *is* splendid. He never cries. Even nurse says he is the best baby she ever had.”

Pat gazed down into the serene baby face, into the quietly contented blue eyes, with a little pang at her heart. Would the day ever come when she would nurse a bundle of her own, smile down into a baby face that she—and her mate—had brought into being? Would her mate ever come back to her?

Betty, always intuitive and doubly so since she was married, said quietly, “Heard anything yet of Gerard?”

Pat shook her head. “No, not direct from him, not a word for nearly seventeen months. Mrs. Graham says she saw him about Christmas time. He was at the theatre with that old professor man he was so fond of, Professor Stevenson. She says he was looking thin, but very well.”

“But he hasn’t written?”

“No,” Pat answered heavily. “I begin to think he never will now. There is no reason why he should not have written if he wanted to.”

“Don’t doubt him, Pat. I mean—don’t doubt his love for you. Gerard would want to be very, very sure before he came. It only means that the conquering of that wretched habit has taken longer than—well, than we hoped for. That’s all.”

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting, if everything comes all right in the end.”

“I have so often wondered why it was that Mrs. Graham took such a tremendous interest in him,” Betty said ruminatively. “Of course, I know she is devoted to you and consequently was bound to take an interest in your ‘young man.’ But that time in London, when we told her what a hash Gerard was making of things, she looked terrible. And to-day when I spoke of him she turned quite white. I am so sorry she has decided to go over to America. She told me she will probably never come back again.”

“I know,” Pat said regretfully. “I shall miss her terribly. Dad doesn’t say much, but he is awfully unhappy about it. You know she is going away this evening by the six o’clock train?”

“No. I thought she was staying till to-morrow?”

“So she was, but some little thing has cropped up in connection with some investment and her banker has begged her to see him before she goes away. So she is going up to-night instead of to-morrow morning.”

“I think she is as beautiful as ever,” Betty said as she watched Mrs. Graham strolling towards them from the farther lawn, with Sir John by her side.

“Quite.” Pat watched her too. But she, who was behind the scenes, could see that though Eleanor might be as beautiful, the oval face was thinner, the shadow in the dark eyes more persistent, the spring of her step less buoyant than it used to be. There was, as it were, a veil over all the former brightness of her.

Only she and Sir John guessed how terrible had been the past year and a half of suspense, how hard it had been to wait for the brief terse notes that Professor Stevenson had, after all, sent from time to time. The last one had come about the New Year, just a year after her fateful interview with him, and in it the Professor had said he should not write again as, in his opinion, Gerard was completely cured and absolutely normal again.

Yet it was now the middle of May and Gerard had made no sign. Did it mean that he intended to drop right out of all his old friends, never return to his old ways, or did it mean that in his own heart he was not yet assured of a complete cure?

Eleanor’s friends in Florida had written again, urging her to go out, and she suddenly made up her mind that she would go, taking Nannie with her. What was the good of staying on in England? It was obvious that Gerard had no intention or desire to see her. Perhaps it was the very fact that he knew she was an intimate friend of Pat’s that was keeping him away from the girl

he loved. If he knew that she had left England and would probably never return, he might turn at once to the girl who was growing every day more quiet, more silent, as her hopes of a reconciliation with her lover lessened.

She had not even told Pat and Sir John of her intention until her plans were practically completed, and she was on the eve of sailing. Then, in response to an urgent wire from them both, she had gone down to The Court, taking Nannie with her, for three days to say good-bye.

Those days had both flown and dragged for Eleanor. Flown because she felt they were the last she would ever spend there; dragged because she saw Gerard in the dining-room, in the study, in the drawing-room. She saw him in white flannels swinging his racquet on the lawn, she saw him in grey tweeds striding along the country lanes. She saw him smiling, content, assured, even assertive. And across all those happy recollections the vision kept passing of Gerard as she had last seen him, degraded, shaking, white-faced, ashamed.

