

# **The Wisdom of Folly**

Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler

# Table of Contents

<b><u>The Wisdom of Folly</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler</u> .....	1
<u>Prologue</u> .....	1
<u>Book 1</u> .....	7
<u>Chapter 1. THE SISTERS</u> .....	7
<u>Chapter 2. OWEN GRIFFITH</u> .....	13
<u>Chapter 3. NICHOLAS INGOLDBY</u> .....	19
<u>Chapter 4. THE RETURN</u> .....	25
<u>Chapter 5. THE TRAGEDY</u> .....	32
<u>Chapter 6. THE FLIGHT</u> .....	38
<u>Chapter 7. THE FRISBYS</u> .....	44
<u>Chapter 8. THE FINDING OF THE FUGITIVES</u> .....	50
<u>Chapter 9. A REFUGE</u> .....	58
<u>Chapter 10. GWYNNETH MORGAN</u> .....	64
<u>Book 2</u> .....	69
<u>Chapter 11. MEADOWFORD</u> .....	69
<u>Chapter 12. RIVAL CLAIMS</u> .....	75
<u>Chapter 13. FRESH HOPES</u> .....	80
<u>Chapter 14. NICHOLAS AT MEADOWFORD</u> .....	86
<u>Chapter 15. GWYNNETH'S QUESTION</u> .....	95
<u>Chapter 16. ROLAND'S REPLY</u> .....	102
<u>Chapter 17. GWYNNETH'S RESOLVE</u> .....	108
<u>Book 3</u> .....	115
<u>Chapter 18. MIDDLE AGE</u> .....	115
<u>Chapter 19. JOY AT LAST</u> .....	123
<u>Chapter 20. ROLAND'S AFFAIR</u> .....	126
<u>Chapter 21. TO BE TRANSFERRED</u> .....	130
<u>Chapter 22. RENUNCIATION</u> .....	136
<u>Chapter 23. AMY'S RESPONSE</u> .....	142
<u>Chapter 24. CONCLUSION</u> .....	145

# The Wisdom of Folly

Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- Book 1
- Chapter 1. THE SISTERS
- Chapter 2. OWEN GRIFFITH
- Chapter 3. NICHOLAS INGOLDBY
- Chapter 4. THE RETURN
- Chapter 5. THE TRAGEDY
- Chapter 6. THE FLIGHT
- Chapter 7. THE FRISBYS
- Chapter 8. THE FINDING OF THE FUGITIVES
- Chapter 9. A REFUGE
- Chapter 10. GWYNNETH MORGAN
- Book 2
- Chapter 11. MEADOWFORD
- Chapter 12. RIVAL CLAIMS
- Chapter 13. FRESH HOPES
- Chapter 14. NICHOLAS AT MEADOWFORD
- Chapter 15. GWYNNETH'S QUESTION
- Chapter 16. ROLAND'S REPLY
- Chapter 17. GWYNNETH'S RESOLVE
- Book 3
- Chapter 18. MIDDLE AGE
- Chapter 19. JOY AT LAST
- Chapter 20. ROLAND'S AFFAIR
- Chapter 21. TO BE TRANSFERRED
- Chapter 22. RENUNCIATION
- Chapter 23. AMY'S RESPONSE
- Chapter 24. CONCLUSION

## Prologue

Now it came to pass in the merry days when Edward the Fourth was King, that there were gay doings in the village of Eldhurst; for the Monarch was keeping his court in the palace, and there was to be a great tournament held there, as well as minor jousts and feasting, in honour of the new banqueting-hall which the King had just built, whereof the roof of chestnut-wood was the finest in the whole realm, saving only that in the Great Hall at Westminster, whereof it was a fair copy. A stately house the palace at Eldhurst had ever been since the great Bishop Bek enlarged and beautified it, and then bequeathed it to Queen Isabella the Fair as a royal residence: but King Edward the Fourth had doubled its beauty and grandeur by adding to it the graceful four-arched bridge and the glorious banqueting-hall, which are standing unto this day as an age-long testimony to the genius of those medieval craftsmen who so ably mastered the arts of building and of beautifying houses made with hands.

## The Wisdom of Folly

But in the midst of all the mirth and merriment at Eldhurst on the eve of the tournament, there was one heart filled to overflowing with gall and bitterness—namely, the heart of the Lady Marian Mandeville, daughter of the deceased Fulke de Brian, Earl of Bexley and Lord of Lamorbey in the county of Kent.

The Lady Marian had little beauty and only moderate wealth, though her name and family were of the oldest in the kingdom: and such as she had she was about to bestow upon Sir Hugo Fitzwarrenne, who longed to quarter his arms with the still nobler escutcheon of the Mandevilles of Lamorbey. But the advantage of so ancient a name and lineage was somewhat marred, in the case of the Lady Marian, by the additional gifts of a sharp temper and a still sharper tongue: which latter had so wrought upon the spirit of Sir Hugo that he was fain to relinquish his claim upon the lady altogether, rather than submit himself for the rest of his mortal days to their fury.

Therefore he came humbly before his lord the King, and confessed on bended knee that he was desirous to break the troth which in a foolish moment he had plighted with the Lady Marian Mandeville; but that he was ready to vindicate his honour by engaging in mortal combat with any knight or gentleman who would constitute himself her champion and take up arms on her behalf.

"I will die if needs be, my liege," quoth he, "and if my honour and the honour of the lady require it: but live with a brawling woman I neither can nor will."

The King turned to his Jester who stood at his elbow, and whom he had dubbed Knight not many moons before. "What sayest thou to the matter, Sir Mandolet? Would'st rather wed with a shrew or with the tomb, wert thou Sir Hugo Fitzwarrenne?"

"Were I Sir Hugo, sire," replied the Fool, "I would do as Sir Hugo doeth, seeing that neither men nor beasts can act save after their kind. But were I Mandolet the Fool, in the place of Hugo the Braggart, I would sooner marry a lively woman than a grave. Better is a wife with one long tongue than a wife with two long ears: for the woman who talks, convicteth herself of folly; but the woman who listens, convicteth her husband."

"But there is more than the shrewishness of the lady, an it please your grace," said Sir Hugo, again bending low before the King.

"And what may her further fault be? Speak out, Sir Knight, and tell us all. It is that her nose is as much too short as her tongue is too long, or that her eyes lack the fire of her temper? Because, if so, methinks thou should'st have found this out before plighting thy troth to her. Of a truth she is too tall for our royal taste: but her inches are no greater than they were when first she came to court; for, by my halidom, her growing days were over even then!" And the King laughed loud and heartily.

"Nay, my liege, it is in neither grace nor beauty that the Lady Marian falleth short of my desires; but," and here the Knight lowered his voice and crossed himself, "it is said that she hath too much wit and learning for an ordinary woman: and that what she hath over and above the usual discretion of her sex, was not sent down to her from Heaven."

The laughter faded out of the King's face while the lips of the Fool twitched with indignation and horror. Here was a serious charge indeed!

"Speak out, sirrah," said the King sternly, "and keep not thyself to hints. If there be any truth in this matter it must be searched out at once."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"There is still more, your grace," urged Sir Hugo, anxious to press his point, and to prove that he was indeed justified in throwing over his ladylove in this apparently dastardly manner: "it is whispered that the Lady Marian hath the Evil Eye, and that she hath brought about the death of more than one who gave her cause of offence."

"Hast heard aught of this, Mandolet?" asked King Edward, turning to his Fool.

"Nay, my liege," replied Mandolet, "for the very good reason that only those hear who listen. To close one's own ears is a good way of shutting another's mouth; and a still better one is to close one's own first!"

Then the King, after meditating awhile, gave judgment: "We decree that the matter shall be decided in the true knightly fashion according to the laws of chivalry. The heralds shall proclaim, at to-morrow's tournament, that Sir Hugo Fitzwarrenne hath broken troth with the Lady Marian Mandeville because she is accused of trafficking in the Black Art; and they shall call upon any knight who will constitute himself her champion to come forth and challenge Sir Hugo in the lists. If a champion come forth, and if he overthrow the lady's accuser, then is the accusation made null and void, and her innocence is proven and her name cleared in the sight of all Our court here assembled. Thenceforward none shall dare to say a word against her on pain of Our royal displeasure. But if no champion offer himself to fight in the lady's causes—or if he do fight, and be overthrown by Sir Hugo—then is the charge of witchcraft established, and the lady banished from Our realm for the remainder of her days. This is Our royal decree: and now go and bid Our heralds see to it!"

Whereupon Sir Hugo, once more bending low, thanked the King and withdrew from the royal presence: and the King dismissed his Jester, and went hawking in the fair large park round the palace of Eldhurst, while Mandolet the Fool sought after his own concerns.

Fair dawned the morning of the great tournament, and goodly indeed was the array of knights and heralds who were preparing for the fray: for it was to be one of the finest tourneys ever held in England, and the palace was all astir with the bustle of preparation.

Gradually the tilting-yard filled with a throng of people and all went merry as a marriage-bell—all save the heart of that one woman whom fate and Fitzwarrenne had used so badly. The court was always gay when it was at Eldhurst, for the air of the place was soft and salubrious, and was sweet with the breath of the merry greenwood which lay round it on all sides. The palace stood high—full two hundred feet above the level of the river Thames, which flowed some three miles away—and from its green lawns and stately terraces one could look over the sloping meadows and dark forests to London itself, and see the fine old Cathedral of S. Paul, the Abbey of Westminster, the White Tower, and the Palace of the Savoy. And it was delightsome indeed (as it is to this day) to walk in the midst of flowery meadows and leafy bowers, and to behold in the distance that great city of London, which was wonderful even then, and is still more wonderful now: and to rest for a time in the soft green hush of the country, knowing all the while that the rush and bustle of the busy town were not so very far away.

When the tilt-yard was filled and all was ready to begin, the King and Queen, followed by their suite, rode in state through the great gateway, and took their places amid the cheers and shouts of the spectators: and then the heralds sounded their fanfare of trumpets, and the knights rode into the lists each with his lady's sleeve upon his helmet. But as yet none wore the green sleeve broidered with gold which was the favour of the Lady Marian Mandeville.

This unhappy girl sat as in a dream among the Queen's ladies, whilst various knights entered the lists against each other, and retired victor or vanquished as the case might be; but she took no notice of aught save her own sad thoughts, until at last a herald stood forth and proclaimed that Sir Hugo Fitzwarrenne had broken his troth with the Lady Marian Mandeville because the latter had been suspected of meddling with matters into which it is not safe nor seemly for Christian maids to look, and also of possessing the Evil Eye: and he blew his trumpet three times, and called out for some knight to come forth to defend the cause and vindicate the good name of the Lady

## The Wisdom of Folly

Marian. Then all the other heralds sounded their trumpets, and called upon the Lady Marian's champion to come forth. Twice they did this, and twice there was nothing but silence in response to the call, while the court was all agog to see what the issue of the matter would be. There sat Sir Hugo Fitzwarrenne on his coal-black horse, looking indeed a goodly gentleman in his suit of mail, ready to fight with the best: but neither best nor worst seemed forthcoming to fight with him on Lady Marian's behalf.

But at the third blast of the trumpets there was a stir in the crowd that thronged the great gateway; and through it there rode upon a piebald horse none other than Mandolet the Fool!

At this a huge shout of laughter rose up from the whole assembly. Here indeed, was a fine jest that would serve them as a source of merriment for many a long day! The piebald steed was richly caparisoned and his rider well suited in armour; but through the coat of mail the motley underneath could be plainly seen, and the helmet was surrounded by the well-known cap and bells. But there was something else on the helmet beside the cap and bells: there were the green and gold of the house of Mandeville. Every one looked at the Fool, and he laughed and bowed his head and set the bells of his helmet a-jingling; and then everybody looked at the Lady Marian, and could see nothing in her still pale face to tell them of the storm that was raging in her heart: and, lastly, everybody looked at Sir Hugo, and read plainly in his countenance the contempt that he felt for such an adversary as this.

Then the trumpets sounded once more, and the two knights made ready for the fray: while the spectators were almost beside themselves with delight at this unexpected feast of buffoonery.

Sir Hugo was accounted a knight of no mean skill and courage, and every one expected that he would have no difficulty in overcoming the presumptuous challenger. But a great surprise was in store for the laughing crowd.

As the marshal of the lists pronounced the signal words, "Laissez aller," the combatants dashed against one another at full gallop. But to the amazement of the populace, and to the greater amazement of the court, though the shock of the encounter splintered the spears to their hilt, neither combatant was unhorsed. The sky rang with the acclamations of the spectators as the knights slowly rode back to their places, where new lances were given them. Now there was no longer laughter to be heard. In a tense silence the crowd awaited the signal for the onset. The King bent forward in eager expectation. The Lady Marian could scarce maintain her look of proud indifference. Again the trumpets sounded: again the combatants met in full career. But this time fortune was not equal! Sir Mandolet indeed reeled in his saddle, but maintained his seat: Sir Hugo was hurled headlong to the ground.

Then the spectators went almost mad with enthusiasm: and the King himself started up from his throne and shouted "Well done, well done, Sir Mandolet!"

The victor doffed his helmet and rode up to the royal dais for his reward; and the heralds blew their trumpets once again, and proclaimed that the Lady Marian was righted and her champion victorious, and that whosoever should again accuse her of the Evil Eye should be banished from the kingdom and all his estates should be forfeited: for by the trial of battle her innocence had been established. The King was so pleased with his Fool that he clapped him on the back in his delight; and then he called upon the Lady Marian to come and give her heart and hand to the man who had so ably avenged the insult offered to her by her quondam lover, and had justified her in the eyes of the whole court.

Deadly pale the daughter of the Mandevilles rose from her seat and approached the royal dais. In those rough-and-ready days it was no rare thing for a monarch to give his female subjects in marriage to whomsoever he would: and Marian knew that there was no escape from the lot now offered to her—the lot of a Fool's wife.

"Come hither, Lady Marian," quoth the King in high good humour, "and bestow thy hand upon the Fool who hath won it in fair fight from the wise man who let it go."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"As you will, my liege," replied the lady, curtsying low.

"It is cold courtesy to give only thy hand in accordance to a King's command. Hath thy heart no concern in the matter, and doth it not second Our royal orders?"

"Nay, your grace: it hath nothing whatsoever to say upon the question. I am bound to bestow my hand whither your highness listeth: but my heart is not included in the deed of gift."

The King chided her: "Fie, fie, fair lady! Thou showest but scant gratitude to the knight who hath fought so well on thy behalf. Of a truth it would have served thee right if thy second lover had treated thee as scurvily as thy first! For Our part; methinks, a tree that hath many thorns and but sour fruit, is not one to transplant into a man's own pleasure."

"Each to his taste, my liege," replied the Fool: "now for my part I would sooner eat a sour grape than a sweet gooseberry, and would sooner pluck a thorny rose than a smooth dandelion. Therefore, an it please your grace, it is my fancy to take the lady, since she is the only one in the court that taketh my fancy."

Then the King turned to the Lady Marian and bade her give her hand in betrothal to Sir Mandolet the Fool. And Sir Mandolet fell down on his knees and kissed her hand in the sight of the whole court, with the same reverence as he would have kissed the relic of a saint, and with no false shame as to the showing of his feelings, as a more serious-minded man would have had. For having a pretty wit of his own, he had no fear of the wit of others. And the King joined their hands together and bade the heralds proclaim that the marriage should be solemnised in the royal chapel of the palace on the very next Tuesday.

Then the jousts and the games began, and the court and the crowd watched them until the sun went down over the woods of Blackheath; and the shadow of the great banqueting-hall stretched over the lawns and pleasures until it almost touched the walls of the tilting-yard; which walls glowed a deep-rose-colour in the glory of the evening light, until it seemed indeed as if they were made of jasper-stone, like the walls of the city that came down from Heaven. At least so it seemed to Mandolet as he looked at them: but then he was only a Fool; and, moreover, a Fool in love.

Then the heralds sounded their fanfare for the last time, and the royal procession passed through the gateway and across the stone bridge into the palace. And there was a grand feast held in the banqueting-hall, such as has never been held before or since. The revels were kept up until far into the night: and the sounds of mirth and jollity could be heard across the meadows by the robbers hiding in the dense forests of Blackheath, and by the archers guarding the summit of Shooter's Hill.

But while the court thus revelled and feasted, the Lady Marian walked upon the terrace in the moonlight wrapped in gloomy thought. It was a beautiful scene upon which she gazed. The palace of Eldhurst stood upon the summit of a hill: and from the terrace the ground sloped steeply down through green and flowery meadows to the dense thickets lying at its foot. On the north side of the valley was a high ridge, crowned at the eastern extremity by the forests of Blackheath, and at the western by the towers of London.

And as the Lady Marian walked up and down the terrace the peace and beauty of the scene around her penetrated into her very soul, and gradually stilled the tempest of anger and despair that had been raging therein.

Surely every place has an atmosphere of its own in accordance with its natural formation, which atmosphere leaves its impress and influence upon the character of its inhabitants: and the atmosphere of Eldhurst is the atmosphere of peace.

## The Wisdom of Folly

Why this is so, it would be difficult to tell: but so it was in the days when the Fourth Edward ruled, and earlier: and so it is even to this day.

It may be that the contrast between the bustle of the great city in the distance and the quiet hush of the woods and meadows hard by, brings a feeling of rest and repose to the weary soul: or it may be that a village which has watched the rise and fall of kings and dynasties, has learnt the lesson of the mutability of human pomp and glory, and the real insignificance of temporal things, so that these have no longer the power to disturb its tranquillity or to mar its peace. Be the reason what it may, the fact remains that to those who have the ear to hear and the heart to receive its message, the message of Eldhurst is the same evangel that thrilled the hearts of the Syrian shepherds—the message of peace upon earth.

And this same repose settled down upon the weary and wounded soul of Marian Mandeville as she walked in the moonlight, soothing and healing her troubled and tortured spirit: until she began to wonder why she had disquieted herself so long. And, as she wondered, Mandolet the Fool came out upon the terrace and joined her, and stood beside her, gazing out upon the moonlit meadow. Being fool enough—and enough in love—to consider the whims and fancies of a woman, he fell in with her mood and held his peace until she addressed him.

After a few minutes of silence she spoke. "Why art thou come hither, Sir Knight, to the cold stillness of the moonlight, when the light and the revelry call upon thee to stay within?"

He answered her simply: "Because, fair lady, the stillness and the moonlight please me and the mirth and the revelry please me not: and I am fool enough to do what I choose, and not that which others choose for me."

At this she smiled somewhat bitterly. "Thou makest a strange choice, nevertheless, in choosing thy ladylove: since thou art content to take another man's leavings."

"The best rose in the garden is good enough for me. And what matters it that another man looked on it first, but was too great a coward to pluck it because it chanced to boast a thorn or two?"

"But how knowest thou that it is the best rose in the garden, since none desired it to wear save thee alone?"

"Because, mistress, I am fool enough to think my own opinion better than another's. And, of a truth, if I hold it the best rose in the garden, it is verily the best rose in the garden for me. I look not through another man's eyes, nor desire with another man's senses: I leave that to the wise who are too clever to know their own minds, and too cautious to learn them."

"I think it is thou who hast learnt wisdom, Sir Mandolet."

"Nay, lady; Heaven forbid! The only wisdom I have learnt is the wisdom of folly."

"And wilt thou take my hand even if my heart doth not go with it?" the lady persisted, melting—as all women will—in the warmth of a great devotion.

"I will take just as much or as little as thou thinkest fit to bestow, mistress. A beggar cannot dictate to his almoner, nor a subject bargain with his queen. All I know is that I love thee as surely never woman was loved before: for I love thee better than the prizes of fortune or the praise of my fellows; yea, even better than mine own profit."

And then suddenly—why or wherefore she knew not—the face of the Lady Marian changed towards the Fool, and her heart grew very tender towards him.



## The Wisdom of Folly

"Here is my hand, and methinks my heart shall go with it, since it seemeth a pity to break up the estate," said she, with a smile and a blush.

Mandolet took both her hands in his own and kissed her on the mouth. And so they plighted their troth in the moonlight, on the terrace which lies to the north of the palace and looks upon the distant towers of London.