She would like to have known before she left England that Pat and he had come together again. But Pat would write, and her going away might hasten their reconciliation.

Of course, Sir John had done his utmost to persuade her to stay. Once again he had urged his own claims, his own love, but Eleanor had very definitely refused to reconsider the question.

And now it was her last afternoon. In a few hours the car would take her for the last time into Gloucester Station, and on the next day but one she would sail from Southampton for New York, probably never to return.

As she strolled across the lawns by Sir John's side she looked at the peaceful, gracious scene around her—the well-kept garden, the beautiful old grey house, the two girls on the garden seat, leaning over the new heir to the Pelton barony, the satin-coated setter at their feet, the whole picture one of quiet, well-ordered, luxurious homeliness. And it could be all hers for the stretching out of her hand, with one word. Was she a fool to turn her back on it all, to become a wanderer again in a strange country, when here, in this beautiful old corner of the Cotswolds, she could find peace, security, love?

She turned swiftly to Sir John, but at that moment he had swung round as Teddy Elliott's voice rang out clearly, and the proud young father came striding along the short cut from the drive.

“Hullo, everyone. How's Edward, Betty? Is he still coughing?”

“Duffer!” Betty turned her face up for his kiss before she smiled at Pat. “Edward gave one little tiny cough this morning, choked over his milk if the truth were known, and Teddy wanted to send for Dr. Forsyth on the spot. He’s the most terrible old fuss-cat you ever saw. If I let him bring Edward up as he would like, he would be rolled in cotton-wool and kept in a glass incubator.”

Teddy grinned. “Sounds like me, doesn’t it? Now then, young woman, are you ready to go? I’ve left the car in the drive. We ought to go at once if we are to get to Cheltenham by four o’clock.”

Teddy had been unable to lunch at The Court, so Betty and Edward the Second, as the baby was called, had come without him to say good-bye to Mrs. Graham, and Teddy had promised to fetch them.

He turned now to Eleanor as she walked up to them.

“Well, what do you think of yourself for deserting us all? I’m in mourning. Did you notice my black tie? Of course, I don’t want you to be too miserable, but I hope you’ll be miserable enough to want to come back very quickly.”

“I’ve told her that till I’m tired of it,” grumbled Sir John, “but she won’t listen to any of us.”

“I do listen and I am more grateful than I can say that you all want me to stay,” she answered, her eyes bright with feeling. “And perhaps—who knows? I may be so homesick that within a few weeks I may be on my way home.”

But as she laughed into Teddy’s face she knew in her heart she should never return unless—Gerard were to ask her to come, and the chances that he would appear infinitesimal.

After they had all superintended the packing of Edward the First and the Second, and of Betty, into the car, Pat said she had a few notes she must write and that if Eleanor would go with her father to his study, she would join them as soon as she could.

The notes could have waited, but she wanted to give her father one more chance. She had seen Eleanor’s impulsive movement towards him at the moment Teddy had appeared and her instant recoil when he had not seen her. Could it be that her heart really was failing her a little at the last moment, and that she might yet be persuaded to stay, even to listen to Sir John? For Pat knew that her father’s love for Eleanor had become as great a thing in his life as his love for herself. They did not discuss it, as they did not discuss

Pat's patient, but half-hopeless waiting for Gerard. They were too good friends, and at the same time too rigorously observant of each other's boundaries, for that.

Eleanor said something about going to her room to pack, but Sir John said quickly that Nannie surely was capable of managing the packing alone.

"Do come," he said, as he held out his hand. "There is so little time left, and I don't want to lose any of it."

"Just let me run up and see Nannie then," she answered "I will come down again in five minutes."

Sir John's study was at the back of the house, looking on to the wide tennis lawns, and the drawing-room, where Pat went to write her letters, looked on to the front, so that anyone walking up the drive to the front door would actually pass the windows.