The very next Tuesday Sir Mandolet the Fool and the Lady Marian Mandeville were wedded with great pomp and ceremony in the fair chapel belonging to Eldhurst palace: and that was the end of their life at court. For Mandolet was fool enough to care not for royal favours nor for worldly advantage, but chose rather to lead a quiet and uneventful life with the woman he loved. In vain King Edward wished to retain his favourite in attendance upon his royal person, and offered him a post in the royal bodyguard. With the wisdom of folly Mandolet threw it all away for the sake of a peaceful country life, removed from the favours of kings or the intrigues of courts. So his royal master gave him a parcel of ground on the top of the hill hard by the great conduit: and there Mandolet built him a house, and lived to a good old age in true peace and happiness, honoured and cherished by his loving wife, and surrounded by a flourishing family of sons and daughters.

By reason of her husband's great and wonderful love for her, the heart of the once haughty and bitter Lady Marian became as the heart of a little child. She whose scornful glance had once earned for her the reputation of the Evil Eye, now overflowed with such kindness and charity that she was loved as a Lady Bountiful for miles round. Her soul, once black with hatred and anger, had twice been washed white: first by the Love of God in the sacrament of Baptism, and again by the love of her husband in the sacrament of Marriage.

In a century when salvation was supposed to be found mainly in the cloister, and success chiefly in the court or on the battlefield, Mandolet proved to men that God may be served as well, and life may be as perfectly lived, in the humble home and by the common paths, as in the seclusion of religious houses or amid the alarms of war. And he succeeded so well in making domestic life as beautiful in its way as any of the more notable roads to Heaven, that tradition tells us it was granted to him one day, when walking in the dense forests that surrounded his home, to catch a fleeting vision of the Sangreal itself: whereby it was shown to all who should come after and hear his story, that a man may do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with his God, amid the common haunts of men and on the ordinary thoroughfares of life, as perfectly as upon earth's high places.

Sir Mandolet wrote no name upon the page of history, and carved no niche in the temple of fame: but he watched the sun set day after day over the towers of London, and he saw the blossoms fall year after year over the Weald of Kent. And so his life passed in great peace and contentment, enriched by the simple beauties of Nature and gladdened by the joys of domestic happiness. And when at last, full of days, he ended his course and was gathered to his fathers, his last hours were fortified by the rites of that Faith which was to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness: and his calm and contented spirit passed onwards to its allotted place, unhampered by any of the wisdom of this world which is foolishness with God.

## Book 1

### Chapter 1. THE SISTERS

In a remote and very beautiful corner of North Wales, somewhere in the last quarter of the last century, two girls and a young man sat by the seashore enjoying the combined delights of extreme youth and an exquisite summer's day.

The girls were both beautiful--the younger one exceptionally so. They were singularly alike, with the same golden-brown hair, dark eyes, and delicate complexions; but while the elder was staid and serious beyond her years, surrounded by an intangible atmosphere of sadness and reserve, the younger was the embodiment of

## The Wisdom of Folly

sunshine and gaiety, and seemed to be an impersonation of all those qualities which are associated with the dawn of day and the Rush of spring. Any one could see at a glance that they were sisters; but—as it has frequently been the case with a pair of sisters, from the days of Leah and Rachel downwards—the younger was an *edition de luxe* of the elder, and had been petted and spoiled accordingly.

Adah, the elder one—whom Nature had called to play the role of Leah, providing her with the tenderly pathetic eyes and the knack of taking a back seat belonging to the part—was barely twenty years of age, but already a woman: while Zillah, the younger sister—the counterpart of Rachel, with all the orthodox adjuncts of beauty and favour—was fully eighteen, but still no more than a lovely and irresponsible child. Their mother had died some fifteen years before this story opens; and upon the five-year-old Adah had devolved the duty of supplying, as far as possible, her place towards the pretty and wayward baby of three. Hence arose Adah's womanly dignity and maternal responsibility at an age when most girls are only children themselves; and hence arose also that devoted adoration of her younger sister which was the ruling passion of her life.

There are few more delightful human relationships than the bond between a pair of sisters. Being of the same sex, the same family, the same generation—brought up with identical surroundings, associations, and education—they are as much alike as it is possible for two human beings to be: yet, on the other hand, this similarity is, as a rule, varied and thrown into relief by far-reaching and fundamental differences of taste and character.

This dear and delightful bond was specially strong between Adah and Zillah Treherne. Their mother died when they were very young; their father was far too morose and melancholy a man ever to stand on the same plane as that in which his children lived and moved; and they had no intimate friends of their own age—partly because devoted sisters do not generally make intimate friends outside their own family circle, and partly because in this particular case the girls never met any other girls whereof to make friends. Hence they were thrown much upon each other for companionship and sympathy: and each one fully and amply responded to the other's needs.

Their father, who was a Cornishman by birth, had been for many years the Vicar of a remote country parish on the Welsh coast. There he met and wooed and wedded his lovely wife; and there he laid her, after six short years of married happiness, to await, at the foot of the everlasting hills, the dawn of the Resurrection Morning.

The girls had never gone ten miles away from Llanferdovey in all their short lives: had never thought of asking to go: but they had dreamed their dreams—as all girls will—of the wonderful world lying east of the rampart of mountains which guarded their wave-washed home: and had experienced youthful and uttered longings to break through that (to them) impenetrable barrier, and to taste the pleasures and shares of joys of the gay life on the other side.

If friends were scarce in that remote seaside village, so also were lovers. In spite of their undeniable good looks, the younger of the sisters, when this story opens, had known but one suitor, and the elder none at all. Yet—and herein lay the tragedy, by no means, alas! an uncommon one—marriage was the only possible vocation for these two girls. They were not sufficiently well educated nor sufficiently enterprising to earn their own living by scholastic or commercial methods; and their father had nothing to leave behind him when he was gone. They had no kind friends—no rich relations. Their mother had been the only child of an impecunious farmer; and their father belonged to an old and impoverished family, and was now the last of his race. Therefore marriage and starvation appeared to be the only alternatives before them in the future, when their father was no longer with them; and the former and more agreeable of these alternatives was rendered practically impossible by the absence of any eligible bachelors.

True, the only bachelor in the neighbourhood was, after his fashion, in love with Zillah; but his eligibility was a matter of doubt in the case of a refined and sensitive girl. Owen Griffith was in no sense of the word a gentleman. He was neither well born nor well bred. And, further, bad as were his manners, his morals were infinitely worse.

## The Wisdom of Folly

His father had been a cattle dealer and owned a small estate; but Owen himself did nothing at all, having unfortunately inherited just sufficient money from that defunct parent to keep him permanently in mischief and out of work: for the Satanic undertaking to supply idle hands with ample occupation had in his case been abundantly carried out. Owen Griffith was a low, coarse, ill-conditioned fellow, and a most unsuitable companion for two innocent girls. Yet until this year he had seemed to be the only possible husband for the lovely and penniless Zillah.

But this summer another possibility had appeared upon the matrimonial horizon in the form of the third member of the party sitting upon the beach at Llanferdovey: which member was an extremely ugly, yet at the same time somewhat attractive, young man of about one-and-twenty. He was obviously a gentleman: he was equally obviously an unconventional one: unconventional even at an age when the normal male is obsessed by a consuming desire to look and act and live in a manner absolutely identical with the acts and looks and lives of all the other normal males of his set and generation. This uncommon young man had repaired to that remote corner of Wales in order to have leisure and opportunity to prepare himself for his final examination at Oxford; and this he dutifully intended to do, as he was by no means an idle or a frivolous person. But the gods saw otherwise, as they have a knack of seeing, when weak mortals make plans irrespective of the claims of youth and nature.

Nicholas Ingoldby (that was the name of the unusual young man) attended, as in duty bound, the village church on a Sunday morning; for he was sufficiently unconventional not to defy all the conventions in which his mother had trained him. At the village church he saw the Vicar's younger daughter; and straightway found it necessary to call at the vicarage and entrust his spiritual welfare, during the time of his sojourn at Llanferdovey, into the hands of the shepherd of that particular fold. The Reverend Reuben Treherne was only too well pleased to undertake—if but temporarily—the guidance of a spirit as bright and cultured as that of Nicholas, and one, moreover, which was even yet in the sheltering shadow of that University where the Vicar of Llanferdovey had spent some of the happiest years of his life: therefore the road to Zillah's acquaintance was an easy one, and the door of the vicarage was speedily thrown open to so rare and cheerful a guest.

The Vicar liked him because he was an Oxford man and a gentleman: Zillah liked him because he amused and admired her: but to Adah he appeared as a winged and glorious, Perseus, sent specially to rescue her Andromeda from the clutches of the sea-monster.

For herself Adah Treherne saw no visions and dreamed no dreams: she raised no airy castles for her own habitation: all her thoughts and hopes and wishes were centred in her young sister; and it was for Zillah's sake, and for Zillah's sake alone, that she built castles in the air and painted rosy pictures of the future. Her life was so absorbed in that of her sister that she literally had no ambitions of her own. If Zillah's life were happy, she would be happy in seeing it; if Zillah's life were miserable, then her heart would surely break.

She was wise enough to realise what a hopeless future spread out before herself and her sister, should they not marry before their father died; and as Reuben Treherne had not himself married until late in life, Adah could not help seeing that the time still left to him must perforce be short.

And then what would happen to herself and Zillah?

They were too refined and too well born to be able to earn their own living as farm-servants: they were too ignorant and inexperienced to earn it in any other way. Then what would become of them if they were still single and unprovided for at the time of their father's death?

For herself she did not mind: she really had no self apart from Zillah. But it was agony to her to think of this beautiful and beloved sister exposed to the miseries of poverty and privation: and it was even a keener agony to imagine her adored and admired idol married to that ill-conditioned brute, Owen Griffith.

## The Wisdom of Folly

But when Nicholas appeared upon the scene, fresh hopes irradiated Adah's soul. She saw at a glance that he admired her sister: knew day by day that he was falling more and more deeply in love with Zillah: and her heart leapt within her at the thought that here at last was the solution of her life's problem, and the answer to her many prayers for Zillah's welfare.

She did not know—how could she?—that Ingoldby was a poor man, with no prospect of being able to maintain a wife for many years to come. That knowledge was to come later, when the shadows darkened around her, and the veiled form of Tragedy stepped heavily across her threshold. All she knew at present was that a fairy prince (albeit in an ill-favoured disguise) had scaled the rampart of mountains which guarded Llanferdovey, and had come to set her sister free.

"I cannot endure portents and omens and things of that sort," the young man was saying on that summer's afternoon to his listening companions, *à propos* of a conversation concerning the supernatural; "because I think they are prone to produce what they only intend to predict. To expect a misfortune to happen, is one of the surest ways of inducing it to happen. I know a man at Oxford who is wretched for a month if he happens to see the new moon through glass, and who vows that some misfortune always follows his vision. And I believe that it does: not because the glazed moon predicted the misfortune, but because the artificial dread produced by the sight of the new moon induces a state of mind which paves the way for the misfortune that it expects. Now what is the sense of adding to the unavoidable miseries of life a lot of extras and intermediates, brought about by magpies and new moons and Fridays, and things of that kind?"

The girls slightly shivered. To their Celtic blood and Cambrian upbringing these theories were rank blasphemy.

"I believe in all such things myself," the elder remarked.

"And they frighten me dreadfully," added the younger.

"Then what a mistake to indulge in so perverted a form of faith! It is your belief itself that frightens you—not the things that you believe in. No bogey ever killed a man: but the fear of bogies has killed its tens of thousands."

"Then don't you believe in the supernatural at all, Nicholas?" asked Adah.

With the delightful freemasonry of youth—unshadowed by even the ghost of a chaperon—the young people were already on the footing of Christian names.

"Certainly I do—with all my heart; and that is why I am not what you call superstitious. It is because I believe so much, that I believe so little. It is because I believe that the supernatural world is a real world, that I cannot believe all the unreal nonsense that you talk about it. Don't you see my point? It is because I believe that the angels and the spirits are as real and as living as we are, that I believe they are as sensible and as rational as we are. If you tell me that the laws of the spiritual world decree that dire suffering shall be the consequence of deliberate sin, I am with you; but if you say that they likewise rule that dire suffering shall be the result of an accidental peep at the new moon through your bedroom window, I can only say that I have too much respect for Almighty Wisdom to countenance such a theory for an instant."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Zillah inquired in an awestruck voice.

"Certainly; but in wise and sensible ghosts, and not in the table-turning, floor-rapping, aimless species. It is just because I cherish such a profound belief in and such a deep respect for spiritual beings, that I cannot credit them with all the foolish and purposeless behaviour that is commonly attributed to them in so-called haunted houses. I think if people are permitted to come back to this world at all, they are permitted for some wise purpose, and not for the mere object of knocking at doors and throwing crockery about and causing all your servants to give notice.

## The Wisdom of Folly

If Providence sees fit that your servants shall give notice, it isn't necessary to go to the expense and trouble of sending the denizens of the other world to frighten them into doing so; it will be quite sufficient to send somebody else's maid to stay in your house for a week—end."

"Then I suppose that though you believe in ghosts, you are not frightened of them?" said Adah.

"Precisely. I have lived all my life in an old, old place, imbued with the spirit of the past, so that now the by-gone times are as real to me as the present ones. I don't believe that the people who once lived in a place come back to that place centuries after, for the fun of knocking at doors and walking about empty rooms, like little boys who ring your front-door bell and then run away and hide. But I do believe that the people who live in a place create a spiritual atmosphere there, which clings to that place long after they themselves have passed to some higher plane of existence. That is why I would never, if I knew it, live in a house where very wicked people had lived: I think they would create an atmosphere of evil which would for ever after infect the moral air of that house."

"Then you would be frightened of their ghosts after all!" cried Zillah triumphantly.

"I shouldn't be frightened, as you would be, of their saying 'Bo' behind a door, or making faces at me in the dark. I should be afraid of their having infected the air I breathed with their vile moral poison, so that I should finally become as bad as they had been. Just as I should be afraid of staying in a house where people had smallpox; not for fear of the patient's relieving the tedium of illness by dragging bodies about or rattling chains, but for fear of catching the disease myself."

"Did you ever see a ghost at your lovely old house—the place you are always telling us about?" asked the younger of the girls.

"I never saw one: but I am haunted continually by the spirit of one, Mandolet, the Court Jester of that departed monarch, Edward the Fourth. I never beheld the wraith of that excellent Fool; he passed over some centuries ago to higher and wider spheres, and, I doubt not, is serving and praising his Maker in the company of the angels that excel in strength. But the moral atmosphere that he left behind him was so strong and so abiding that it has permeated the house where I live, which was built on that part of the royal Palace of Eldhurst where the Jester's apartments lay. At least tradition says that the Jester's apartments were situated near to the bakehouse, so that—like his distinguished prototype, the Knave of Hearts—he might help himself to the royal tarts when that way inclined."

"And did he help himself?" asked Zillah, who was still young enough to be absolutely literal.

"Metaphorically speaking, he did. That is to say, he enjoyed the sweets of court life with none of its responsibilities; he stole the tarts, and left the suet-pudding to be dealt with by the royal digestion. And therein he showed himself for the wise fool that he was; and set forth to succeeding generations a shining example of the wisdom of folly." Nicholas loved the sound of his own voice; and never so well as when it was discoursing what other people considered nonsense. "For when the King offered him higher rank, and the right to poke his fingers into the pies of State, and all such privileges as the ambitious wisacre sells his soul for, the merry knave declined them all; and deliberately chose to spend the remainder of his days in domestic and undistinguished seclusion. Which merely proves to the world at large what an arrant fool he was; and to me in particular that the wisdom of folly is the only wisdom worth seeking after."

Zillah laughed gaily: Ingoldby's whimsicalities were a source of endless wonder and amusement to her in contrast to the serious strictness of her father's conversation. "And do you feel yourself as great a fool as Mandolet?" she asked.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Alas! not yet; but I hope to be, ere my days are done. Give me time, sweet lady: remember that I am but just of age, and that a perfect fool is a ripe and mature product. But even now, compared with men of my own generation—with my cousin, Roland Ketteringham, for instance, who is younger than I am, and as wise and sensible a young man as you could meet with on a summer's day—I flatter myself that I am foolish indeed. I love scholarship for its own sake, and not for what it may lead to—I play games in order to pass the time, and not as the end and aim of existence—and I order my life to please my Maker and myself, and not according to the dicta of Society. Could folly have gone much further than that in the short space of two decades, I ask you?"

Zillah laughed again: and the dimple in her cheek was so bewitching that Nicholas was tempted to add to the list of follies that he had committed, the crowning one of having fallen head over ears in love with a girl whom he could not possibly afford to marry. But this once he thought before he spoke: and refrained.

Adah's face was still wistful. When Zillah laughed she smiled: and her smile was always more or less pathetic. "But you are not foolish enough to be superstitious, you say?"

"I said I was much too foolish to be superstitious. It is because I believe in ghosts that I am not afraid of them: and it is because I pin my faith to real omens that I have no regard for false ones. If you told me that you had met an angel with a flaming sword, who warned you that if you went along a certain road evil would come of it, I should believe you implicitly, and beg you to avoid that road at all costs: but if you told me that you dared not go down a particular street because you would have to pass under a ladder in order to do so, I should have no patience with you at all. I believe in horses and chariots of fire and in legions of angels all round about us: I should never be in the least surprised to catch sight of them any day: but I cannot believe in silly spirits who thump doors and rap tables and make themselves generally tiresome and ridiculous—or, if I do believe in them, I think they are very second-rate and inferior spirits, and ought not to be encouraged."

"Do you think that there are really such things as haunted houses?" asked Zillah.

"Certainly: I don't think there are really such things as houses that are not haunted. Every house is as full of unseen things as was Elisha's mountain: only our eyes—like the eyes of the prophet's servant—are not yet opened to see them. Every house that is inhabited by human beings is haunted by principalities and powers and the great conflicting armaments of good and evil. Don't you see what I mean?"

"I think I do, to a certain extent," replied Adah, while Zillah listened spell-bound, "and I wish I could believe it too. Your sort of superstition must be comforting instead of terrifying. But it is so dreadfully difficult to make oneself believe what one doesn't," she added with a sigh.

"According to my theory, nothing is supernatural because everything is supernatural," continued Nicholas, his ugly face almost transfigured into beauty by the intensity of his feelings and the passing exaltation of his mood. "There is nothing surprising to me in a miracle: it is only the rarity of miracles that surprises me. In the same way there would be nothing wonderful to me in seeing a spirit: the wonder is that our eyes are so blinded that we cannot see them. I have no fear of haunted houses: my only fear would be to enter a house which was not haunted by the denizens of the spiritual world, and where no guardian angel kept watch and ward. It is just because I believe in real ghosts so much, that I believe in imaginary ones so little. I have never seen phantom hearses or headless ladies or shadowy hounds, and I don't want to see them: but I trust if I keep my heart pure and my eye single, I may now and again be vouchsafed visions of angels, and may even perchance some day catch a far-off glimmer of the glory of the Holy Grail."

There was a pause for a few moments, while the two girls were filled with the admiration which women always feel when a man allows them a glimpse of his real self: and Nicholas was overpowered with the shame which a man invariably suffers after such a glimpse has been permitted. Then he rose awkwardly from his seat upon the beach, exclaiming, "I say, let's go in: it must be getting teatime!" And his two admirers meekly followed him to

the vicarage.

## Chapter 2. OWEN GRIFFITH

"I think you said you didn't believe in presentiments," said Adah to young Ingoldby a few days after the above recorded conversation.

"Only in reasonable ones. If you tell me that you have drunk prussic acid, I shall have a strong presentiment that you are destined for an early grave; and if you tell me that you have been eating green apples, I shall see pain and anguish writ large upon your scroll of fate. But I shall suffer from a foreboding of neither of these misfortunes should you merely inform me that you were born upon a Friday, or took your last meal in company with a dozen friends."

Adah smiled: "I didn't like to say it before Zillah, for fear it should worry her, and I always try to keep things from her that might make her unhappy: but what I was thinking about the other day when I talked of presentiments, was that I myself am always haunted by an idea that I shall die quite young. And it makes me so wretched, because I don't know who will take care of my Zillah when I am gone."

Nicholas was sorely tempted to mention the name of some one who was quite ready to undertake this burden should Adah relinquish it: but he thought of his widowed mother and his empty purse, and again refrained.