Spite of her plea that the notes must be written, Pat did not attempt to take up a pen when she sat down at the writing bureau. First she picked up a large, silver-framed photograph of Gerard, taken during the week of their brief engagement, and looked at it closely, intently. Then she put it back in its place and cupped her face in her hands and stared out of the open French window on to the blossom-laden trees that bordered the drive near the house.

She wished that dull, unsatisfied ache at her heart would cease. She had tried so hard to take her old interest in the village, in the house and garden, in her friends. She had not allowed her energies to flag, nor had she permitted herself to neglect her old duties, social or otherwise. But she carried about with her always a vague feeling of emptiness, of longing for something unattainable, that robbed everything of its savour and glamour.

"Oh, what a fool I was—and what a cruel fool!" she said to herself for the thousandth time, as she let the unhappiness of her thoughts show in her face. "Will things ever come right? Will Gerard ever come back?"

And as she gazed through the open window the answer came. It seemed to her as though the vision had crystallized out of her thoughts, for she had heard no step on the gravel, yet suddenly Gerard, the Gerard she had known and loved, the Gerard of the photograph she had just put down, only looking several years older, was standing in the embrasure of the open window.

He stood there, his two hands grasping the framework of the window, staring at her as though he could never look his fill, while she sat still,

without moving, gazing back at him. Had she dreamed it, imagined it, or was it really her lover there, just a few feet away from her?

“Pat—oh, Pat!” he said at last.

Then Pat started up and held out her hands.

“Gerard!”

In another moment he was in the room and was standing close to her, yet not touching her.

“Pat, I can’t believe I’m here again—with you. I wrote last night, but instead of posting the letter I brought it with me. I felt I couldn’t bear to wait for the answer. Have I come too late? Oh, Pat! Pat!”

As the uncontrollable longing broke through his voice Pat gave a little sigh like a tired child and, putting her arms round his neck, laid her head against his breast.

So they stood, with the scents and sounds of the spring all round them, their own youth being given back to them, her heart beating against his, his cheek pressed against her bright hair. Then slowly Pat lifted her face.

“Do you mean it?” Gerard said hoarsely. “May I?”

Her eyes gave him the answer before they closed in ecstasy as she yielded her lips to his.

Presently they sat down on the big lounge, his arm still about her, as he said,

“You know I needn’t tell you that I have conquered that—that curse, need I? You know I wouldn’t have come till I was sure?”

Pat looked up into his face, so like, yet so changed from the face she had loved two years ago. It was thinner, stronger, finer, the face of a man who had suffered, who had fought and won through, no longer the face of a satisfied, untried boy.

“Of course,” she answered.

“Stevenson wanted me to write to you months ago, because he knows everything. But I wouldn’t. The test I had set myself was that a whole year should pass from the day that I touched the last drop of drink before I would come to you. It is a year to-day.”

“A whole year? Oh, Gerard! It has been such a long, long time.”

The radiant happiness in his eyes clouded over again. “And what do you think it has been to me, longing till I was sick for the sight of you, for the sound of your dear voice? But I had failed so often, I knew I could not put the test too high. For a month past I have sat with glasses of spirits and of wine on the table in front of me as I worked, and I have found it difficult to work, not because I had the slightest desire or temptation to touch them, but because the old nausea I used to feel at the smell has come back to me—thank God!”

She lifted the hand she was holding against her cheek. “Thank God, too. Does it hurt to talk about it, or would you like to tell me?”

“I should like to tell you and then I should like never to speak of it again. The very day after I wrote my last letter to you I broke my oath to you and to myself. I was so determined to fight alone, but I know now that if help hadn’t come at the moment it did I should never have been here to-day. I was so sick with shame at falling at the first fence and I felt it was all so useless, that I was on the verge of throwing up the sponge at the beginning. Then I had a letter from Professor Stevenson, to whom I owe everything, telling me he was wanting an assistant to help him tabulate his old notes and so on, and, if I was free, he hoped I would take it on. It seemed too good to be true. It was like a rope thrown to a drowning man. I went to him, told him all the truth and asked him if he still wanted me. I can’t tell even you, Pat, how he talked to me, what he said. But he told me he would stand by and would never let go till I was cured, as he knew I should be, if I put all my will-power into it. He only made one stipulation: that I should promise on my honour to tell him every time I failed. He insisted on my living with him, working in his house, under his eye. Lord! how sick to death he must have got of the very sight of me!”

Pat stroked the hand she held between her own. “What can we ever do to show how we thank him?” she whispered.

“We can’t,” he answered simply. “Nothing could ever pay back all that Stevenson did for me. The first few months were Hell. Sometimes, for weeks at a time, I quite conquered the craving, then for a few days it had its will with me. But the intervals between the attacks of—as it seems to me now, insanity—grew longer, till a year ago they ceased entirely. Mind you, I had to work like a nigger. Stevenson kept me at it all day and half the night. I’ve taken up no end of fresh work, and now — —” he stretched his shoulders upwards, “I am so in training for mental work, I feel I could slog away the twenty-four hours round and not weary.”

“Oh, Gerard, how utterly splendid. And you are going to be called to the Bar after all?”

“I’ve been back in my old rooms for the last three months and I’ve been given my first brief for next week.”

His blue eyes were alight with triumph as he turned and gazed at her, and again she marvelled at the change in him. The lips which had completely lost their old look of weakness had tightened up and become almost compressed. And in a flash she realized something of the enormity of the struggle that had gone into the efforts of the past year and a half, a struggle that only those who have been nearly swamped by the curse, incomprehensible to those who have never felt it, can really understand.

Gerard might have fallen into the mud of life, but he had lifted himself right up out of it and had his feet surely set on the heights, heights to which if he had not fallen he would never, could never have reached.

No wonder we are told there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance. It is so easy to take the straight and narrow path when there is no choice of roads, so hard to choose it, when the wide, easy, primrose-bordered way beckons with alluring invitation, even though notices of the precipice waiting at the farther end are posted on every side.

“Oh, my dear,” Pat whispered. “I am so glad, so happy, I can hardly bear it.”

As she lay close against her lover’s breast, and he pressed his lips against her burnished head, the door opened and Sir John and Eleanor stood in the doorway.

“Pat, my dear,” Sir John began, and broke off when he caught sight of Gerard. “Hullo! when did you come?”

Gerard and Pat stood up, but Pat kept hold of her lover’s arm, as he answered, “Half an hour ago, sir. I know I ought to have come to you first. But I saw Pat through the window. May I stay?”

Sir John looked from his face, finely drawn, a little pale in his sudden anxiety, to Pat’s—satisfied, radiant. There was a long moment’s pause.

Then Sir John held out his hand.

“Of course. Delighted to see you, my boy.”

At that generous acceptance, without question or answer, other than the mute, swift appraisal, Gerard's face quivered.

"I shall never forget that, sir," he answered in a low voice. "I'll try to deserve it."

Eleanor had been standing a little back, letting the sudden wild beating of her heart subside before she spoke. Her passionate wish had come true. Gerard had come back, he and Pat were at one again, before she left England. And the Gerard she had hoped, almost hopelessly, to see, had come, and the Gerard that had broken her heart appeared as if he had vanished for ever. Suddenly she moved forward, and spoke in a level, steady voice, "I am so glad you have come down to-day, before I go. Because it gives me the chance of saying good-bye to you and of congratulating you before I leave England the day after to-morrow, without breaking my word to you. You will let me say how glad I am to see you so—so splendidly well, won't you?"

But though her voice was steady, her lips trembled as she held out her hand.

Gerard shook her hand gravely. "I, too, am very glad to see you, because it gives me a chance too—the chance of acknowledging my debt and of thanking you for what you did for me. Sir John—Pat, I want you to know, because I know you think I was cruel and unfair when we last met here. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Graham I shouldn't have been able to come here to-day. It was she who made me see what a coward and cur I was. It was she who goaded me into fighting. I owe what I am to her."