"What on earth makes you think such a silly thing as that?" he merely asked.

"I don't know. I have always thought it. Do you believe it means anything?"

"Yes, I do. I believe it means that you will live to be a very old woman,—like Campbell's 'Last Man'—and survive everybody you've ever known. My experience is that when people have a presentiment that a certain thing is going to happen to them, that particular thing is just the one that never will occur. Folks who foresee for themselves beautiful early death—beds and broken lilies on their tombs, generally manage to outlive their reputations and their residuary legatees. Just as the girls who are sure they are going to be old maids, turn out to be the early birds who secure the matrimonial worm. I've noticed it scores of times."

"But you said on Monday that expecting a thing to happen made it happen," said the literal Adah.

"So I thought at the time: but thinking a thing on Monday afternoon is no reason for thinking it on Thursday morning. I was quite sure on Monday that to-morrow would be Tuesday: now I am equally certain that to-morrow will be Friday: and both theories were absolutely right. It is very narrow-minded to believe that two absolutely conflicting statements cannot both be true. If only people could realise this, persecutions would cease."

"You comfort me by not believing in my presentiment," said Adah gratefully. "Not that I think it any hardship to die early: if it wasn't for Zillah, I should want to do so. There is so much here that is tiresome and horrid; and it would be so nice to have done with it all, and to begin life again somewhere else with mother to help me. But I couldn't bear to leave Zillah. She has never been away from me, and I have always done everything for her since mother died, so she couldn't possibly do without me."

"You are awfully good to Zillah! I don't believe there is anything you wouldn't do for her," Nicholas exclaimed in a voice husky with feeling.

"Of course, there isn't; nor any sacrifice that I wouldn't make for her sake," replied Adah softly, neither she nor Nicholas dreaming what she was indeed going to do for Zillah's sake in the sad days to come. Had they dreamt it,

## The Wisdom of Folly

they would have cried to the earth to cover them and to the sea to swallow them up, rather than that so terrible a dream should come true.

"Hark! What is that?" exclaimed Nicholas, as cries and moans of anguish suddenly greeted their ears: "I am afraid it is some poor brute in a trap, if there are such things as traps on the seashore."

Adah's eyes filled with tears: she never could bear to think of anything or anybody in pain. "Oh! let us find the poor thing and save it," she cried.

Nicholas hastened to obey her. Her eyes were so like Zillah's that he could not bear to see tears in them: and sometimes—when Zillah was not there—he almost loved Adah for being so much like her sister. But not quite. Adah lacked the mirth and vitality which added the crowning charm to Zillah's beauty; and though a man might gradually grow to esteem and reverence the elder sister with all his heart, she would never turn his head with one glance of her eyes as the younger could.

The two hurried round the projecting rock into the little creek which it guarded; and there a horrible sight met their eyes.

A man was standing by a rocky pool holding a dog, which he evidently intended to drown. The animal was weighted with stones, and everything was obviously ready for the execution. But instead of dropping the poor creature at once into the water and putting it out of its misery, the man was deliberately prolonging its agony for his own evil gratification. He was watching its futile struggles with evident pleasure; and deriving positive enjoyment from a sight which would have filled a normal man with pity for a dumb creature's suffering.

So absorbed was the human devil in the anguish of his victim, that he did not notice Nicholas and Adah until they were close upon him. Then he suddenly turned round—still keeping hold of the dog—and revealed the face of Owen Griffith, Zillah's would-be lover, distorted with the lust of cruelty.

"Good-day, Adah," he said sulkily, without troubling to remove his cap: he was annoyed at being thus disturbed in his delightful pastime.

Adah did not answer, but Nicholas did. "I say, drop that," he said curtly. He had no idea who Griffith was, as the two had never met: but Owen quickly recognised him as the Oxford man who was staying in the village and paying such marked attention to the Vicar's daughters. Ingoldby's wealth and position had been enormously exaggerated, as was but natural in a place where so few strangers came: and Owen cringed before him accordingly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he replied in a fawning voice; "but the dog is my own, and a good-for-nothing creature. He is no good at rapping, so I've made up my mind to do away with him."

"Drop him, I say," repeated Nicholas sternly.

"Surely a fellow can do what he likes with his own," pleaded Griffith, still in the obsequious manner which he always adopted towards his superiors in social rank or worldly possessions.

"A fellow can't torture a dumb animal as long as I am at hand to prevent it, whether it is his own or whether it isn't. Drown that poor brute at once or let it go, if you don't want to feel my stick across your shoulders."

Griffith, like the arrant coward and bully that he was, cringed still lower: for there was that in Ingoldby's eye which showed that the latter meant what he said.



## The Wisdom of Folly

The poor dog continued to whine and to struggle; but its struggles were growing gradually weaker and its whines fainter.

"Do you hear me? Let the poor thing go at once!" Nicholas spoke quietly; but there was in his manner that indefinable air of good breeding which always carries authority with it wherever it is found.

The man of inferior training succumbed to it at once. He was as much afraid of Nicholas as the dog was afraid of him. In addition to his involuntary respect for Ingoldby's unmistakable air of quality, he was a prey to unmanly terror of Ingoldby's stout walking-stick; for there was not a grain of either moral or physical courage in the whole of Owen's nature. Ready as he was to hurt and torture creatures weaker than himself, he was utterly incapable of standing up to a man of his own size. So he flung the exhausted dog on the sand, and Adah quickly ran to it and relieved it of its weight of stones, stroking and soothing the poor thing as she did so.

"You can go now," said Nicholas, with the air of a young monarch. And the coward Griffith, nothing loth, slunk away.

"What a brute!" exclaimed Ingoldby as soon as he was gone.

"He is dreadfully cruel: he always has been ever since he was a boy. I remember he used to hurt Zillah and me when we were all children together, just for the fun of seeing us cry," replied Adah, still tenderly nursing and petting the half-dead animal.

"What a devil incarnate! If I'd known that, I'd have given him a taste of my stick quite apart from his behaviour to the dog," exclaimed Nicholas with some heat. "Who is he?"

"His name is Owen Griffith, and he lives on a small estate near here, called Plâs Dovey. His father was a cattle-dealer: I can just remember him as a horrid, fat old man, with a very red nose all irregular in shape like a huge piece of coral; and a thick throaty laugh like a parrot's."

"And what was the mother like?"

"I cannot remember her at all. She died long ago. But I've heard she wasn't at all a nice sort of woman. She was cruel, as Owen is: and used to torture the animals about the place whenever she got the chance. There is a tale that once in a passion she threw a cat behind the kitchen fire."

"What awful people!" exclaimed Nicholas, with a grimace. "But, all the same, the wretch isn't bad-looking," he added, with a pang of hurt surprise that Providence should have bestowed the priceless gift of beauty upon such a ruffian as this, and at the same time should have denied it to himself. "He is one of the many instances that prove the untruth of the fallacious proverb that handsome is as handsome does!"

"He is very good-looking: and as a boy he was quite beautiful. I think it was because he was so handsome that Zillah and I used to let him bully us. I believe his mother was a very beautiful woman—she was a gipsy—and Owen is said to be like her."

"I wonder you were allowed to play with such a boy when you were children," remarked Nicholas resentfully: "surely he was no fit companion for two little girls!"

"He was the only other child in the place except the village children," explained Adah: "and we had to play with somebody. Then we had no mother to look after us, you see."

A wave of pity for the two lonely, motherless girls swept over Ingoldby's heart. "Poor little things!" he said softly.

## The Wisdom of Folly

It was on the tip of Adah's tongue to tell him that Owen wanted to marry Zillah, and what a nightmare it was to her that this dreadful thing might come to pass when she and Zillah were left alone in the world, with no one to stand between them and poverty. And if only she had yielded to this impulse, how much sorrow and anguish might have been avoided! For the idea of such a fate as this in store for his adored Zillah, would soon have put to flight all Ingoldby's chivalrous scruples against declaring his love until he was in a position to marry. But with feminine quickness of perception Adah had perceived the scornful pride of race with which Nicholas looked down upon Griffith, quite apart from his moral contempt of the man; and she was therefore unwilling to lower her sister in the social scale by admitting that the latter was wooed by a suitor whom Nicholas would not consider a gentleman: so she held her peace. Poor, foolish Adah, to let so paltry a consideration prevent her from taking Nicholas into her confidence on this matter! Bitter indeed was her punishment. For it sometimes happens that in this life we are chastised more severely for our mistakes than for our misdeeds: and certainly this was so in the case of Adah Treherne.

The summer days slipped by swiftly at Llanferdovey, each one finding Nicholas more deeply in love with Zillah than the day before; and each one leaving him more profoundly imbued with the idea that he had no right to confess his love in his present position. And there was something to be said for his point of view after all. If Zillah had returned his love, no consideration on earth would have prevented him from openly declaring himself her lover. But he was quite clever enough to see that she did no such thing as yet, though probably the declaration of his love for her might cause her to do so. The woman who can love a man without any assurance of that man's love for them, are few and far between. Therefore, seeing that Zillah was still heart-whole—and seeing also that it was doubtful whether during the life of his widowed mother Nicholas would ever be in a position to maintain a wife—the young man hesitated before saying the word which he guessed (and rightly guessed) would admit him into the paradise of Zillah's love.

As for the girl herself, she just drifted as was her way. She was so accustomed to Adah's doing everything for her, and taking every burden off her shoulders, that she neither troubled about the present nor the future, but just enjoyed herself with the enjoyment of an irresponsible child. She had no misgivings and no forebodings. Whatever went wrong, she thought, Adah was sure to put it right again, and to make the crooked straight for her and the rough places plain. It was not her way to look far ahead, as her sister did: she took things as they came, and was merry and light-hearted all the time. She had a childish belief that everything would always be just as it was then; and had no more idea that a time might come when her father and her old home would be no longer there, than that a time might come when the sun would cease to shine or the earth to stand firm beneath her feet.

But with Adah it was different. She was consumed with anxiety that Nicholas should declare his love, and so remove for ever that horrible possibility of Zillah's being forced to fly from the clutches of want into the arms of Owen Griffith. She could not imagine why Ingoldby did not speak. She was so unsophisticated, so ignorant of the ways of the world, that it never occurred to her that a man who dressed as well and lived as delicately as Nicholas, should suffer in any way from lack of means. Yet she was kept back by feelings of maidenly modesty from saying anything to Ingoldby upon the subject, or in any way trying to force his hand. The mere idea of doing such a thing would have made her blush to her finger-tips. Therefore, between Nicholas's sense of honour and Adah's sense of modesty, poor Zillah's interests were in danger of dropping to the ground altogether.

At last the time came for Ingoldby to leave Llanferdovey. It was with a heavy heart that he said good-bye to the two girls: but he was upheld by a mind conscious of well-doing—little recking to what evil results that well-doing would lead. To do evil in order that good may come of it, is one of the ways of the world at which Apostles well may rail: but to do good and for evil to come of it, is one of the ironies of life at which angels well may weep.

Zillah did not show much sorrow at Ingoldby's departure. Her pride was up in arms that he had not openly succumbed to her charms, and so she scorned to express even the regret she felt. Whereupon Nicholas tied his figurative hair-shirt still tighter round him, and congratulated himself upon his unselfish chivalry in thus leaving

## The Wisdom of Folly

the girl he loved so entirely heart-whole. But he little knew—being only a man, and still young—that this so-called chivalrous conduct on his part was driving his beloved into the arms of the man whom he despised too much even to have suspected him of being a rival. For Zillah—being only a woman, and still younger—salved the wound to her vanity, which Nicholas's apparent coldness had made, by the soothing thought of Owen Griffith's openly expressed admiration.

That is a thing which a thoroughly conscientious and high-minded lover rarely takes into account. Whilst he is hugging the implements of his martyrdom, and rejoicing in suffering for his beloved's sake the agonies of unexpressed devotion, she is probably availing herself of her undesired freedom to forge other and inferior chains. After a parting between undeclared lovers, when the ineligible male is congratulating himself upon the fact that he could not have loved his lady so much if he had not loved honour more, and feeling as sure as did Sir Richard Lovelace that she, too, is adoring his inconstancy, in all probability she is doing nothing of the kind: but is at that very moment engaged in inducing some other man to say the things which her conscientious swain so religiously refrained from uttering.

Adah was well-nigh heart-broken when Nicholas went away leaving his love still unexpressed. It was her nature to look on the dark side of things, and never to take the hopeful view—which perhaps accounted to some extent for the troubles which befell her. For it is a strange but indubitable fact that misfortunes frequently do happen to the people who expect them. Like attracts like: opposites repel opposites. Gloomy things draw towards gloomy people and turn away from cheerful ones: success comes to the happy and hopeful, and evades the depressed and discontented. There is a great natural law underlying the fiat, "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that he hath"; that same law of attraction and repulsion, which binds the sweet influences of the Pleiades and loosens the bands of Orion—which brings forth Mazzaroth in his season, and guides Arcturus with his sons.

And besides this great natural law, there is also a great spiritual one: the law that according to our faith so is it unto us. Fear is the counterpart, the correlative, of faith: and as faith makes us capable of receiving good things, so fear makes us capable of receiving evil things. As faith is the channel through which flows into our souls the river of the water of life, so fear is the course whereby are conveyed to us the waves of bitterness and the waters of affliction. Faith is the everlasting Yea: fear the eternal No. Not only is it with us according to our faith, but it is with us also according to our fear: for in some strange and mysterious manner which we cannot understand, Almighty Power chooses to make for Itself this mysterious limitation: so that long ago not many mighty works could be wrought in the country of the Galileans because of their unbelief.

"I wonder that Nicholas does not write to us," Adah said to her sister one day, when the autumn was beginning to cast the shadows of decay over Llanferdovey.

Zillah tossed her pretty head. "Oh! he has forgotten us, I suppose. Men soon forget."

"But Nicholas isn't like other men."

"He is uglier than most other men, fortunately for them! But I suppose he is pretty much the same inside. If his upper lip is long, his memory seems to be short enough; and if his nose turns up, his letters certainly don't." Zillah was very bitter: women whose vanity is wounded generally are.

"I am sure he was really in love with you," the faithful Adah persisted.

Zillah shrugged her shoulders. "He seems to have got over it pretty quickly. Surely a marvellous recovery in so short a time! He must have plenty of what doctors call recuperative power."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"He hasn't recovered. I'm perfectly sure of that. You know I am a great one for having presentiments, Zillah; and I've got a strong one that Nicholas will come back again some day to ask you to be his wife."

"Then I wish he'd be quick about it; for it would be great fun to get married, and to go and live near London, and see a bit of the world! And you'd come too, Adah darling: you know I couldn't possibly live without you: and we'd have a lovely time together, you and I, seeing all the wonderful things that we have been wanting to see all our lives!"

Adah sighed wistfully. "Yes, it would indeed be lovely!" she said; but she was thinking exclusively of Zillah's pleasure and not of her own. "And I agree with you, dear, that I wish he would be quick about it!"

Zillah pouted. "I don't know why you should be in such a tearing hurry, Adah. You talk as if I were an old woman with one foot in the grave and no time to lose. If a girl isn't married before she is twenty, she isn't such a very, very old maid after all; and I've still two years to play with before even that."

Adah smiled fondly at the girl. "Yes, darling, of course, I know how young you are!" She did not add that it was her father's age, not Zillah's, which was filling her with such gloomy forebodings; for the Vicar of Llanferdovey was visibly breaking up day by day, and Adah very much doubted if he would live through the approaching winter.

"I don't know what you saw in Nicholas to make such a fuss about," continued Zillah, who was too deeply offended with the young man in question to see any virtue in him at all: "he is nothing like as good-looking as Owen Griffith."

"But he is a gentleman, and Owen is not."

"I don't see the good of that as far as we are concerned, if it makes him too stuck-up to go on being friends with us," retorted Zillah shrewdly.

But Adah was always loyal to her friends. "It isn't stuck-upness, darling; I'm certain of that."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure that there is some good reason for Nicholas's silence, or else he wouldn't be silent."

"Silence always irritates me. If a person is fond of you I can't think why he doesn't tell you so. To me there is something horribly close and unfriendly in buttoning up all your feelings in your own mind and never letting anybody see them. I hate your reserved, secretive people!"

"Nicholas wasn't generally reserved about things," pleaded Adah.

"Yes, he really was, though he talked so much he didn't seem so. But it is the people who talk a great deal and tell nothing, that are the really reserved people. Now Owen isn't a great talker; he very rarely speaks; but you can always tell what he thinks about things and people."

"Oh! Zillah, Zillah, why will you keep on comparing Nicholas with Owen? Can't you see that there is really no comparison between the two men—that Owen is not fit to black Nicholas's boots!"

"But he is ready to black mine; and that is all that matters, as far as I am concerned."

"And Nicholas is so much cleverer than Owen," persisted the somewhat tactless Adah.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I know that; but what difference does it make to us how clever a man is up at Oxford, when he has left us to eat our hearts out down here?"

"And then Nicholas is a good man, and Owen isn't."

"I don't call it goodness to come and flirt with a girl and try to make a fool of her, and then to go away and forget all about her. I call it horrid selfishness!"

"But, Zillah dear, Owen is so cruel."

"He is to animals; he always was. But Nicholas has been cruel to me, and that is far worse. Owen would never be cruel to me."

Adah's heart sank. She hated Zillah's partisanship of Griffith, and all that it portended, for she understood—as Nicholas would never do—to what Ingoldby's prolonged silence was driving her sister. Why did not Nicholas make some sign? Adah could not imagine. Sometimes she felt tempted to write to him; but then the sensitiveness of youth and her pride for her sister prevented her as it might not have prevented an older and a wiser woman. And Nicholas continued his high-minded, quixotic policy of letting Zillah alone in order that she might forget him if it was for her happiness to do so. And thus these two inexperienced and ultra-unselfish young people let things slide; and allowed the girl, whom they both worshipped, to drift to her own undoing for want of a revealing word.

### Chapter 3. NICHOLAS INGOLDBY

"It is no use asking me to listen to reason, my worthy Roland; reason is the one thing to which I will not listen. To theory, or romance, or even to rhyme I will lend a willing ear: but the horror known as common-sense is an abomination which I cannot and will not countenance."

"But, my dear Nicholas, you are talking nonsense."

"I know I am; it is the highest form of conversation, and as a matter of fact I rarely talk anything else, as you ought to know by this time; but I fear that you are lacking in powers of observation, or else do not feel that absorbing interest in studying the manners and habits of your gifted cousin which I flatter myself that my exceptional gifts of mind and character ought to excite."

"And you say you are sure the girl has no money?"

"Absolutely certain; in the matter of silver and gold she is as poor as the Apostles were when they passed through the gate called Beautiful. And there I show my superiority to any sensible person. No sensible man knows when he has enough, but goes on trying to make more and more until he dies of overwork before he has learnt how to live; and then leaves the price of his martyrdom to be converted into death-duties. Now I am sufficiently foolish to realise when I have enough, and to rest content with the same. I once knew an old lady who was very fond of advising her successful friends to 'stand upon their own laurels.' Now that is what I mean to do; and to kick my legs in the air all the time out of pure joy and lightness of heart."

But the sensible Roland still demurred. "Enough, Nick? Do you call eight hundred a year enough?"

"Plenty for my needs—four hundred a year too much."

"And for Miss Treherne's?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Also plenty; considering that she has been brought upon an income of about a quarter the amount." Nicholas was still sufficiently inexperienced to believe that the less a woman has to give, the less she expects in return.

"Have you no ambition, Nicholas?"

Ingoldby shook his head. "None at all, in your sense of the word. That is to say, I have no uncontrollable yearnings to sit upon a Town Council, or to administer justice and maintain truth in the person of a County Magistrate, or even to append the sacred letters of M.P. to my honoured name. No; my ambition is not of the vaulting sort which 'o'erleaps itself and falls on t'other'; it has never been trained to take a fence. All I ask of life is that I may carry out the programme of my beloved Ruskin: 'To watch the corn grow and the blossoms set; to draw hard breath over the ploughshare and spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray: these are the things that make men happy!'

"You are not at all like me, Nick."