Sir John put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad to hear you acknowledge it."

"There is another thing," Gerard took a step forward and looked his mother directly in the face. "I had meant to come to you after I had seen Pat and ask you if you would not like to take your old name and drop pretences. What I really mean is, I wondered if you would like to admit publicly who we both are and—and our relation to each other?"

Eleanor sat with her hands tightly locked together, mother and son once again facing each other, as though there were no one else present, as they had faced each other in that room nearly two years ago.

At last she spoke. "You mean you would acknowledge me as—as—"

"Yes," he said gravely. "If you would permit it, as my mother."

Her voice was quite toneless as she said, "Will you tell me—exactly—why you are suggesting this?"

"Yes. Because during the last year and a half I have been learning a lot and getting to understand a great deal I never understood before. I think at last I do see how much you gave up for me and suffered for me. And—and I am very grateful."

"I see." Even to her own ears her voice sounded cold and hard. "You have decided it is your duty to try and make up for what I certainly did suffer for you? That is—generous of you. But— —" her voice grew colder, "it is a generosity I shall not exact from you!"

Gerard drew back as though he had been struck. He had felt full of generous desire to make up and to atone only a moment before. His face flamed and then went very white. Pat felt the blow as though it had been delivered at herself. Her eyes flashed for a moment and for the first time in her life she felt a swift resentment against the woman who had dealt it.

"Oh, Mrs. Graham, that isn't fair! Gerard *offered* it."

Eleanor smiled as she saw how quick the girl had been to take up cudgels on behalf of her lover. Oh, what a fool Gerard had been to accept his dismissal so promptly two years ago! One real assault of love against the defences of friendship and the defences would have gone down with a run!

"I beg Gerard's pardon. I was ungenerous when I spoke as I did. I should have said I will not accept his offer. But," she turned again to him, all the bitterness fading out of her voice. "I am glad you made it, all the same. I mean it. I shall always remember it gratefully. And if you really want to do something to please me, try to forget who your father was, try to forget his very name. Mr. Napier was, in all essentials but actual parentage, your father. He gave you his name legally. Keep it. It is an honest, honourable name. Unless Pat would rather you changed it, I would rather you kept it."

"I think you are quite right," Sir John put in. "I see no object in raking up any of the past. I should leave things exactly as they are."

Pat turned to her lover, slipping her hand into his. "I quite agree with Dad and Mrs. Graham. Now, as we've got a lot to think over, shall we leave all discussion to another time? We've relaid the rose garden since you were last here. Come along and let me show it to you. We shall just have time before tea."

She looked significantly at him. She felt that her father was longing to speak to Eleanor alone. But Gerard needed no second hint. He was only too

ready to jump at the chance of escape. He wanted to recapture the first rapture of his reunion with Pat.

Out of earshot of the drawing-room he turned to her, his blue eyes puzzled and a little hurt.

“I seem to have blundered somehow. I only seemed to hurt and offend her. I honestly meant what I said. I really did want to try to make up a little.”

“I know, darling,” Pat said, as his arm crept round her shoulder. “And just at first when she refused to accept your offer I felt hurt for you, because I know you meant it. But she was bound to feel like that, because, you see, she loves you better than the whole world. And the only thing that is of any real value to her is your love. She does not want duty from you.”

“I wish to Heaven I could feel differently. I would if I could,” he said regretfully.

“Perhaps some day,” Pat whispered. “Perhaps some day if you—if we have a son, you will understand.”

They were passing the entrance to the summer-house. With a swift movement he swept her inside.

“Pat, my Pat,” he whispered, as he caught her in his arms and held her closely. “I can scarcely believe all that your words imply. I can hardly believe you are really giving me back everything I threw away. You are sure you won’t ever regret? You can really forget all the past that I’d give half my life to undo?”