"Heaven forbid! Though I don't deny you have your points, Roland. Your personal appearance leaves nothing to be desired, although so ordinary a soul inhabits it. But I wouldn't share your Philistine spirit—no, not even if I might at the same time share your Grecian nose. But that doesn't mean that I don't appreciate and admire and even envy its Grecianity; on the contrary, I often wonder why an all-wise Providence ordained that you—who are really so very inferior to me—should present such a very superior appearance. As I have remarked before, if only that glorious and comfortable lie, 'Handsome is that handsome does,' were true, then I should be the beauty of the family: but unfortunately for me—and may I add fortunately for you?—it isn't."

Roland laughed, and affectionately stroked the feature under discussion. He was still young enough to be abundantly satisfied with his own good looks. And there was no doubt that they were very striking; for in addition to regular features and a complexion as fair and clear as a girl's, Roland Ketteringham possessed grace and strength and a magnificent physique.

In this he was a marked contrast to his cousin, Nicholas Ingoldby, whose short stature, narrow shoulders, sallow complexion, and irregular features gave to the casual onlooker a totally erroneous impression of the real character of the man thus handicapped by Nature. But it is hard work for men and women to give the lie to that superscription—however false and misleading—which Nature has written upon their faces. None succeed in so doing until they have passed their third decade; and some never succeed at all.

Nicholas lived with his widowed mother in the quaint old village of Eldhurst. There he had been born and bred, and there he had spent all his life, excepting such time as he was at Winchester and Oxford; and his soul was so bound up in the place that he loved every stick and stone of it. All its historical associations and traditions he knew by heart; and what Nicholas Ingoldby did not know about Eldhurst was not worth knowing.

His father, Sir James Ingoldby, had been Governor of a West Indian Colony, and did not marry until after he had retired upon his pension and settled down at Eldhurst. Lady Ingoldby was considerably younger than her husband, and a clever woman in her way. They had only one child—a son—who was but two years old at the time of his father's death; and the widow and her boy lived on at the old house at Eldhurst, which had been leased by Sir James from the Crown at the time of his retirement from public life.

Nicholas loved this old house with every fibre of his being. His was one of those natures to whom historical associations always make a powerful appeal; and so he was particularly fortunate in having been born and bred in a place so rich in memories of the past. Courtyard House, as it was called, stood in the courtyard of the ruined palace, between the stone bridge which spanned the moat with four graceful arches, and the fine old gateway which led into the tilting-yard. The principal rooms of the house looked due south into a beautiful garden, where the floods of golden sunshine were dappled by the branches of grand old lime and mulberry trees which had been

## The Wisdom of Folly

planted in the dim recesses of the past. Beyond this garden was a large orchard, surrounded by an ancient red-brick wall: which orchard originally was the tilt-yard of the palace, where the jousts and tournaments were held in half-forgotten days.

When any one came out of the wooden gates which guarded the back of the house, he found himself at the top of an avenue of huge lime-trees, which led straight to the old stone bridge. To the left of the avenue was the high red wall of the tilting-yard: and to the right, a row of exquisitely picturesque wooden houses, the origin of which was lost in antiquity. They were known as the Chancellor's Lodgings: for there my Lord Chancellor used to lodge in the olden times when the court was at Eldhurst: and there Cardinal Wolsey and Sir Thomas More and Nicholas Bacon all sojourned in their day, and ruled the realm from that secluded spot.

Passing down the lime avenue the traveller came to the beautiful bridge built by Edward the Fourth across the moat; and, crossing that, he found himself on the side of the palace, whereof nothing now remained intact save the great banqueting-hall with its magnificent chestnut roof: the rest of the royal demesne being occupied by two large houses, of which party were fairly modern, and parts were portions of the old palace adapted to modern usages.

On the farther side of these houses were gardens such as satisfy the dreams of the most idealistic garden-lover. Lawns which had been rolled for some five centuries, flanked on one side by the stately walls of the banqueting ball, and on the other by a wide moat, which now no longer contained water as did the moat on the north side of the palace, but was converted into a very paradise of roses. And surely roses never grew anywhere in such beauty and luxuriance as they did at Eldhurst in the days when Nicholas Ingoldby was a boy: nor indeed as they do now, nearly half a century later. The Eldhurst roses keep as young and as beautiful as they ever were, though men grow old and pass away.

Between the banqueting-hall and the rose-filled moat ran a long terrace, which commanded a fine view of the dome of S. Paul's and the towers of Westminster—the very same terrace where Marion Mandeville walked in the moonlight with Mandolet the Fool some five hundred years before: and where, later, King Henry the Eighth courted fair Mistress Boleyn, while his proud Spanish wife wept in secret in the Queen's apartments on the other side of the royal residence. Near to the terrace was a secret stone staircase leading to an underground passage, through which—so tradition asserted—Joan of Kent, the fair widow of the Black Prince, escaped from the insurgents when Wat Tyler and his followers marched from Blackheath to besiege the royal palace of Eldhurst.

The dwellers in those houses on the site of the palace were friends of Lady Ingoldby; and little Nicholas was given the freedom of the lovely gardens with their wealth of roses and their dower of historical association: with the result that this royal playground became a liberal education to the clever and impressionable boy. In turn he played the parts of attacking rebels and of fugitive princes—of merry Monarchs and of wise Lord Chancellors—of motley-clad jesters and of chain-mailed Knights: until to his childish imagination the old scenes were re-enacted and the old stories revived; the shadow on the dial of history moved five hundred paces backward, and Eldhurst became royal Eldhurst once more.

And it was not only the boy's historical tastes that were developed at Eldhurst: his mystical instincts were stimulated as well. For when he stood alone in the great banqueting-hall after dusk, it seemed to him to be filled with strange and stately Presences, and to resound with faint echoes of the mirth and laughter with which its walls had rung so many centuries ago. When he passed through the fair gateway which led into the orchard, he seemed to feel riding on either side of him armed knights on their gaily-caparisoned horses, ready for the fierce joy of tilt and tourney. And when he walked in the fields on the north side of the palace that looked towards London, he seemed to penetrate still deeper into the mysteries of the unseen: for in those fields there was a little pool which, local tradition said, was bottomless: and on its green banks, shadowed by tall trees, Nicholas used to fancy he could catch faint glimpses of fairy dancers, and hear the far-off tinkle of fairy bells. There he seemed to lie close to the heart of Nature herself—that heart which was old in motherhood, though still young in strength and

## The Wisdom of Folly

vitality, before ever human history was dreamed or thought of. In the banqueting-hall and in the tilt-yard Nicholas seemed to go back to the fierce joys and the simple pleasures of the Middle Ages—to the days of hard fighting and of pure romance, with their jousts and their tournaments and their Courts of Love. But by the shaded little pool in the flower-strewn fields, his spirit wandered through those dim æons before the first line upon the page of history had been penned: those æons when the pipes of Pan pierced with their music the impenetrable thickets of the primeval forests, and when the sons of God walked upon the face of the earth and saw the daughters of men that they were fair.

Such was Eldhurst in the days when Nicholas Ingoldby was a boy: such very much is it now: and such may it please Heaven and the Crown that it shall continue to be, a sweet spot of earth as yet untrodden by the crushing feet of that great centipede, London! Let us pray that the so-called march of civilisation may pursue its way, leaving Eldhurst and such-like places on one side, so that even now, in these terrible modern days of storm and stress and hurry and bustle, there may be left a few sweet spots where men may find time and opportunity to guide their feet into the way of peace, and to study the workings of Nature; and in faith and hope and patience to possess their own souls!

As he grew older Nicholas was filled with longings to take up literature as a profession: but the small competence which was left to Lady Ingoldby after her husband's pension ceased, was not enough to justify her son in selecting such an uncertain means of obtaining his bread-and-butter. So he decided to read for the Bar after he left Oxford.

But just as his residence there was ended and his degree taken, his god-father died, leaving him an independent income of about eight hundred a year: whereat Nicholas at once abandoned his intention of becoming a barrister, and made up his mind to go in for a literary career. If he made money thereby, he made it: and if he did not, he had sufficient to live upon as it was: and, to tell the truth, he did not care an atom about the pecuniary part of the arrangement. All he cared for was that he might have time and opportunity to give expression to the truth that was in him—a craving which is common to all writers, be they great or small: and that he might be allowed to accomplish some great thing, and to attain to the divine joy of the creator, who—looking upon the work of his hands or his brain—sees that it is very good.

"No, you are not like me," Roland repeated. "I want to do the best I can for myself: and I mean to do it, too."

"Ah! my good Roland, you are certainly one of those who will never exchange the regalia of success for the pearl of great price. Your eyes may lack the open vision, which catches glimpses of the Holy Grail, but it will never be without a keen perception as to which side your bread is buttered."

Roland laughed good-humouredly. Nicholas's whimsical speeches never annoyed him; and he regarded his eccentric cousin with a certain amount of admiring reverence adulterated with a good deal of indulgent contempt. That Nicholas was clever he could not deny, and he had a great regard for cleverness of any kind, since cleverness made for worldly success. Roland was not intellectual himself in the learned or literary way, but he possessed plenty of practical common-sense. He would never become a scholar or a poet, but he had the makings of an excellent man of business.

Unlike his solitary cousin, he was a member of a large family: one of those typical, good-looking English families, where the daughters all marry early as a matter of course, and the sons begin to earn their own livings with equal certainty and promptitude: a family endowed with less than its share of brains and more than its share of beauty, and therefore bound to flourish like a green bay tree, and to prosper in all its comfortable, commonplace ways.

Roland, who was one of the younger members, was being trained as a land agent; but as yet had only just begun to learn his profession.



## The Wisdom of Folly

"But what about Miss Treherne?" he again inquired of his unpractical cousin. "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Of course I am, my dear fellow: I'm longing to tell you about her, and to embrace any and every opportunity of conversing upon so delightful a subject. The long and the short of it is that I am in love—deeply and hopelessly and irretrievably in love: and I am on the point of telling the lady so, and begging her to honour me with her affection in return, with heart and hand thrown in."

"And are you sure she will say, 'Yes'?"

"*Sure?* What a word to apply when the workings of the feminine mind are under consideration! But I am as sure as any one can be with regard to the problematical actions of a woman, that I shall not be unsuccessful in my suit. I know I have not your handsome face to recommend me, nor your graceful and admirable proportions: but I am sober and honest, and clean in my work and in person, and I have a pretty wit of my own when the fancy pleaseth me."

"And has she a pretty wit of her own, too?" asked Roland.

"Just the right amount that all really charming women have: enough to know when a man is clever, but not enough to discover when he isn't."

Roland shrugged his shoulders. "Women don't care a rap for wit in men."

"Oh! surely some of them do—the clever ones who are clever enough not to be too clever. A thoroughly nice girl laughs at all a man's jokes."

"But that's because she is good, and not because the jokes are. Girls are awfully quick to see when it is the proper thing to laugh, and to do it: but as to what they are laughing at, nine times out of ten they haven't the ghost of an idea! They see 'heartly laughter' in the stage directions and act up to their cue: but they never trouble their pretty heads as to what it's all about, bless you!"

"My good Roland, you misjudge the fair sex as a whole; as for ours, it is enough to be truly thankful when we find they are laughing not at us, but with us. For a subtle appreciation of real humour give me the feminine brain—Miss Treherne's for choice!"

"If she appreciates yours that's all that matters."

"She does, she does! She is one of the rare women who understand what you say before you say it: and she is also one of those still rarer specimens who don't persist in harping upon those particular strings which a man has snapped in order to keep them silent. Have you ever noticed that the ordinary type of woman is never really happy unless she is opening doors which you'd give anything in the world to keep shut? And when she has opened them and discovered your own familiar skeletons, is she then content to hold her tongue? Not she! Her delight then is to dress up those skeletons as dolls, and play with them and nurse them and dandle them upon her knees for the rest of the day."

"And Miss Treherne does none of those things?"

"Not a single one. She never talks about unpleasant subjects, and she lets ill alone. That is one of the startling differences between men and women. The more disagreeable a subject is, the more a woman likes to talk about it and the less a man does. No woman can ever really close a door: she always leaves it open behind her, whether she is going out of Bluebeard's chamber or into church. She can't make up her mind to shut the thing, and to keep the secrets in and the draughts out. Consequently scandals are let loose and colds are caught, and there is the devil

## The Wisdom of Folly

to pay all round!"

It was always difficult to keep Nicholas to the subject in hand, he was so prone to wander off along all the byways of a conversation: but Roland firmly endeavoured to do so. "Is Miss Treherne pretty?" was his next pertinent question.

"Pretty? She is as beautiful as a rose on a June morning, and as graceful as a gazelle upon the mountains of Judea. And her name is a poem in itself. Zillah;—Zillah Treherne. Could any woman boast a lovelier name, however beautiful she might have been? The mere utterance of such words as Jane or Martha or Emma or Eliza would have chilled my young blood and quenched my ardent spirit. But Zillah! The name is a romance in itself."

"Dark or fair?" persisted Roland the indefatigable.

"Hair the colour of leaves in autumn, eyes deep brown like the fish-pools in Heshbon, a skin that puts roses and lilies to shame, and lips like a thread of scarlet. She is divine, my dear Roland—simply divine! If you saw her I verily believe she would make a poet even of you; while as for me, the mere thought of her makes me break out into idylls and sonnets and limericks and every other accepted form of verse."

"You do seem pretty hard hit!"

"Felled to the earth, my dear fellow: prone: not a leg left to stand on, because they are all being used for kneeling at her shrine!"

"And where did you meet this divinity?"

"A year and a half ago, when I was reading for Greats in Wales. I repaired to a remote Cambrian hamlet, if you remember, in order to give undivided time and attention to the Classics; and there I met my fate! I went in search of the tree of knowledge; but tasted instead the fruit of the tree of life."

"I wish to goodness you'd leave off gassing," said Roland somewhat impatiently, "and tell a fellow all about the girl in a few plain words."

"All right; here goes! Miss Zillah Treherne is the daughter of a Welsh parson whom I met and fell over head and ears in love with when I was cramming for Greats, at Llanferdovey; I mean I fell in love with the daughter, and not with the parson, though he was not a bad sort as parsons go. Like the curate's egg, parts of him were excellent; but unfortunately he was stupid; and stupidity is even worse in good people than it is in bad, ones; it brings religion into disrepute and gives the enemy occasion to blaspheme."

"Yet good people are stupid—often."

Nicholas sighed: "I know it; but it is always a tragedy. The living epistle, which is known and read of all men should never be bound in half-calf."

"Well hit, sir!" exclaimed Roland, with a laugh. "But the poor fools can't help not being clever."

"They can help being stupid, which is quite a different thing. Nobody wants them to be clever if they are not built that way. Stupidity is not lack of cleverness; it is the capacity to put yourself in another's place. But to my story. Instead of reading Greek and Latin, my only books were Zillah's looks, as some poet or other—Byron, if I'm not mistaken—so aptly remarked; and I made up my great mind that she and none other was the wife for me."

"Did you tell the girl so?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"No; strange to say, for the first—and I trust the last—time in my life I allowed my actions to be guided by caution; and I was restrained from asking Zillah to share my fortunes by the paltry consideration that I had no fortunes to share. It was most cautious, most prudent, most sensible, I admit; I have been ashamed of myself for it ever since; but the disgraceful fact remains that for once in my four—and—twenty years I was fool enough to be wise, and to allow concealment, like a worm i' the bud, to feed on my damask cheek; where it has contentedly browsed ever since."

"I don't see very well how you could propose to a girl until you'd some prospect of making a home for her."

"No; that's just the sort of thing you never would see; your eyesight is singularly defective at times. But I can't blame you as I otherwise should, since I was cursed with a similar defect of vision myself. I can't think how I could have been so unpardonably sensible; but the fact remains that I was; and that I calculated the price of love as I should the price of cotton, and offered Cupid wages as I do the boy who cleans the boots!"

"I think you did quite right."

Nicholas groaned. "I knew you would. It was the consciousness that I should thereby earn your approbation that first made me realise the enormity of my offence. It was as if the vine had refused to bud without a wine licence, or the dews of heaven to fall until the water—rates were paid; even then they would have been no worse than I was!"

"I don't see what else you could have done," persisted Roland; "you couldn't propose to a girl unless you could marry her, and you couldn't marry her unless you could keep her. I still repeat you did the right thing"

"But the things you think right are so awful! You are the sort of person who would think it right to lay down a permanent way for the lightning, and to study the score of the song of the morning—stars. You are a Philistine of the purest water—an Erastian of the finest brand!"

"Anyhow, you did exactly what I should have done in your place." Roland could not conceive of higher praise than this.

"Well, I am about to rectify my wisdom and to purge away my sense. Having been left a competence by my excellent godfather—a competence being enough for any man, and more than a competence, merely a surfeit—I am going at once into the remote fastnesses of Wales, there to ask Zillah Treherne to share that competence with me, and to make me supremely happy for the rest of my mortal life. Here at Eldhurst we shall settle, and here we shall grow old together, unvexed by the storms of money—making or the waves of ambition, as did Mandolet the Fool some four centuries ago, whose mantle (I fondly imagine) has fallen upon my unworthy shoulders."

## Chapter 4. THE RETURN

"Are you sure that this girl will make you happy? Because, if so, I have nothing to say more, except, 'Bless you, my children!' My one desire is that you shall be happy, Nicholas: it has been my one desire ever since you were born. But now I add a rider to this petition, namely, that you shall be happy in your own way and not in mine; which is a distinct advance on the prayers that I offered up for you in your infancy." Lady Ingoldby spoke with her usual decision. She was a woman who knew her own mind; and who, moreover, had a mind to know, and one which was well worth the knowing. She was not—and never had been—a handsome woman; but she possessed the two indefinable gifts of style and charm, and they had stood her in good stead during her forty—five years of existence.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"How nice of you to want me to be happy in my own way, mother, and how deliciously foolish too! Sensible people always know what is best for you, and ram it down your throat, like the man who said that if his children were not happy he would flog them till they were. But you and I have learnt the wisdom of folly, and we know that people would rather be unhappy in their own way than happy in ours."

"No, Nicholas, I am not foolish; I never have been, and I never intend to be. It isn't my role; and it always irritates me when people play parts for which they are not cast. By the time a woman is forty she ought to have learnt her part in life's comedy, and to be word-perfect in it; and she ought never to infringe another woman's copyright. There are women who have respectively patented innocence, and silliness, and disagreeableness, and folly; and I should consider myself downright dishonest if I assumed even for a minute any one of these qualities." Nicholas laughed; his mother always amused him: and the woman who permanently amuses the men of her own household is a past-mistress in the wisdom of womanhood. There are women who endeavour to stimulate men's interest in them by suffering and sadness, or by tears and temper; and—backed by beauty—these methods are effective for a time. But they have no staying power; they are not warranted to wear. The two things of which no man ever tires are a good joke and a good dinner; and a wise woman does well to consider this.

"You are certainly never disagreeable, mother: and still less frequently are you dull."

"I easily could be: it would be a holiday sometimes to be both one and the other. But they would not be in harmony with my character and reputation, and so must never be indulged in. For me to say a stupid or all ill-tempered thing would be as unseemly as to drink cocoa at a Lord Mayor's banquet, or to dance a hornpipe in church."

"Yes, mother, it certainly is very upsetting when people become suddenly what they are not. For my part, I don't even like disagreeable people to be pleasant for a time; it seems out of drawing somehow. And I consider it absolutely dishonest when an habitually unpunctual person catches a train. It is like catching hares in spring, or shooting pheasants in August."

"For a shrew to say a pleasant thing, or a fool a clever one, is as bad as serving mustard with mutton or jelly with beef."

"Certainly," agreed Nicholas. "I don't know why things are as they are; but if they are as they are, they ought to continue so. The man who first ate mustard with beef, and jelly with mutton, was a pioneer, an inventor, a leader of men. But the man who tries to overrule and change such eating after all these centuries, is an anarchist and a regicide and a revolutionary. I hate all changes and innovations! To my mind there is nothing so decadent as improvement or so retrogressive as reform."

"Well, Nicholas, if you are certain that this Zillah Treherne will make you happy, go down to Wales and marry her forthwith. But don't ever tell me that she will be to me what you have been, because she won't, and because there is nothing that I hate so much as cant."

"Then I won't do it; or else I shall feel like that awful and mysterious Being called 'Sign,' who invariably proves to you that what you don't want will suit you infinitely better than what you do. The moment that 'Sign' appears upon the scene, I take to my heels and flee. For what am I that I should stand before so august a personage and try to prove to him that ermine will not satisfy the hunger that craves for calico, nor pocket-handkerchiefs quench the thirst that cries aloud for gloves? Therefore, dearest mother, as long as I live I will never try to prove to you that my wife will suit you better than I do; for I have not the presence, nor the manner, nor even the frock-coat that are so convincing in the case of 'Sign.'"

"Thank, you, Nicholas. You always understand."

## The Wisdom of Folly

It was the evening preceding the departure of Nicholas for Llanferdovey, and he and his mother were having a final talk before he left. Lady Ingoldby did not particularly want a daughter-in-law at all: still less did she want one who was the penniless child of an obscure Welsh parson. But the thing that she did want, and wanted more than anything else in the world, was that Nicholas should continue to be devoted to her; and she was prepared to pay the full price for this, even though the price involved the inclusion in her family circle of a beautiful nobody such as Zillah Treherne. Which shows that Eleanor Ingoldby was wise in her day and generation. But though she was ready to pay the full price for her heart's desire, and had learnt that in this world most things have to be paid for either in money or in kind, she was not one of the women who find joy and contentment in calling things by their wrong names.

It is strange but true that there are many such women—women to whom the sound of words means more than the sense. To such it is a positive delight to pronounce even their own names differently from how they are spelt: to change a short "i" into a long "y" or to throw the accent where no sane person would dream of throwing it. As a rule, it is safe to convict of affectation all those persons who put the accent upon the last syllable of their own surnames: at best it involves the invention of a Huguenot ancestor, and at worst an unauthorised claim upon Norman descent.

But it is not only in misnaming themselves that persons of this mental complexion find support and consolation: they prefer to call everything as it would have been called had it been something else. By assuming the outward and visible sign of any quality, they fully believe they assume the quality itself. By despising their peers, they think that they raise themselves to a higher social level: by frisking and frolicking like an exuberant kitten, they imagine that they change their forty years into two twenties, as Douglas Jerrold wished to do in the case of his wife. To such women kind words mean far more than kind actions. If a man never forgets to open a door for them when they leave a room, they will forgive him for fraudulently annexing their property; if he persistently writes them quasi love-letters, they will overlook the fact that he produces false balance-sheets as well.

"Well, good-night, mother," said Nicholas, rising and preparing to leave the room. "I shall be off before you are up in the morning."

"Good-night, my boy, and luck go with you!"

"When you see Zillah you will know that luck dwells in the light of her eye, and happiness lurks in the meshes of her hair. No man could be anything but lucky with such a wife as she will be. I know you will love her, because no one could help loving her. Clever as you are, you wouldn't be clever enough for that!"

"There is just one other thing that I want to say," added Lady Ingoldby. "I want you to know how thoroughly I appreciate your unselfishness and your thought for me in not proposing to this girl until you inherited your godfather's money, and knew that your marriage would entail no extra expense upon me, nor in any way diminish my already small income. You have behaved so well to me in this, Nicholas, that I feel I owe it to you to behave well in my turn and to welcome the woman of your choice as warmly as if she had twenty thousand a year, or was a peeress in her own right."

Nicholas did not trust himself to reply: he was always terrified of showing his feelings: so he kissed his mother in silence and left the room. And Lady Ingoldby, knowing him inside and out, thoroughly understood and was completely satisfied.

It was late on the following afternoon when Nicholas Ingoldby arrived at Llanferdovey. He rode in the carrier's cart from the nearest station, but got out and walked as he approached the village, so as the more fully to enjoy the pleasurable emotions which his return to that lovely spot excited.

## The Wisdom of Folly

How hard it had been, he thought, to hold his peace when last he was here, and to keep back the torrent of loving words that rushed to his lips whenever he was alone with Zillah. At the sight of the familiar places, there came over him, with overpowering force, the memory of what an agony of repressed feeling he had endured when last he was here.

But now all was changed, he said to himself. Thanks to his godfather's legacy, there was no longer any necessity for keeping from the woman he loved the knowledge that he loved her. Nicholas was an epicure in emotions; and he felt that the ecstasy of telling Zillah of his love, and asking for hers in return, would be intensified and heightened by its former suppression. He had heard nothing of the girl since he left Llanferdovey a year and a half ago: it had been part of his code of honour that there should be no correspondence between himself and Zillah as long as his impossibility as a suitor continued: for he knew perfectly well—and was correct in such knowledge—that a very little effort on his part would have fanned the smouldering fire of Zillah's liking for him into the flame of love. So he thought it right to abstain from that effort, whatever such abstinence might cost him. True, he had been sorely tempted to write to Zillah and ask her for her hand in marriage, the moment that he knew he was in a position to do so. But—as has been said before—he was an epicure in emotions; and he felt it would be so much more blissful to say by word of mouth all the things he had to say, and to read their answer in Zillah's brown eyes. And it only made the difference of a few weeks, after all. Therefore he had possessed his soul in the delightful patience of a nearly fulfilled hope, and had postponed the telling of his great news until his godfather's affairs were settled, and he could come and do so in person.

He had not much doubt as to the ultimate success of his wooing: which confidence did not arise from vanity on his part (for Nicholas exaggerated rather than underrated his own ugliness); but rather from a deep spiritual conviction that Zillah Treherne and he were meant for each other—were true mates ordained by Heaven to unite and to become one. From the time that he first met Zillah, he had been convinced that she was made for him and he for her, and that nothing could finally come between them: and the unexpected fortune from his godfather, with the consequent removal of all pecuniary difficulties, had further confirmed this conviction. Therefore when he suddenly saw her coming towards him along the mountain road, as if she had just stepped out of the sunset and was still haloed with its rosy light, his heart leaped to meet her in an ecstasy of joy.

But as he drew nearer he saw it was not Zillah at all; it was Adah; but the sisters were so much alike that it was easy to mistake the one for the other, especially when she had the light behind her. Later—when Adah seemed destined to take Zillah's place in his life and his affections—he recalled this meeting, and took it for a forecast and prophecy of the future.

At first Adah did not see him. She was walking along, her eyes fixed upon the ground, lost in thought. But as Nicholas approached her he uttered her name; and then she looked up and saw who stood before her. And he also saw that she looked older and much less strong and vigorous than when he parted from her. The past year or two had dealt hardly with her.

"Nicholas!" she cried: "Nicholas at last! I knew you would come back. I never doubted you!"

"Of course I have come back," replied Nicholas, taking both her hands in his own. He sometimes almost loved Adah for her likeness to Zillah. Perhaps if Zillah were to go out of his life, Adah might eventually take her place, as not infrequently happens in the case of sisters who closely resemble one another. So strong is the influence of a facial likeness, that it is sometimes difficult for a man or for a woman to realise that some one may almost reproduce the Beloved in form and feature, and yet be utterly diverse in character and disposition; that though the hands may indeed appear to be the hands of Esau, the voice is the voice of Jacob, the supplanter.

"I knew you would come back," Adah repeated. "I had one of my presentiments that you would, and I was the only one who never doubted you."

## The Wisdom of Folly

Nicholas was touched by such unswerving loyalty; for he knew that his behaviour—though guided by the highest motives—had been capable of misconstruction. "Thank you, Adah, for trusting me," he said; "you are very true to your friends."

"It wasn't exactly that," explained the accurate Adah. Nicholas smiled. The sister's scrupulous conscientiousness had always amused him. They invariably devoted their attention to moral details, and left the general effects to look after themselves. "Then what was it?" he asked.

"It was because I always have such true instincts about people. I know at once whether they are to be trusted or not, and I find that I am never mistaken. Now Zillah is quite different. She, poor darling! doubts her true friends and trusts her false ones."

"Then she doubted me?" said Nicholas quickly.

"Yes. And she would not believe me when I said I was sure that there was some explanation of your silence, and that you were not really forgetful or fickle." As usual, Adah was mercilessly truthful.

Nicholas flushed. It is always upsetting, even to the most imperturbable man, to discover that his lady-love's opinion of him is less complimentary than her sister's. "I thought she knew me well enough to understand that my silence was due to consideration for her, and not to any selfish reasons."

"I am sorry to say she didn't; but I did."

"But how is she? Is she well? That is the most important thing."

"Oh! yes, she is quite well; but—"

Nicholas, however, could not listen to Adah's *but*, so anxious was he—now that he was assured of Zillah's welfare—to prove to Adah that her trust in him had not been misplaced, and that her sister's doubts had been utterly unjustifiable.

"You see it was in this way," he began; "I fell in love with Zillah the first time I set eyes on her. You must have seen that for yourself."

"I did. I never doubted that you loved her, though I often wondered why you did not tell her so."

"I am coming to that," replied Nicholas, as Adah turned with him and they slowly walked together along the picturesque road to Llanferdovey. "I made up my mind then and there that I should never marry any woman except Zillah; but at that time I was not in a position to be sure whether I should ever be able to marry any woman at all."

"Why not?" Adah's expressive face was all aglow with interest. At last the problem of the last eighteen months was going to be solved.

"Because, as you know, my father is dead, and I have a widowed mother to look after."

"But even men with mothers get married," Adah demurred. "I mean having a mother doesn't prevent it, as having a wife does."

Nicholas laughed. "How thoroughly Trehernian! I never knew two such girls as you and Zillah for taking things literally." His criticism on the sisters was correct.

## The Wisdom of Folly

They had lived too far from the madding crowd, and were too innately truthful, to be able to adapt themselves to the subtlety and complexity of more civilised conversation. Each of them possessed gifts which the other lacked; but the fairy-godmother, who bestows the priceless gift of tact, had been absent from both of their christenings. "In my case," he went on to explain, "there wasn't enough money for both a wife and a mother; and so the mother who already existed had the first claim, and the wife who didn't exist had to go to the wall. I couldn't afford both."

"Oh! I am beginning to understand at last. You mean you put your mother's happiness before your own." Though she was devoid of tact, Adah Treherne was by no means lacking in penetration. "You are a very unselfish man, Nicholas."

"Not at all," replied Nicholas airily. "I had no option, considering that the money was left by my father. I couldn't very well starve his wife in order to feed my own. It was bare justice."

Adah sighed. "I suppose it was. But why couldn't you tell Zillah that you loved her, and ask her to wait for you?"

"Till when, my dear girl? As I told you, I had no certainty of ever being in a position to marry while my mother lived, and she is still a comparatively young woman; and I couldn't very well ask a beautiful girl like Zillah to tie herself to me indefinitely until we were both old people and our lives were nearly over. Besides, I knew that Zillah did not love me—and I also knew that I could make her love me if I tried—and I thought it would be playing rather low down to engage her affections until I had something to offer her."

"I understand. Unselfish again. It is strange what a great deal of harm is done in the world by unselfishness!" Adah spoke so softly that Nicholas did not hear her, his mind being full of his own explanations, and his desire to justify her faith in him.

"I felt I had no right to try to engage Zillah's affections, or to bind her in any way: but I made up my mind that if ever a time came when I was in a position to support a wife without crippling my mother, I would come back to Llanferdovey and ask Zillah, if she were still free, to marry me. I meant to do that, however long I had to wait. But I had not to wait long after all. Two months ago my godfather died, and left me a competence of eight hundred a year; and so soon as I could escape from the clutches of the lawyers I have come straight down here to ask my darling to share that competence with me, Now you know why I didn't come: and also why I did."

"Poor Nicholas! And you have come too late after all!"

Nicholas stopped dead, as if he had been shot. "Too late! What do you mean? You said she was quite well." He was listening attentively enough now.

"When you went away I think Zillah fretted a good deal after you, but she was too proud to confess it even to me, as you had given her no right to think that you loved her."

"No right to think it? Good heavens! What eyes women must have! Couldn't she see that I worshipped the very ground she walked on?"

"But you hadn't said it, you see, and so she couldn't act on it. Women are made like that."

"Then they are very queerly made: that is all I can say. But go on, for pity's sake!"

Adah steadily pursued her tactless way. "She was so hurt at your going away without telling her that you loved her, that she tried to console herself with Owen Griffith's admiration; because *he* really did admire her, you know, and didn't mind telling her so."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"Owen Griffith? That brute!"

"He wasn't a brute to Zillah. He had always loved her in his way, ever since we were children together. And Zillah was so angry when she believed that you had dropped us because you were stuck-up and thought we were not grand enough for you, that she found a sort of soothing comfort in Owen's adoration."

Nicholas groaned aloud. "I stuck-up, and thinking she wasn't grand enough for me! And all the time I was eating my heart out because I didn't feel I had anything that was worthy to be laid at her feet. Good heavens! What folly will women imagine next?"

"And then," Adah went on, "father was taken ill: and as soon as the cold weather set in, he died. Zillah and I had no friends and no money, and didn't know which way to turn, and we were neither of us clever enough to earn our own living."

"But why on earth didn't you write to me?" cried Nicholas.

The pride of sex and the pride of poverty—the two strongest forms of pride there are—looked sternly at him from Adah's eyes. "How could we—when we were only girls, and you had dropped us so completely?"

Again Nicholas groaned. "What an ass I have been: what an arrant ass! But go on; let me hear the worst." Adah went on in her calm merciless voice. It was meet that Nicholas should suffer, she felt, seeing that he had brought suffering upon Zillah. "And then Owen begged Zillah over and over again to marry him, and promised that if she would, I should share their home. So she married him a year ago last January,"

"Married Griffith—married that creature? Oh, Adah, how could you let her do such a thing?"

Adah felt inclined to add that it was he, and not she, who had let Zillah do this thing: but she forbore. "How could I avoid it?" was all she said. "There was no help for it; no alternative but the workhouse."

"And is she happy?"

"No: that is the dreadful part of it."

"Why not? Does that wretch ill-treat her? Because if so, I will kill him with my own hands."

"No; Owen never ill-treats Zillah: he is too much afraid of her to lay hands on her. But she has a little baby-girl just three months old, and he is dreadfully cruel to the child."

Nicholas fairly gasped with horror. "Cruel to a baby? What an unutterable devil!"

Adah continued with the calmness of despair: "He hates it for two reasons: first, because it is a girl, and he wanted a boy; and secondly, because Zillah loves it far more than she loves him, and he is madly jealous of it. He hates it so much that we are afraid to leave him alone with it, for fear he should kill it in one of his uncontrollable fits of rage and jealousy; so you can imagine what a life Zillah leads. It is a wonder to me that she is alive—much more so that she is fairly well. Though the strain is so great that she must break down sooner or later."

"And then what will become of the poor little baby?"

"I shall guard it with my life. Owen shall never hurt it as long as I am here to save it from him." And there was a fierceness in Adah's voice that Nicholas had never heard there before—the fierceness of motherhood: for Adah loved her sister's child as fondly as she could possibly have loved one of her own.

With a groan Nicholas sat down by the roadside and covered his face with his hands. This was the result of his superfine sense of honour and his excessive altruism! In a moment of agony he realised the truth which Adah had already proved—the truth that our mistakes are often punished more severely than our misdeeds: and for a few awful moments he felt that the punishment was indeed greater than he could bear. He little guessed, poor fellow! that he was as yet only putting his lips to a cup of anguish which, he would have to drain to the bitter dregs.

## Chapter 5. THE TRAGEDY

Nicholas did not go back with Adah. He felt he must become somewhat accustomed to his changed relationship towards Zillah before he exposed himself to the fascination of her presence, as he was an honourable man, and intended to behave himself honourably to his life's end. Neither did he go straight back again to Eldhurst; for though an honourable man, and one with every intention of acting and even feeling honourably, he felt that he must see Zillah once again before he said good-bye to her for ever. She had been so much to him for the last year or so; had inspired every action and permeated every thought: and before he put her out of his life for ever, he must just once again hear her sweet voice and look into her lovely eyes. So he went to the little inn where he had stayed a year and a half ago, telling Adah that he would call at Plâs Dovey—Owen Griffith's house—on the morrow, to bid his final farewell to herself and to her sister; and Adah went back to Plâs Dovey to relate to Zillah—either wisely or unwisely, who shall say?—all her conversation with Nicholas; and to prove to her sister that the latter's doubts as to Ingoldby's sincerity had been utterly unjust and unfounded, and her own faith in him abundantly justified.

It never occurred to Adah to keep anything from her sister that Nicholas had said. She was ever a woman of a single eye and an undivided aim: and being imbued with the idea of justifying Nicholas in Zillah's eyes, it never struck her that Zillah's lot might be made harder instead of easier by the knowledge of how narrowly she had missed what appeared to Adah an ideal happiness. But though poor Adah was always loving, she was not always wise: or perhaps it would be more correct to say that her wisdom was not of this world, where what is lawful always comes second to what is expedient, and where the truth is so cooked and flavoured to suit individual taste and convenience that frequently very little of the original substance is left at all. Her soul had long dwelt in that purer atmosphere of a simple and primitive society, where they speak every man truth with his neighbour, and eat their bread with singleness of heart.

It was this innate simplicity of the Treherne sisters that had attracted Nicholas quite as much as their undoubted beauty. His was a subtle and complex nature, much addicted to introspection and hair-splitting and other somewhat morbid exercises. He was always taking out his own feelings, and looking at them from the outside point of view, and examining their origin and calculating their results. Therefore when he was thrown into intimate intercourse with two girls who said exactly what they thought, with no regard to the effect of their words, and who simply felt things without in the least understanding what they were feeling, he found such society a great rest and relief after the more intellectual and analytical atmosphere to which he was accustomed.

So Zillah heard from beginning to end a simple and straightforward account of all that had happened on that memorable afternoon; how Nicholas had been true to her all the time, and had only been prevented by his poverty from proposing to her a year and a half ago; how he had come back, as soon as he was in a position to do so, to ask her to be his wife; and how he had sunk down by the roadside, utterly crushed and broken in spirit, when he learnt that his coming had been too late.

All this Adah told without restraint or reservation; with the result that Zillah—feeling that her sacrifice had not been imperative, and that, if only Nicholas had spoken earlier, she need not have married Owen after all—rebelled more bitterly than ever against her husband's behaviour, and cherished a more intense anger against his treatment of their child.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"So I hear your tardy suitor, the magnificent Mr. Ingoldby, has come back to Llanferdovey a day too late for the fair," Owen remarked at supper, having learned from one of the villagers of Nicholas's return, and being quite acute enough, when his senses were sharpened by jealousy, to put two and two together.

Zillah tossed her head defiantly. As Owen's admiration had braced her against Nicholas's apparent cruelty a year and a half ago, so now Nicholas's admiration in turn braced her against the actual cruelty of Owen. "Yes, he has come back," she replied; "Adah saw him, and he is coming here to-morrow to see me." It would doubtless have been wiser not to add this latter piece of information in Owen's present mood; but the Treherne girls never thought before they spoke.

Owen's handsome face grew evil. "Coming here, is he? And who says he may come here?"

"I do, and I am the mistress of this house."

"I am the master, however; and I want no fine gentlemen hanging about my place."

"Then I do. It will be a nice change from what I am accustomed to." Foolish Zillah thus to goad her husband to fury. But she was so enraged at having discovered that she had been premature in marrying was in a rebellious mood, and did not care what she said. Moreover, she had found him torturing a kitten that very afternoon by thrusting its paws into the parlour fire; and she was filled with special indignation against him and his cowardly cruelty.

Owen's surly face grew darker. "Your fine gentleman had better be careful what he's about, or he may get more than he bargains for if he comes trespassing on my land. He interfered with me once—confound him and his impudence! But he won't do that twice without getting something in return, I can tell you!"

"He won't fight you; you needn't be frightened," said Zillah scornfully, "Gentlemen only fight with gentlemen."

An evil smile lit up Owen's face. "If he is as slow to fight as he is to woo, I certainly have no cause to fear him."

Zillah's face flushed crimson at her husband's taunt, and Adah hurriedly endeavoured to make the peace: but, as usual, she did not set about it in quite the right way. "He wasn't really slow, Owen: he couldn't help himself. It was his poverty, and not his pride, that prevented him from proposing to Zillah a year and a half ago. But he was always devoted to her."

Owen fairly snarled. "Devoted to her, was he? A funny sort of devotion that made him take precious good care not to come to the rescue when she and you were homeless and starving, and there was nobody to offer you bread for your mouths and a roof over your heads but me. That's the sort of devotion that you get from your fine gentlemen. I've got to keep and clothe you both, and he comes and says pretty things to you between meals!"