“My dear, there is no past for me—there is only the future.”

## Chapter 25

When the lovers disappeared through the window, Sir John turned to Eleanor.

“Doesn’t this alter everything? Eleanor, it’s not too late yet. Don’t be vexed with me for asking you again. But—won’t you stay now?”

She shook her head.

“No, John, I can’t. Don’t tempt me. Oh, don’t think I don’t want to. If I only thought of myself, you know I would say yes.”

“Then I think it utter folly!” he answered almost angrily. “Why shouldn’t you think of yourself—and me? Yes, I will be selfish if you won’t. I adore you and you know it. You admit you could get to care for me enough to marry me if you would let yourself, and yet, though I want you with all my heart, and though you know I shall be terribly lonely when Pat goes, you still refuse to think of my point of view at all.”

She smiled at his vigour as she laid a hand on his arm.

“John, don’t be angry with me. Can’t you see if I were here it would spoil everything for Gerard?”

“Gerard—Gerard—Damn Gerard! To hear you one would think there was only one person in the Universe.”

His face flamed with indignation. His years had dropped from him and he was like a young man fighting for his woman.

“So there is—for me,” she said a shade sternly. “I’m not going to undo my work of all these years now by my own selfishness. I very nearly wrecked everything two years ago. I won’t do it again. You can see for yourself that Gerard has no slightest feeling of love or tenderness for me. I know I ought to be grateful for his offer just now—but I’m not, I’m not. It hurt me more than words can say. Of course, you’ll think me utterly illogical. But how would you feel if your Pat, disliking you, offered you duty in exchange for your love for her?”

“But that is so different,” Sir John expostulated. “You must face things as they are. You and Gerard have been separated nearly all your lives.”

“Of course, to him we have been separated, but to me, I have spent every hour of every day with him. Even you, John, with all your understanding, don’t understand how he has been the centre of my whole life, always, even though I didn’t see him with the eyes of my body. And can’t you see that he and Pat, even though they live in London, will look on this as their second home? You would hate it if they didn’t. And you can see how it would spoil everything for Gerard if he knew he would always find me here. They would not come so often. In time, even Pat would feel a constraint about coming if her husband disliked meeting the mistress of her own home. No, no, John, I’m not going to spoil things for him now. He has had two pretty bad years. He has fairly won his happiness—and he shall have it, unspoiled by me.”

“Suppose I said I was willing to leave The Court—shut it up and come with you?”

“No, no, my dear!” She laughed, but there was a quiver in her laughter. “That wouldn’t do. That is just foolishness. But I will compromise. If, in the years to come, you are still in the same mind, and if I think I could take all you offer me without really spoiling things for Gerard, I will. God knows, I don’t believe in unnecessary sacrifice. There is so much that is necessary, that I don’t believe in making a deliberate martyr of anyone. Only for the present I know I am right and you know it too.”

“I don’t. I think you are a pig-headed woman, but I adore you all the same! I shall never change, and, unless you return before, I warn you I shall come out to Florida in the autumn.”

“Well, the seas are still free, so I can’t prevent you!” Eleanor answered with a touch of her old buoyancy.

Before Sir John could answer the door opened and a maid asked him if he could see the man who was building the new outhouses.

“I’m afraid I must,” he replied, turning to Eleanor. “He’s going into Gloucester this afternoon and I promised to see him at four. It’s a confounded nuisance, for it means going down to the Long Meadow, but I shall be back in plenty of time for tea and to drive into Gloucester with you.”

He followed the maid from the room and Eleanor was left alone.

She picked up a weekly illustrated paper and turned over the pages, but she did not see the pictures, nor read the letterpress. At last the paper fell from her hands and slipped to the floor, and she sat staring in front of her.