"How vulgar you are! How unutterably vulgar!" exclaimed the irrepressible Zillah.

"Vulgar, am I? Well, anyhow my money is not too vulgar for you and your fine sister to be thankful for. You seem to forget that I picked you both out of the gutter, and have fed and housed you ever since. And what have you done in return, I should like to know? Only given me a girl-brat to be another woman to tug at my purse-strings, when you knew I wanted a son to inherit Plâs Dovey after I've done with it!" Owen's rage was fast getting the better of him. "That's all you are good for! To eat a man out of house and home with yourself and your female relations."

But his time Zillah's scorn was too deep for words. She simply looked at Owen with the air of an offended queen.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I'm sick of you and your conceited ways," Owen went on, lashing himself by his own words into a more violent fury; "you seem to think that I'm the dirt beneath your feet. But you'd better be careful! I'm getting tired of giving bread and lodgings to folks that despise me and can't keep civil tongues in their heads; and I've a good mind to pack you and your whining brat and your precious sister to the workhouse, where you'd have been for the last year if it hadn't been for me."

"I wish to goodness I had been," retorted Zillah; "for I believe that there they keep husbands and wives apart!"

"And look here," the infuriated Griffith went on, "I won't have that fine lover of yours hanging about my house, and so I tell you once for all!"

"He isn't my lover any longer; simply because he happens to be a gentleman and I am a married woman."

"Well, understand I won't have him here, whatever he is, and that's the long and short of it," Owen continued, with a string of oaths.

But Zillah was not frightened of him. She never feared him for herself: she knew that at bottom he was afraid of her, and that he was too much of a bully and a coward even to hurt anybody of whom he was afraid: she only feared him for her helpless baby.

"He will come here once—to-morrow," she replied, "to say good-bye to me, and then never again as long as he lives. I must see him once more—I must, and I will—and then I shall say good-bye to him for ever."

"I won't have him making love to my wife," shouted Owen, with another volley of oaths.

"He will not make love to your wife," replied Zillah, with a calm that was more impressive than anger; "because he is a gentleman and she is a lady, as I have tried to explain to you before; and gentlepeople don't do these things."

"Don't they? That's all you know!"

"I am perfectly aware," continued Zillah, still with her grand air, "that you make love to my cook under my very nose, and consider yourself a gentleman all the time. But I don't consider you one, and so am not disappointed—or even annoyed—when you fail to behave as such. It amuses you, and it is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me. All I ask is that you will not judge me by yourself, as we belong to different classes of society, and so have different codes of both manners and morals."

"D—n you!" cried Owen, wincing under the lash of her scorn. "None of your confoundedly grand airs with me! After all is said and done, my fine lady, I am your husband! You seem to forget that."

"On the contrary, I was just saying that I didn't forget it, and wasn't likely to. It was you who seemed to suffer from loss of memory as to the bond."

Once more the gentle Adah amiably if clumsily endeavoured to keep the peace. "Zillah isn't likely to make love to Nicholas, Owen. She is very angry with him for not having asked her to marry him before it was too late."

At that moment sounds of the baby's crying reached their ears, and Zillah sprang up from her supper-table and rushed upstairs to see what was the matter with her darling, followed closely by Adah, whose devotion to little Amy was no whit less than Zillah's.

## The Wisdom of Folly

When the sisters had left the room, Owen sat on at the supper-table brooding over his evil thoughts. By this time he was in a perfect frenzy of jealousy, partly of Nicholas, although at the bottom of his heart he knew well enough that there was not the slightest ground for this, since Zillah's was far too noble a nature ever to break, even in thought, her marriage vow; and her husband—stupid as he was—had the wit to perceive this. She would always be true to him, he knew: not for love of him, but for love of righteousness. But his more intense and violent jealousy was aroused by the baby, since no moral law could prevent his wife from infinitely preferring her child to her husband, and from showing that preference whenever she had the opportunity. Moreover—such was the innate cowardice of the man—his bitterest hatred was always reserved for creatures smaller and weaker than himself. The weakness and feebleness of children and animals awoke no pity in his mean and cruel soul; these very qualities only served to whet his desire to hurt and torture anything that could not defend itself. Had the child been a son, who could have inherited his possessions and followed in his evil footsteps, he might have felt a certain pride in it; but for a delicate and puling girl he had nothing but scorn and loathing.

So the wretched man sat on late into the night, plotting how he could wreak his hatred upon the helpless infant that was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

It was nearing noon on the following day when Nicholas Ingoldby made his sorrowful way up to Plâs Dovey to bid a final farewell to the woman he had loved with all his heart and soul. He felt very bitter against the fate which had played him such a sorry trick; for what he had done he had done for the best, and had put his own wishes and inclinations on one side in order to further, as he thought, his mother's interests and Zillah's. It was for their dear sakes that he had crushed down his passion and stifled the words of love that rose so often to his lips. And now what was the result of all this self-sacrifice and altruism? Zillah's life was spoiled, and his own heart was broken.

As he neared Plâs Dovey he was struck by the forlorn and neglected condition of the place. Situated half-way up one of the hills that guarded the village, it had no fields nor pasture-land near it, but was surrounded on all sides by barren and rocky ground. The house was an old stone building, and had at one time been of considerable size; but now only part of it was inhabited, and by far the larger half was in ruins. There were farm buildings near; but they also were unused, and had sadly fallen into decay. A desolate and dreary home, indeed, to which to bring a young and beautiful bride!

The garden was less neglected than the farm, but even that was but poorly kept. There were already plenty of flowers; but they grew all over the place in a somewhat wild confusion. Then suddenly Nicholas saw Zillah standing in the garden; and his heart throbbed with anguish as he remembered that this was to be the last time that he should ever see her until both their lives' end. He gazed at her with an intense concentration of vision, so as to impress upon his mind's eye the lovely sight that he was to see no more. And truly it was a beautiful picture. In spite—or perhaps because of—her sorrow and misery, Zillah's beauty had increased and intensified since he saw her last. Then she had been a healthy and irresponsible girl; now she was a fragile and unhappy woman; and the change had written itself upon her outward form in added dignity of bearing and depth of expression. She was standing in the sunshine, with the spring flowers round her feet and the morning light upon her shining hair. To the end of his life Nicholas never forgot that exquisite picture of youthful womanhood; and never again did he see anything to his mind so superlatively fair.

As Zillah saw him coming up the garden-path she advanced to meet him with outstretched hand.

"Good-morning, Nicholas," she said; "so you have come back to Llanferdovey."

"Yes, Zillah, I have come back; but only, alas! to say good-bye to you for ever."

Zillah still cherished a certain resentment against him for that silence which had cost her so dear; but at the sight of the obvious misery in his face her heart relented a little towards him.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Adah has told me all you said yesterday," she continued, with her usual straightforward simplicity: no Treherne ever beat about the bush. "There is no need to go into it all again; but I just want to say to you that I beg your pardon for thinking that you had thrown us over because we weren't grand enough for you."

"I think you did mean injustice," replied Nicholas quietly.

"I did; and I want you to know that I am sorry for it." For all her sorrow and dignity, Zillah was very much of a child still.

"Perhaps it was a good deal my own fault," said Nicholas, ever ready to find excuses for her.

"Yes, it was: I cannot deny that," agreed the uncompromising Zillah. "But you didn't mean any harm."

Nicholas's lip quivered, but at the same time he could not repress a smile at her summing-up of his great sacrifice. "No; I certainly didn't mean any harm."

"And perhaps I was to blame a little, too. I was so angry with you, and so anxious to prove to you that I really didn't care whether you came back or not, that I lost no time in marrying someone else. I thought at the moment that it was only poverty and pride that drove me to my marriage; but now I see that it was wounded vanity as well. I imagined I was vindicating my pride as a woman; but really I was only cutting off my nose to spite my face." And the old smile dispelled for a moment the new sadness in Zillah's eyes.

"No; it was I who was to blame, and I alone. But I believed that I was doing the best for you, and I never thought of myself. Now I see that it would have been better if I had."

"I think it is nearly always best to obey one's first instincts, and not to begin splitting hairs and weighing *pros* and *cons*, and being afraid to do right for fear of doing wrong." Zillah was a very primitive woman.

Nicholas smiled again. It was so like her to think that. "Sometimes, perhaps; but not quite always."

"Still, what's done is done, and it is no use making bad things worse by talking about them. But I just wanted you to know that I am sorry I thought such horrid things about you, now that I know you didn't deserve them."

"Thank you, Zillah. And I want you to know that the evil I did, I did in ignorance, and not in intention; and that my one and only object was to save you pain and to secure your happiness. I was a fool, I admit, an arrant fool; but I was never a knave. You believe me, don't you, Zillah?"

"Oh, yes, I believe you, though I don't see what good my believing you will do now to you, or to me, or to anybody else!"

"It will do all the good in the world to me. The only possible happiness now left to me is to know that you have forgiven me for having spoiled your life."

Zillah's smooth forehead puckered a little. "But I'm not sure that I have forgiven you for that. I believe now that you didn't mean to do it; but that's not the same as your not having done it, you know. If you shoot a man's arm off by accident, it isn't as bad, of course, as if you'd shot it off on purpose, as far as you are concerned; but I don't see that it makes much difference to the man who lost his arm. The only thing that matters to him is that his arm has gone, and that he can't get it back again."

Nicholas winced with pain. "Then do you mean to say that it doesn't make any difference to you whether I meant to treat you badly or whether I didn't?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I don't see that it really alters things."

To Nicholas's subtle mind intention was of far more importance than result: his was one of the higher order of intellects, who understand that the good a man wills and does not is far more a part of that man's character than the evil he would not and yet does. But such fine reasoning was far above Zillah's simple philosophy. She judged of things and people exactly as they were, and not as they intended to be. She knew that she was unhappy: she knew that Nicholas could have saved her from that unhappiness: that he had erred through too much love for her, and not through too little, did not enter into her calculations or very much affect her judgment of the matter. Had the cases been reversed, it would have made all the difference in the world to Nicholas whether Zillah had hurt him wittingly or unwittingly, but for Zillah the difference was non-essential.

"Then you haven't forgiven me?" Nicholas pleaded.

"Not yet."

"Oh! Zillah, won't you forgive me before I go away out of your life?"

"I'll try to; I really will. But I don't say that I do as long as I don't; can I?" She certainly could not, though many women could: Lady Ingoldby, for instance. But then men always fall in love with the greatest contrasts they can find to the women of their own families.

At that moment the crying of a child in pain was heard through the windows of the farmhouse. Suddenly Zillah's face blanched with terror. "My baby!" she cried. "I left her asleep in her cradle in the parlour when I came into the garden, as I thought Owen was out. Surely he can't have come in without my seeing him!"

Like an arrow from a bow she darted towards the house, Nicholas following her as fast as he could. Up the garden, through the front door, and across the narrow hall she fled, Nicholas running after her in hot pursuit, until together they reached the parlour, where the table had just been laid for the midday meal.

The cradle was empty: that much they could see through the open door: and on entering the room a horrible sight was revealed to the agonised mother and to the man beside her—a sight so terrible that it was indelibly printed on the eyes of those who were so unfortunate as to behold it. To his dying day Nicholas never forgot the appalling horror of the scene, nor of the events which immediately succeeded it: but could ever afterwards recall them to his mind's eye as vividly as they were on the dark day when they occurred.

Owen was stooping in front of the great fireplace, his back towards the door, while the poor little baby was screaming in his arms. To his unspeakable terror Nicholas perceived that the unnatural father was thrusting the right hand of the helpless infant into the flames, while the child shrieked with agony.

For a second Ingoldby was literally paralysed by the unimagined horror of the sight. It was inconceivable that a father should thus torture his own child; that a human being should thus turn against his own flesh and blood! But, though unimaginable and inconceivable, it was still true. There, before him, Nicholas saw the impossible, converted into fact: the unthinkable transformed into reality. The mad son of the mad gipsy was even now doing to death his own helpless and innocent infant; and doing it to death in the most cruel and fiendish manner possible. It seemed more like a horrible dream than an actual occurrence: such gruesome things did not happen in the ordinary light of day; and, as in a nightmare, Ingoldby's limbs refused to move.

But this paralysis of mingled terror and disgust and loathing was but momentary—the transitory shrinking of the flesh from a vision before which the spirit quailed. In the fraction of an instant Nicholas had recovered himself, and had darted forward to save the baby alive from its unnatural parent's diabolical frenzy of cruelty.

## The Wisdom of Folly

But he was that fraction of a second too late.

He had not been the sole spectator of the horror: Zillah had rushed into the room with him, and had shared the awful revelation which had struck him dumb. If the sight of the infant's agony and peril had been too much for a stranger who had never seen the child before, what must it have been to the mother of the babe—the woman who had borne it and nursed it, and who loved it as her own soul?

Ever since the birth of her baby Zillah's horror of and hatred for her husband had been gaining in depth and intensity every day. She could not forgive him for his detestation of their child: and her fear—alas! only too well founded—that this detestation, in conjunction with his innate cruelty, should lead him to do the infant some grievous bodily harm, had possessed her mind with a complete obsession.

At the awful sight which now met her eyes all poor Zillah's smouldering terror and hatred burst into flame. This was the moment she had always known was coming, the horror which had dogged her footsteps ever since her baby's birth: this was the culmination of her long—drawn anguish, the fulfilment of her wildest fears.

She, was no longer Zillah Owen, the pretty and penniless daughter of a poor parson, the unhappy and neglected wife of an uneducated boor; she was rather the embodiment of outraged motherhood, the incarnation of avenging fate. Hardly knowing what she was, doing—bent only on the salvation of her child from the peril which threatened it—the woman, who had been called upon to bear more than she could endure, rushed upon her destiny, urged forward by the implacable instinct of maternity which impels the whole of the animal creation to fight to the death for its offspring.

Before Nicholas could put out his hand to stop her—before he could even realise what she was about to do—Zillah vindicated her outraged instincts and broke through her unbearable fetters at one stroke; realising nothing but her child's agony and the necessity of saving the infant's life at all costs, the maddened mother seized the thing which came nearest to her hand—a large carving—knife lying on the table—and, regardless of the inevitable result of her action, plunged the deadly weapon with all her strength between her husband's shoulders.

There was a second of dumb horror—a second which though infinitesimal in its actual length, for ever after stood out in Ingoldby's memory as one of the æons of Hell—and then, with one awful groan, Owen dropped to the ground like a felled ox, Nicholas just being in time to snatch the baby from his arms as they relaxed their hold.

## Chapter 6. THE FLIGHT

At the fall of the murdered man's body to the ground the awful tension of silent horror snapped, and the room was filled with the piercing shrieks of Adah and the woman servant. The latter had been carrying the dinner into the parlour at the same moment as Zillah and Nicholas entered it, and so had been an eye—witness of all that occurred; and Adah—hearing the baby's cries—had rushed as swiftly as she could to see what was the matter.

For a few moments there was nothing but wild and ghastly confusion.

Nicholas was the first to regain his head. He thrust the still screaming child into Adah's arms, and knelt by the prostrate form upon the hearth.

Zillah stood as if turned to stone, looking down upon the inanimate body of her husband.

"Is he hurt?" cried Adah.



## The Wisdom of Folly

"Very badly hurt, I'm afraid," replied Nicholas, laying his hand upon the dead man's heart, and trying in vain to discover any movement there.

"Some one must go at once for the doctor," Adah said. "Who is there to go?"

"Nobody, nobody," shrieked the excited maid-servant: "I daren't go all that long way across the mountains to save my life!"

"But you must, Sally. Be off at once!" Adah gave all the orders. The mistress of the house still stood transfixed with horror at what—in the momentary madness of outraged motherhood—she had done.

"Oh! no, no, Miss Adah! Please don't send me! I'm all of a tremble, and I daren't go across the lonely mountains by myself, no, not for anything!" And the woman threw her apron over her head and began to cry hysterically.

"I will go," said Nicholas, rising to his feet. "How far is it?"

"Six miles across the hills, the doctor lives in a little valley just on the other side of that mountain behind the house."

"But we must see to Zillah first," exclaimed Nicholas, gently forcing the horror-stricken woman into a chair, and hastening to get some brandy and pour it down her throat. "Are there no men about the place?"

"No, none," Adah replied. "Owen never would have any. Oh! what shall we do, what shall we do?"

"Do just what I tell you," replied Nicholas, with that abnormal calmness and clearness which comes to certain natures at great crisis. "Take Zillah and the baby away from this," and he pointed to the ghastly figure lying in a crimson pool upon the hearthrug; "and I will go as quickly as I can for the doctor. Is there no horse or conveyance that I can have?"

"No, none. Owen never kept any."

"And are there no servants?"

"Only Sally," replied Adah, pointing to the sobbing woman, crouched in a corner of the room in an hysterical collapse. "Owen said he couldn't afford any others."

"And no labourers about the place?"

"No; Owen did what he could himself, and the rest he left to go to ruin."

All the time that she talked Adah was busily engaged in soothing the child and in ministering to her half-conscious sister. The shock of her own deed seemed to have paralysed Zillah's brain.

"There is no need to hurry for the doctor," Nicholas said; "the case was past his help from the beginning. So before I start I'll help you to get Zillah into another room. She mustn't be allowed any longer to look upon that." And Nicholas shuddered as he glanced again at the gruesome object in front of the fire.

Between them they half-led, half-carried, Zillah into an adjoining room, a plan meanwhile rapidly forming itself in Nicholas's supernaturally alert mind. When they had laid Zillah upon a sofa, he carefully shut the door, so that they could not be overheard, and said:

## The Wisdom of Folly

"You must run away with her, Adah. If she stays here she'll be either hanged or imprisoned for life, for there's no hushing-up what she has done. And you and I must save her from that at all costs."

"Yes, we must, we must," Adah replied eagerly. "She did not know what she was doing, poor darling! She was driven mad by the sight of Owen torturing her child."

"It was enough to drive any woman mad." And Nicholas's voice shook.

Suddenly Zillah half rose from the sofa, putting her hand to her head in a dazed fashion. "Yes, Adah is right—I was mad—I didn't know what I was doing. I thought Owen was going to throw my baby into the fire, as his mother threw the cat—and I couldn't bear it," she gasped.

"Of course you couldn't, darling," said Adah, stroking her sister's hair and trying to soothe her.

"But I didn't mean to kill him—I only wanted to save my little baby. Give her to me," cried Zillah, taking the child—whose screaming had died down to a gentle wailing—out of Adah's arms, and covering the tiny face with kisses in a very abandonment of love. "He didn't really hurt her, did he?" she added.

"No," replied Adah. "He only burnt her a little, but not badly."

"Then I saved her life; I saved my own dear little baby!" murmured the poor mother, rocking the child in her arms and crooning over it.

"Yes, you saved your child's life," said Nicholas. "Whatever you did, you did for that end; and you succeeded."

"But I killed Owen—I killed my husband!" Zillah cried, with a shudder.

"Never mind, darling," whispered Adah, soothing Zillah as Zillah was soothing the child. "You saved baby's life, anyhow."

"Are you sure—quite sure—that he is dead? Oh! Nicholas, go quickly, and see if you can't save him, even now! Perhaps he is only unconscious, for I didn't mean to kill him."

"I am afraid," Nicholas began, but the strictly truthful Adah was before him:

"It is no use for Nicholas to do anything, Zillah dear. Owen was quite dead before we left the parlour."

"Then they will hang me for it, and I am so frightened, so frightened!" cried Zillah, bursting into tears. "Oh! Nicholas, can't you save me?"

"I am going to try, if you will both do what I tell you. See, here is all the money I have with me—it will be enough for you both until I can communicate with you again," said Nicholas, taking a leathern case out of his breast pocket and thrusting it into Adah's hand. "You must both run away at once and take the child with you, and try to hide in some place of safety until the search for you is over. There are thirty pounds in there, so that will keep you for some time; and you must write to me at Eldhurst and tell me where you are hiding, and I will come to you as soon as I can do so without exciting suspicion."

Zillah seized Nicholas's hand and covered it with kisses.

"Thank you, thank you," she sobbed; "I knew you could save me if you would. I don't believe there is anybody in the world as clever as you are, Nicholas."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"You see, Zillah, it is in this way," replied the man slowly: "I feel that it is really I who have driven you to this thing; the guilt is mine rather than yours. If I had spoken to you last year you would never have married Griffith, and so this thing would never have happened. If I could, I would gladly take it all upon my shoulders and give myself up as the person who killed Owen. But that is impossible, since your maidservant saw the deed committed."

Zillah continued to cling to him in a fervour of gratitude. Her's was one of the natures that must cling to something; she could not stand alone—she was too essentially feminine for that.

"There is no time to be lost," continued Nicholas. "I must go for the doctor at once, or the delay will arouse suspicion; but I promise you I will not hurry, so as to give you more time to make good your escape: and if the doctor were here at this minute he could do no more for Owen than he could do to-morrow or this day week; so that I do Owen no harm by delaying, and I do you considerable good. Have you any idea where you can hide?" he added, turning to Adah, who stood calm and collected at his side, a striking contrast to her sobbing sister.

"We have a little rowing boat in the creek at the bottom of the hill."

"And you can manage it?"

"Perfectly. I have known how to row ever since I was a child," Adah assured him.

"Then you had better get into this boat and make your escape that way. But where can you go to then?"

"We can go to Llandudno, and land there, and so get into the train. I should think there are enough people at Llandudno for us to make our way through the town without exciting notice."

Nicholas nodded his head. "Yes, yes, that will do all right; and if fortune favours you, you will get safe in and out of Llandudno before the police have wind of this affair. Then go straight to London—that is the best hiding-place that you can find—and from there communicate with me. Now I must be off for the doctor." And thus saying, Nicholas gently unlocked Zillah's clinging hands and went out of the room and out of the house.

As he passed by the parlour and the kitchen he perceived that the terrified servant had vanished, having evidently flown down to the village, there to advertise the awful tragedy which had just occurred; and he congratulated himself upon her disappearance, as it facilitated the escape of the two sisters—that is to say, if only they managed to get off before the return of Sally and her friends. Otherwise they would be hopelessly trapped. But Plâs Dovey was four miles from the village, hidden away among the hills; and it would be two good hours or more before Sally would be able to give the alarm and to bring help to the scene of the tragedy; while the little creek, where the boat was moored, was just at the foot of the hill upon which the Plâs stood, and could be reached in a few minutes.

Therefore Nicholas was justified in hoping that with luck the sisters would be able to make good their escape.

As he wandered on by mountain pass and gloomy valley, across bleak hillside and foaming stream, towards the house of the nearest doctor, a flood of thoughts rushed into the young man's mind. Was it only an hour or two since he walked from Llanferdovey up to the Plâs to bid a farewell to the woman he loved? It seemed like an æon of centuries. Yet his watch and the sun told him that it was not yet two hours since he had seen Zillah standing in the garden as he came up the hill, with the flowers round her feet and the sunlight upon her hair.

Then she was pure and unapproachable in her sorrowful and stainless womanhood: now her brow was marked with the brand of Cain, and her hands were red with blood; yet to Nicholas she was dearer than she had ever been, since he was one of those rare souls who, loving once, love for ever, and whose love is stronger than time or

## The Wisdom of Folly

death, or even than sin. Nothing that Zillah had done or could do would ever make any difference in his love for her. For all time and eternity she was his, his soul's chosen mate, the other half of himself. Nothing could ever alter that. If she sorrowed, he would lighten her sorrow: if she suffered, he would share her suffering: if she sinned, he would bear her sin: but not one of the dire trinity—not sorrow, nor suffering, nor even sin—could ever really come between them or estrange him from her.

Her crime aroused no horror in him; he loved her too well for that. All he felt was an agonising pity for her, and a still more agonising remorse for his share in the tragedy. He had spoken truly when he told her that he considered the real guilt lay with him. Had he not kept silence when he ought to have spoken, she would never have married such a brute as Owen Griffith; and so would never have been driven, by the fiendish cruelty of her husband to commit the awful sin of murder. It was he himself who was the murderer—not his beautiful Zillah. Again and again he weighed in his mind the possibilities of taking the actual crime upon his own shoulders, and proclaiming himself the slayer of Griffith; and again and again he rejected it, first because of the testimony of the maidservant, who had witnessed the actual deed, and secondly because he felt sure that the innate truthfulness of Adah and Zillah would never consent nor lend its support to such a deception. Also, the thought of his mother again came in, and made such a course absolutely impossible. Thus all he could do for the sisters was to connive at their escape, and, if possible, send them help in the future.

Of himself he thought not at all.

There is a theory abroad—perhaps on the whole a correct one—that men, as a rule, are much more selfish than women. Generally speaking they are—that is to say, the virtue of unselfishness is more commonly found in women than in men. But in the cases where men are unselfish—and such cases, though in a minority, are by no means as rare as is commonly supposed—this unselfishness exceeds that of women. In women unselfishness is a talent; but in men it becomes a touch of genius.

Nicholas being a man, and a man endowed with the quality of unselfishness, put himself out of the reckoning altogether, and did not even give a thought to his own spoilt life and disappointed hopes. All his care and thought just now were for the two women whom he loved—his mother and Zillah Griffith. Had it not been for Lady Ingoldby, and the duty that he owed to her, he would have thrown in his lot with the fugitives, and given himself up to aiding and abetting them in their escape and sharing their subsequent seclusion; for wisdom—as this world counts wisdom—had never been numbered among Nicholas's virtues. But as long as his mother lived (and she was now only a little over forty), Nicholas realised that such quixotism on his part was out of the question. It would not be fair to her, and she would not in the least understand it, for no portion of the mantle of Mandolet the Fool had fallen upon the shoulders of Lady Ingoldby.

He was full of hope, however, that the sisters would have sufficient start to make their way to London unobserved, and to lose themselves in that human whirlpool; whence, he thought, he could assist them to flee to the Continent, and to take up their residence in some remote corner of the earth beyond the reach of any international treaty. There they would spend the rest of their lives in security and seclusion, enjoying such simple and homely pleasures as quietness and simplicity and sunshine afforded; and there he would visit them from time to time, to pour out his love as a libation at the feet of Zillah, and to refresh his eyes and his heart by the contemplation of her beauty and sweetness. The only selfish feeling that crossed his mind was a thrill of joy at the thought that now he could indulge in his love unchecked, and could with a clear conscience devote the remainder of his life to Zillah's service: for she was no longer the wife of another man. That she had killed another man did not affect him at all, except in so far as it destroyed her own happiness; for it was a part of Nicholas's philosophy that men and women must be judged by what they are rather than by what they do, and that one hasty act is not necessarily an indication of character. Whatever she had done or left undone, Zillah was still Zillah, and the one woman in all the world for him: and that was enough for Nicholas Ingoldby.

## The Wisdom of Folly

Occupied with thoughts of Zillah's sufferings, past, present, and to be, and of fears for her future welfare, Nicholas made his way over the mountains to the doctor's house. To his relief the doctor was not in when he arrived, which allowed still more time for the sisters' escape. And while waiting for the doctor's return, Nicholas decided what course he must himself take with regard to the murder.

Although ready even to commit perjury for Zillah's sake, he saw that nothing would be gained by so doing. The best thing he could do in his interview would be to tell the simple truth about the whole affair, hiding nothing and extenuating nothing. He hoped with all his heart that Zillah would escape the arm of the law altogether: but if she did not, he saw that her best chance lay in a plea of manslaughter, for surely no jury would hang a woman for defending, even to the death, her baby from a man who was about to torture it. Even at the worst she could not be convicted of wilful murder: manslaughter was the utmost charge that could be brought against her, and Nicholas was clever enough to recognise that the simple truth was Zillah's strongest vindication. Therefore he saw that his wisest plan would be to describe the affair exactly as it happened, both now to the doctor and afterwards at the inquest, since it was impossible to conceal the fact that Zillah's was the hand which had slain Owen Griffith.

Nicholas had to wait over two hours before the doctor came in, as professional visits were few and far between in those remote regions. Then he told his story as simply and briefly as he could; and he and the doctor set out together in the latter's dogcart to traverse the mountain roads between there and Plâs Dovey.

The doctor—a pleasant enough old man in his way—was as sympathetic with Zillah as even Nicholas could wish. He had attended Mr. Treherne professionally for some weeks before the death of the latter; and had been struck by the unusual beauty and sweetness of the two girls, and by the pitifulness of their circumstances when at last their father was taken from them. He had longed, he told Nicholas, to interfere in the younger Miss Treherne's projected marriage, as he considered Griffith to be mentally unsound and therefore unfit to marry. But he could not prove this, as Griffith was still sane enough to be at large; and, moreover, this marriage seemed at the time to be the only possible alternative to the workhouse. But he had terrible tales to tell of Owen's cruel propensities—and particularly as directed against the baby from the hour of its birth.

"He couldn't forgive it for being a girl, you see," added the doctor; "he was set upon having a son."

"Do you mean to say that he actually hurt the little thing?" Nicholas asked.

"Not directly, because its mother and her sister took care to keep it out of his clutches. But he hurt it indirectly, as his vindictiveness against it so upset Mrs. Griffith that she became unable to nurse the child, and the infant's health suffered in consequence. I don't think she ever forgave him for that."

"And no wonder! The man was a perfect devil; and though he is dead I cannot help saying so."

"He was really a maniac," the doctor replied; "but unfortunately, just sane enough to keep himself out of a lunatic asylum. His mother was the same. For my part, I should say that whoever put an end to his wretched existence was a public benefactor; and I only hope we shall induce the jury to see the matter in the same light."

"Life with such a brute must have been hell upon earth," Nicholas muttered with a groan.

"It was. I can testify to that." And the kind-hearted old doctor beguiled the way with stories about the miseries of the two sisters, until he and his companion arrived at Plâs Dovey.

When they reached the house they found, as Nicholas had expected, Sally and some half-dozen villagers already on the scene of the tragedy, and no sign of Adah or Zillah or the baby. There were no telegraph offices in those remote regions, and no chance as yet of communicating with the police.

## The Wisdom of Folly

The doctor promised to do this after he had seen the body and pronounced life extinct; and he also requested Nicholas to stay on for a day or two at Llanferdovey, in order to attend the necessary inquest, and give his evidence as to the terrible provocation which the poor young woman had received before she resorted to so terrible an expedient as killing her husband.

And this Nicholas agreed to do, knowing that no one could plead Zillah's cause as well as he, nor give evidence so strongly in her favour. And all the time his tender heart was racked with suspense as to what had become of the fugitives, and whether they would succeed in evading the police.

### Chapter 7. THE FRISBYS

"My dear," Colonel Frisby remarked to his wife, "I feel a great, I think I may say a deep, interest in this terrible murder at Llanferdovey. Its having happened in our near, one might almost say our immediate, neighbourhood, seems to make it a matter of personal, even individual, concern."

"Things that are near always seem so much worse than things that are far off," replied Mrs. Frisby: "an epidemic at S. Petersburg isn't anything like so alarming as a case of scarlet fever next door; and no earthquake in New Zealand has ever upset me half as much as the bursting of our kitchen boiler."

"That is so, my love, that is so. The mental sense of perspective, if I may call it so, is very strong in cases of catastrophe, which probably proves some slight discrepancy in the evenness of the balance between the two sides of the brain, which discrepancy—though unnoticeable in ordinary circumstances—is brought into prominence by the sudden shock of evil tiding. There is always a scientific reason for every phenomenon, my dear Caroline, if we have only the wit to perceive it."

"Well, I haven't the wit to perceive things that aren't there, and I'm thankful for it. It takes me all my time to see what is there, and either to show it to you or to prevent you from seeing it, as the case may be, without bothering my head about colour-rays and the spectrum and things of that kind."

The Colonel looked at his wife with an admiration that almost amounted to worship. "My dear Caroline, how quick in apprehension, and at the same time how eminently practical you are! It often astounds me how very rapidly you assimilate my hints, or rather my adumbrations, of ideas, long before I have fully expressed or freely enlarged upon them. It is that wonderful quickness of perception on your part that always makes it such a pleasure, and I may say a profit, to converse with you." As this pleasure had continued for the last thirty years without any signs of satiety or abatement, it is safe to acquit the Colonel of exaggeration.

"But you were talking about the murder, William; let us talk a bit more about it, for it thrills me with interest. It is not only its being in the neighbourhood that makes it so exciting; it is because it was done by a woman, and by a young and good-looking woman into the bargain. I don't know why murders that are done by good-looking people are always so much more interesting than murders that are done by plain ones, but they are."

"Again, my love, your unerring instinct has hit upon a strange psychological phenomenon: namely, the marvellous influence that physical beauty—even though unseen by the actual eye—exercises upon the mind."

"Only in the case of murderesses, or queens, or people of that kind. For my part I don't care a bit whether my own personal friends and acquaintances are good-looking; and I'd very much rather that my servants were not."

"But if we had been so fortunate as to be blessed with a daughter, you would have wished her to be beautiful, Caroline?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Oh dear! no, I shouldn't. A beautiful daughter is a terrible responsibility, and one that I couldn't possibly have undertaken. All I should have bargained for was a daughter good-looking enough to get a husband of her own and not good-looking enough to take other people's. I'm sure when I see the trouble that some women have with beautiful daughters, I thank Heaven that I haven't got any."

"A *Te Deum* that might be raised in a good many homes, my love, judging from the specimens of young womanhood that I see nowadays!" remarked Colonel Frisby, with dry humour.

"And besides, William, how could two people with your mouth and my nose ever have had a beautiful daughter? It is ridiculous even to contemplate such a thing; so let us talk a bit more about the murder."

But the Colonel was not so easily drawn off the scent of a scientific dictum. "Ah! my love, Nature has long since taught us that it is not necessarily the handsomest parents that produce the handsomest children. It is frequently quite the reverse. I have often imagined that a daughter with your eyes and my nose, for instance—"

His wife interrupted him. "Oh! my dear, she'd never have had the sense at her age to pick and choose like that. She's have been bound to have your mouth and my nose, and probably a bit of your complexion as well: and in that case how could we ever have got her a good husband?"

"My love, you are too despondent," began the Colonel.

But again his wife interrupted him. "Well, William, considering that there's no such person and never will be, I don't see what's the good of bothering ourselves about the shape of her nose, or prescribing washes for her complexion. It is pure waste of time."

"You speak with your usual wisdom, my love, your usual wisdom. But if ever we carried into action that plan which we have so often discussed of adopting a daughter to soothe and comfort our declining years, we could then select whatever shape of nose we preferred, and regulate her complexion according to our own taste."

"Yes, William, so we could. And now let's talk about the murder. Do you think they'll ever find that poor young woman and her sister and the baby?"

"I cannot say, Caroline, I cannot say. But I most devoutly hope they will not. There is no doubt, from the evidence given at the inquest, that the poor young creature in a fit of violent, and I think I may say justifiable, rage did indeed slay with her own hand the wretched man whom she was so unfortunate as to call husband; and although it is really a case of manslaughter rather than murder, and no judge nor jury would condemn to death a young mother who was so sorely tried, they might commit her to penal servitude for a period of many years—possibly for the best part of her life. And think of the misery of being condemned at the age of twenty to a living death!"

Mrs. Frisby's eyes (still bright blue in spite of her fifty summers) filled with tears. "Oh, William, it would be dreadful! No regular exercise except the treadmill, and most insufficient food. I can't bear to think of it! I only wish I could help the poor young thing to escape!"

"But, my love, that would be a most dangerous thing to do, and might bring you under the arm of the law yourself for aiding and abetting an escaped criminal."

"I don't care for the arm of the law. I've had nobody's arm except yours round me for the last thirty years, and I'm not going to begin with the law's or anybody else's. But all I know is, that if I'd the chance of helping that poor young woman to get safe out of the country, I'd do it, and snap my fingers at all the judges in Christendom. I never care much for judges; I always think that those heavy wigs confuse their brains."

## The Wisdom of Folly

The worthy old soldier felt it his duty to remonstrate with such flat rebellion. "Still, my love, after all is said and done, and however much we may pity this young Mrs. Griffith, she did kill her husband."

"And what if she did? He was just the sort of husband that wanted killing. Why, if you'd been that sort of husband I should have killed you scores of times during the last thirty years! There are some things a wife is bound to put up with, and some things she isn't. If there is a man living in the house, you know that the railway guide and the paper-knife will always be lost, and that there'll always be marmalade on the daily paper. Every wife is bound to endure that, and she'll be a fool if she expects anything different. But no woman is bound to see babies and kittens put behind the fire, or horrible sights of that kind: and no woman with a tongue in her head or a knife in her hand would stand them for a moment!"

The Frisbys had been staying in lodgings in Llandudno for some three weeks, when that town and all the surrounding neighbourhood were electrified by the news of the tragedy at Plâs Dovey. The Colonel was a soldier of the old school; and after his retirement from the service he and his wife had settled down to live—upon their quite comfortable though not large means—in a picturesque village in the Midlands.

They were utterly unlike each other; and had apparently so little in common that their friends would never have thought of inviting them to the same dinner-party had they not happened to be husband and wife. Nevertheless—like many of such seemingly ill-assorted couples—they were absolutely devoted to one another, and as happy together as the days are long; the only drawback to their almost perfect happiness being that they had no children.

The Colonel was a typical little soldier to look at: spare and upright, with a stern mouth and an aquiline nose, and making the most of his too-limited inches; while Mrs. Frisby was of a fair height, comely and comfortable, but with no pretensions to past beauty save her still bright and mischievous blue eyes.

Early every year they left their house for three weeks, so that the domestic sprite which broods over the orgy known as "spring-cleaning" might hold high and undisturbed revel in their absence: and this year they had come to Llandudno, as one of the seaside places nearest to their own home. In the summer they went farther afield; but for their spring outing the Frisbys generally selected a not too distant bourne; so that—should the sprite of spring-cleaning prove too exigent—Mrs. Frisby was within postal hail of her household as a final court of appeal. All excursions into foreign parts were reserved for the summer, when the cleaning was accomplished, and no sweeps nor carpet-beaters nor whitewashers could mar the Frisbys' rest.

"But, my love," repeated the Colonel, "we must not allow our sympathies to blunt our moral sense. Pity the culprit as we may, murder is still murder."

"No, it isn't. You yourself said it was manslaughter."

"A technical quibble, Caroline, a mere technical quibble."

"Well, I can only say that I approve of killing husbands who fry kittens alive and torture children, as that man seems to have done, according to the inquest; and I think it was very amiable of Mrs. Griffith not to have killed him before. If I'd had a husband of that kind, I shouldn't have waited to manslaughter him when I was in a passion: I should have put arsenic in his coffee, and strychnine in his tea, in cold blood, and then blown him up with gunpowder, as Mary Queen of Scots did."

The Colonel chuckled. "Then I must congratulate myself, Caroline, that I do not resemble in character this unfortunate Griffith; otherwise my life would have been a very uncertain one."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"And your death very certain," added Mrs. Frisby. "I gather from reading the evidence at the inquest that this poor Zillah Griffith was driven by poverty into a marriage with this horrid man. And I think it is wicked of parents to leave their daughters so unprovided for that they are obliged either to marry men who fry kittens and torture children, or else starve. If we'd had that daughter with your nose that you are so fond of talking about, I should have taken care either to teach her a profession, or else to leave her a competence, so that she need never have married anybody that she didn't want to. I couldn't have endured any daughter of mine to marry a man who roasted kittens alive and threw babies behind the fire, and whose mother had been a gipsy in a caravan!"

"Certainly not, my love; I can quite enter into and understand your feelings. And think what a terrible life this poor young woman must have had for the last year or so, if all the evidence given at the inquest be true!"

"Dreadful! It shows what a nice disposition she must have, not to have killed the wretch before. If she'd been the murdering sort, she's have murdered him twelve months ago. Oh, I do hope she'll get off!"

"So do I, Caroline, with all my heart."

"Why, if I'd had a baby," continued Zillah's champion, "and a man had thrown it behind the fire, I shouldn't have been content with just murdering him; I should have had him drawn and quartered, and should have stuck his head on Tower Bridge."

"And where is the poor young creature now?" asked Colonel Frisby. "Does it say in the paper whether her friends have any idea of the whereabouts of the poor young thing?"