So it was all over now. Another hour and she would have left The Court and all that it stood for; she would have said good-bye to Gerard, probably for ever. Gerard had won right back, had not only no need of her, but no use for her. He and Pat had refound their happiness, a happiness far greater than any they could have hoped for two years ago. For then Pat's love was only a girl's first love for a boy—to-day it was a woman's tried love for a man who had made good, who had stumbled and fallen, but who was now standing firmly on his feet.

She had put Gerard first all her life, although separated from him for so many years, and now another woman would spend her life with him and would do for him all that she had longed to do and had been prevented by her own love for him from doing. Her son, the little boy who had put his arms round her neck and had whispered "Mummy" would never now turn to her. His head would seek another bosom, his lips find other lips. With a swift throb of jealousy she felt it was unfair that Pat should have everything.

She got up slowly, and picked up the photograph on Pat's writing desk. What a clear, honest, happy face it was! To-day he looked older, finer, stronger, but there was still the old straight look in the blue eyes.

She stooped her head and gently, tenderly, longingly she kissed the pictured face. "My little, little boy," she whispered.

It was thus that Gerard, who had come silently across the lawn at the side of the house, saw her. Pat had gone to give an order about the car and had told him to go straight to the drawing-room, where tea would be served directly.

He stood still, a few feet away from the window, watching her, and for the first time he saw her as his mother. Till that moment she had been "Mrs. Graham," the woman who had first wrecked his life and afterwards goaded him into redeeming it. He saw her white, quivering face above his own photograph, saw her trembling lips press the cold unresponsive lips of his own picture and, in a blinding flash, for the very first time he *understood* what she had done and been for him.

With the glory of the past half-hour with Pat still enfolding him, with its revelations of a woman's soul and a woman's love, a love which had made her forgive all, wipe out all—and, most wonderful, understand all—he suddenly saw himself as pitiful, small, mean.

A woman's love had forgiven him everything, even his offences against her love. Yet he had been unable to forgive another woman anything, even though her offences had been committed through her love for him.

For the first time he saw Eleanor, with her quivering face, her drooping shoulders, not as an enemy, but as a wonderful friend, who had given and given to him, from his birth until now, while in return he had given back nothing but abuse, cruelty, unforgivable lack of comprehension.

And, in that transfiguring moment, something was born and suddenly leapt to vivid life in Gerard's soul. As a woman who feels the first stirring of the child she carries under her heart, knows that the great miracle of life is about to be repeated in her, so in that moment the miracle came to Gerard. And with that blinding flash of insight irradiating his hitherto darkened understanding, he could not wait.

With a stride he was across the threshold and inside the room, his arms were round Eleanor and he was kissing away the tears that were rolling slowly, heavily down her cheeks.

For a moment she lay still, unbelieving. Then she stirred and tried to draw herself away.

"No, no," she said swiftly. "I do not want your sense of duty."

"It isn't duty," he answered, with almost a choke in his voice. "Oh, I don't know what has happened. I only know I have been a blind and cruel fool. It's only this very minute I have understood."

Tears stood thick in his own eyes as he gazed with mingled bewilderment and pleading at her. He wanted her to understand the miracle that had happened to him. All his life, even in his most prosperous days, he had felt one lack. He had had no relation of his very own, no father, mother, brother or sister. When he had discovered he had a mother it had seemed the greatest disaster in the world. Now suddenly he wanted to claim the relationship, he wanted this woman to acknowledge it, to accept him as her son.

"The last time you wouldn't let me say it. But don't refuse me now. Can't you forgive me and love me again and let me learn to love you—mother?"

As the word, a mere whisper, fell on the air, spoken in the voice she had heard in her dreams, Eleanor fell limply against his breast, and it seemed to her the music of the ages was ringing in her ears.

"Am I dreaming?" she whispered back. "If I am not, say it again, my son."

For a moment Gerard looked puzzled. Then understanding flashed into his eyes. He tightened his hold of her and said again, “Mother—my mother.”

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Unpaid Debt* by Ethel Almaz Stout]