"Of course it doesn't, William. If it did, she wouldn't be safe for another day. No; all that is known is that when Mr. Ingoldby—a nice young man, apparently, from the way he gave his evidence; I have quite taken a fancy to him—left the house to fetch the doctor (though what was the good of fetching the doctor when Griffith was already dead, I can't imagine), the two sisters and the baby were in it; and when he returned they were nowhere to be seen, and have never been heard of since. They had evidently run away in his absence: and I, for one, don't blame them for it."

"Dear me, dear me! And was he absent long?"

"Between four and five hours, because the doctor lived on the other side of the mountain. That comes of living so far away from a doctor—though in this case it turned out to be a good thing! But, I think, as a rule, it is dreadfully dangerous to live on the other side of a mountain from one's doctor; I daren't do such a thing at any price. I couldn't keep in my bed at night if I thought that there was a mountain between me and my doctor, and that I couldn't get him in half an hour if I were taken ill; or, still worse, if you were!"

"I quite agree with you, my love, that it is a great convenience in cases of illness to be within easy reach of a medical man; it so minimises the risk of any accident or sudden seizure. Nevertheless, I should always advise all persons over whom I had any influence to supply themselves with a good stock of household remedies, and with adequate medical knowledge to administer the same in cases of emergency."

But Mrs. Frisby shook her head. "I always think that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, particularly in medicine. I'm sure that nothing but a special Providence could have saved me from the effects of all the amateur doses you've given me since we were married. I've taken enough iron to build a man-of-war, and enough quinine to embitter my whole existence, to say nothing of bicarbonate of soda and sweet nitre, and goodness knows what! I must be like a chemist's shop inside. And yet here I am alive. I wonder I haven't broken out into those large coloured glass bottles that chemists always have in their windows!"

"And has no one any idea as to what has become of these two unfortunate young persons?" the Colonel asked.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"None at all; or, at least, nobody has said so, which comes to the same thing. I have my suspicions that that nice young man, named Ingoldby, could tell more if he liked: but he evidently doesn't like, any more than I should like if I were in his place. My opinion is—judging from the nice, thoughtful way in which he gave his evidence—that he is in love with the unmarried sister."

Colonel Frisby smiled. "My dear, what a mind yours is for running upon romance! You are always thinking about whether people are in love with each other."

"And there's nothing else worth thinking about in my opinion," replied Mrs. Frisby, who was a born matchmaker. "If only that young Ingoldby is in love with the unmarried sister, it will make that murder as good as any novel."

"It would make it still more like a novel if he were in love with the married sister, Caroline."

"But not like a nice novel—not like the sort of novel that we should have allowed that daughter with your nose and my eyes, if she'd ever been born, to read. No, William, mark my words: that young man is in love with Adah Treherne, the unmarried sister, and he is holding his tongue in order to let the two poor things escape if possible."

"It is a sad case, Caroline, a very sad case! It will be a miserable fate for the poor young wife if she is caught; and hardly a less miserable one if she has to spend the rest of her life in hiding."

"Well, of the two, I'd rather spend my life in hiding than in prison: I should get more fresh air, and it would be more cheerful. And then eventually that nice young man could marry the other sister, and live happy ever after."

"He could do that in either case," replied Colonel Frisby. "There is no suggestion of putting Miss Treherne into prison, or of her being in any way responsible for the catastrophe. It was solely Mrs. Griffith's act, done under the influence of sudden and uncontrollable—and I think I may say justifiable—anger."

"Still that nice young man—and I am sure he is nice from the way he gave his evidence—might hesitate, nice as he is, to marry a woman whose sister was in prison. Some men hate that sort of thing."

"And not unnaturally. Some men also might object to marrying a woman whose sister had killed her husband."

But Mrs. Frisby waived aside this possible objection with scorn. "Oh! that would be positively ridiculous. That sort of thing doesn't run in families. I never heard of a case of two sisters both killing their husbands; never!"

"Well, my love, I can only repeat that it is a sad story; a very sad story!" said the Colonel, sighing and shaking his head.

"Talking of sad things, I can tell you of another," remarked Mrs. Frisby; "and that is the case of our fellow-lodgers."

"Indeed, my love, and pray what is amiss with them?"

"One of them—a young Mrs. Evans—is very ill indeed with double pneumonia. The doctor comes twice a day, but Mrs. Price is afraid he won't be able to save her." (Mrs. Price was the name of the woman who kept the lodgings.)

"Dear me, Caroline, that is sad indeed! I have thought I heard someone coughing as I came up and down stairs, and this accounts for it. Is any one with this poor invalid?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Yes; her sister, a Miss Morgan, a very pretty girl indeed. I have met her once or twice on the stairs. Tall and slender, with a complexion like a rose and an expression like an angel."

"And have they a trained nurse as well?"

"No," replied Mrs. Frisby, "they haven't. The doctor wished it, but they were both so set against it that he didn't press the point. And Miss Morgan evidently knows a lot about nursing, and is quite competent to look after her sister."

"And is the invalid young also, and of equal personal attractions?" inquired the Colonel.

"Very much the same age, Mrs. Price says, and very good-looking too; but, of course, just now she is so terribly ill that one can hardly judge of her looks properly, illness being so dreadfully unbecoming to anybody: though Mrs. Price thinks that when she was well she must have been as pretty as her sister. And she has a little baby, which makes things worse. They have no relations, and Mrs. Evans is a widow, and Mrs. Price says it makes her heart bleed to see two such young and pretty creatures alone in the world, to say nothing of the baby, which is a sweet little thing, and already very like its mother and its aunt to look at," said Mrs. Frisby, who—like many childless women—was always absorbingly interested in her neighbours' affairs.

"Well, Caroline, as I said before, it is a sad case—a very sad case—but I do not think that we can do anything, as they have a regular medical practitioner in attendance. Otherwise I should have been only too pleased to prescribe for the young lady myself, as I am always very successful in dealing with chest and throat troubles," said the Colonel, whose favourite pastime was medicine. "Unless my memory misleads me, I have never failed to cure a cold of yours, Caroline. Is not that so?"

"Hitherto I have always recovered from my colds, I am thankful to say, but whether that has been on account of your remedies, or in spite of your remedies, I am not prepared to give an opinion. And when all is said and done, my colds have never gone lower than the top button of my petticoat—bodice, which is a very different thing from double pneumonia. I don't want you to be tried for manslaughter as well as Mrs. Griffith, so I think you'd better leave Mrs. Evans' cold alone."

The Colonel rose from his seat and looked out of the window. "It is a beautiful morning, a very beautiful morning, Caroline; and, if you will excuse me for half an hour, I think I will stroll down to the station and buy a paper. If I start at once I shall return in ample time to accompany you on your customary constitutional."

"Then be off at once, William, for I like a good walk before my lunch, and I own I don't see the point of a woman carrying her own waterproof when she has got a husband to carry it for her," replied Mrs. Frisby, who rarely, even in the finest weather, went out without the protection of a mackintosh.

As soon as her husband had started, she sat down the more carefully to study the local paper. But she had hardly begun to read before Mrs. Price knocked at the door.

"I am sorry to trouble you, ma'am," said the worthy woman on entering, "but I am sorely exercised in my mind about the two poor ladies on the second floor, and hardly know what to do, life being so uncertain, and me not having any man to turn to, having lost my poor husband these ten years." Like everybody who knew Mrs. Frisby, Mrs. Price instinctively turned to her in trouble.

Mrs. Frisby's sympathy and interest were excited at once. She dearly loved poking a finger into other people's pies; but in justice to her it must be admitted that the process invariably tended to the sweetening of the pies. "Well, Mrs. Price, and what's the matter now? Mrs. Evans no worse, I hope."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"But she is, ma'am; that's the trouble. The doctor has just been to see her, and tells me that, in his judgment it isn't possible for her to live another twenty-four hours, both lungs having intervened on a delicate constitution and a heart that is far from strong to begin with."

Mrs. Frisby's blue eyes filled with tears. "Oh, dear oh dear, that's sad news indeed! Surely her friends ought to be communicated with, and communicated with at once. The sisters are too young to be alone at a time like this."

"So I made a bold to say to Miss Morgan. But she tells me they are quite alone in the world, and have no friends or relations at all, which is more than I can understand in the case of such perfect ladies, most orphans having grandparents, or, at any rate, an aunt or two."

"How very sad! And at their age, too! They cannot be more than two or three—and—twenty."

"If they are that," added Mrs. Price. "But it is always difficult, begging your pardon, ma'am, to guess the exact age of them very slim figures, Time seeming, as a rule, to pass over the thin ones in order to devote himself to the stout. To me they seem little more than children."

"I wonder if they are well provided for, or if poverty is added to their miseries," said Mrs. Frisby. "If it is, I must see what I can do to help them."

"No ma'am, there doesn't seem to be any scarcity of money, which is, indeed, an alleviation to most of the troubles of this world. I will say that for them. In fact Miss Morgan assured me this very morning that although they had no friends, I need be in no anxiety about getting my bill paid, me naturally feeling anxious, having no man to work for me, and my poor husband in his grave these ten years."

"Well, it is very sad to see two such young things so solitary and friendless. It would make me miserable if they were my daughters," said Mrs. Frisby, with much kindness of heart and some confusion of thought. "I will go up to their room at once and see if I can do anything for them. They may be without relations, but they shan't be without a friend for another five minutes, or my name isn't Caroline Frisby!"

But although the lady rose from her seat, the landlady did not budge. "That isn't quite all, ma'am," she added, lowering her voice and looking round to see that the door was quite shut and nobody listening: "that isn't the whole of my difficulty. A death in a lodging-house is bad enough, I admit, being so apt to scare away other lodgers, even though in no ways infectious or even contagious, folks being so nervous about their healths. But there's something worse even than a death."

"Good gracious, Mrs. Price, what on earth are you driving at?"

"Well, you see, ma'am, it's in this way," continued Mrs. Price in a more mysterious voice than ever: "I haven't mentioned it to anybody but you, nor should I till I've asked your opinion, being a lone and solitary widow with no man to lean on or to ask advice of. But having read all the accounts of the murder at Llanferdovey—as who could fail to do, being such an interesting and awful occurrence and so near home?—I've come to the conclusion that my two upstairs lodgers are none other than that particular pair of sisters, Mrs. Evans being really Mrs. Griffith, and Miss Morgan Miss Treherne."

## Chapter 8. THE FINDING OF THE FUGITIVES

Mrs. Frisby fairly gasped. Here was excitement indeed! "Did you suspect this when they first came?" she asked as soon as mingled horror and astonishment allowed her sufficient breath for speaking purposes.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"No, ma'am; how could I," replied Mrs. Price, "considering that the young ladies arrived here and took my rooms before there was a word about the murder in any of the papers; but I own I did think it a bit funny that they had no luggage with them, though Miss Morgan did say something about having lost it all on the way, and expecting it to turn up by the next train? And by the time the murder was out, and the police in full chase after the young ladies, as you might say, they were safe hidden on my second-floor-back."

"Tell me about their arrival, Mrs. Price. Tell me everything. It was certainly queer their having no luggage as you say; and I have found that whenever anything queer happens there is always something still queerer at the back of it."

Mrs. Price ostentatiously concealed a cough—as her class have a habit of so concealing such conversational interruptions—and proceeded with her narrative, greatly flattered by her lodger's intense interest in the recital. "Well, ma'am, you see it was in this way. You and the Colonel being settled on the drawing-room floor, and the dining-room suite being permanently let to a single gentleman with a weak chest, who happens to be away staying with his own relations for the present, but never allowing his rooms to be sub-let in his absence for fear of infection, I had nothing vacant but the small sitting-room on the second-floor with the bedroom adjoining it, and also the extra bedroom on the same floor belonging to the dining-room suite, but not being included in the present dining-room let, the single gentleman only occupying one, and that on the ground floor. So when the young ladies arrived at the door—that is to say, Miss Morgan, Mrs. Evans staying in the cab till the last moment, and me seeing at a glance that they were real ladies—I offered them the second-floor sitting-room with two bedrooms, that being all I had available."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Price, I quite understand. Go on."

Mrs. Price, hugely delighted at being thus urged, continued, "I was taken with Miss Morgan's appearance the minute I opened the front door to her—such a perfect lady, and so pretty at that. Not that I'm one to set too much store on good looks, beauty being but skin deep, and Providence looking not upon the outward appearance. But all the same there are faces *and* faces; and some seem to go straight to your heart at once, while others stick in your throat from the very beginning, and it is no good saying that this isn't so when it is. And Miss Morgan's face went to my heart before I'd opened the door as far as the hall-mat; and the second-floor was hers before she'd as much as asked for it."

"What did she say?"

"She said as how she and her married sister were travelling together, and how the sister had caught a dreadful chill and couldn't proceed on her journey, and she didn't know where to take her, having lost all their luggage and no friends within reach. And seeing the 'Apartments' card in the window—me always putting it there when the downstairs gentleman is away on a visit, though he don't allow it if he knows—she came to ask if I could take her and her sister and her sister's baby in, until her sister's cold was better."

"And of course you consented at once."

"Well, ma'am, what else could I do, me having such a tender heart, and never *any* children of my own to lavish it upon?"

"Nothing, considering that the poor young woman was ill and you have rooms to spare. It would have been positively horrible of you to have made the slightest objection."

Mrs. Price purred with satisfaction at such magnificent approval. "Of course, many lodging-house keepers do refuse to take invalids, the other lodgers often making such objections; and I did go to the length of asking whether it was in any way a catching complaint. But when she assured me that it was only a very bad cold in the

## The Wisdom of Folly

chest, and she feared bronchitis, what could I do but throw open my doors to her at once; especially as my late husband suffered from a weak chest for years, and never went out without flannel round his throat and cotton-wool in both ears—not even on the warmest day in summer. So that I know all about chest complaints, and that they aren't catching, and I seem to feel a special interest in them for my late husband's sake."

"I'm sorry to hear that Mr. Price had such a delicate chest," said Mrs. Frisby, her ready sympathy stifling for the moment her rampant curiosity. "Did he die of it in the end?"

"No ma'am, not of his chest. A furniture van carried him off at last by running over him, which doubtless was providential, even though sudden and unexpected."

"Oh, how dreadful! How very dreadful! And it must have been such a fearful shock to you!"

This was a proud moment for Mrs. Price, and she fully appreciated it. "Yes, ma'am, that's just what it was—a shock, as you say, rather than a sorrow. For he was a trying man, was Price, and I'd borne with him for over twenty years. And if he'd been at home as he ought to have been at that time of night, instead of just coming out of *The Welsh Harp*—and if he'd been walking on the side-path as is meant for walking on, instead of staggering in the middle of the road—he'd never have got under that there furniture van; all things being ordered by Providence and working together for good."

"And so you took those poor young creatures in," said Mrs. Frisby, returning to the thrilling subject under discussion, "as was right and kind of you. And did Mrs. Evans seem dreadfully ill then?"

"She did ma'am. As I saw her coming out of the cab on her sister's arm, and being helped up the stairs, I saw death written on her face as plain as the places on a finger-post, me not being one to cry Peace, when there's no peace. 'There's more than a common cold there,' says I to myself; and so it proved: for they sent for the doctor next day, and he said it was double pneumonia, with a delicate constitution, and a nervous breakdown, and exposure to the cold and wet thrown in. And she has been getting steadily worse ever since, her cough being something awful to listen to, especially at nights, which is the worst time for sick folks."

"It is really dreadful," sighed Mrs. Frisby; "my heart bleeds for the poor young things! And how soon did it strike you that they were Mrs. Griffith and Miss Treherne?"

"As soon as I read the description of the missing sisters in the papers. But I wasn't going to say a word that could bring fresh trouble upon a dying woman, her having enough to bear as it was, with her double pneumonia and delicate constitution and what not. So I held my tongue. And if she'd got better and gone away in the course of nature, as all my other lodgers do, I should have held my tongue for ever, not seeing any cause to do otherwise. They gave their names as Mrs. Evans and Miss Morgan; and Mrs. Evans and Miss Morgan they were to me, and always would have been; it isn't my place to pry into what my lodgers' *alibis* or *aliases*, or whatever you call them—and especially when they pay a week in advance, as these two poor young ladies did. But if she dies on my hands and there is a funeral, and perhaps an inquest, it seems rather to alter things, ma'am; though, I dare say, with the doctor in regular attendance there wouldn't be an inquest at all."

"Yes, it does," replied Mrs. Frisby thoughtfully. "Of course, if she had recovered, and they had left of their own accord, you could have stood aside, so to speak, and not interfered with their concerns at all. But you can hardly stand aside when a young woman dies under your roof, leaving an unmarried sister and a young baby utterly alone and friendless. Neither can we."

"Besides, ma'am, you see it is like this. As long as the poor young woman is alive, I feel bound to save her, if possible, from the gallows, for goodness knows what will be done to her if the police get hold of her, and she having just murdered her own lawful husband; and nobody knowing better than I do how trying lawful husbands

## The Wisdom of Folly

can be if they take it into their heads! It would be cruel to give her up into the hangman's hands, and she suffering from a cold on the lungs and a temperature of one hundred and three degrees. But if she dies, neither the policeman nor the hangman can harm her any more. And the question is, what ought I to do then?"

"I think then it will be Miss Treherne's business, and not ours, to decide what is to be done. But if Mrs. Evans is really Mrs. Griffith—as after what you have told me I feel convinced she is—her sister will find it a difficult business to go on concealing her identity. But all that can wait. The first thing to be done now is to look after those poor dear young women as they are, and not to trouble our heads about who they are if they are somebody else and the second thing is, to hold our tongues as long as Mrs. Evans lives, and to let her die in peace."

"Thank you ma'am," said Mrs. Price with much relief, preparing to follow Mrs. Frisby out of the room; "that's just what comfort having you to back me up, me having no man to fight my battles for me, and yet not liking to deliver a pretty young woman, with a temperature of one hundred and three degrees, right into the hangman's hands."

"Things often settle themselves if you leave them for a bit," replied Mrs. Frisby, opening the door; "and a way of escaping out of a difficulty is frequently provided for us if we've the faith to expect it and the wit to perceive it. But," she added, turning back and closing the door again for a moment, "I think we'll say nothing about this suspicion of ours to Colonel Frisby. He is a most wise and good man, and I always turn to him in any and every difficulty, and am guided by his superior judgment. But when a question of what is one's duty is involved, it is often best not to tell a man anything at all about it, as he is so apt to put that before every other consideration—particularly if he happens to be a soldier. If we told Colonel Frisby our suspicion, he might think it his duty to communicate with the police. I don't say that he *would*, but he *might*. But if he knows nothing at all about the matter he can't do his duty, because there won't be any duty to do; and that saves a world of trouble when a man and a soldier is concerned. If I don't want the Colonel to do his duty, I never let him find out what his duty is, and that saves his conscience and my arrangements." After which sage enunciation Mrs. Frisby walked out of the room and upstairs, to offer her help and sympathy to the desolate young lodgers on the second floor.

It was late that afternoon before she came out of the sick-room, and by that time all was over; and the woman who was known as Mrs. Evans had quietly passed over to join the great majority. For the last hours of her life, Mrs. Frisby's kindness to her had been beyond description; and at the end she fell asleep, holding the elder woman's hand.

When all was ended, Mrs. Frisby led the bereaved sister out of the room into the small sitting-room adjoining it; and then putting her arms round the weeping girl, she begged to be allowed to act the part of mother to one who was so obviously in need of sheltering care and tenderness.

"My dear," she added, "I don't want to ask any questions, or to pry into any matter that doesn't concern me; so don't tell me anything you don't wish me to know. But if there is anything that I can do for you, for goodness' sake let me do it, for I want a daughter as much as you seem to want a mother; and I always love to help young people if I can, for the sake of the daughter that I never had."

The weeping girl nestled closer to the motherly shoulder and cried as if she would sob her heart out. Then—when she was sufficiently recovered from her first outburst of grief—she spoke in accents broken with weeping.

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Frisby—it is so good of you to take an interest in two such desolate and forsaken creatures as baby and me. I am going to take you at your word—and make a friend of you—and tell you all the dreadful truth about myself!"

"Tell me as much or as little as you like, my dear, and remember that in everything you shall have my sympathy and my help."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I couldn't tell—the truth—while my sister was alive," sobbed the girl, "for reasons—that I am going to explain to you. But now that she is dead—and nothing can harm her more—I am going to—to—make a clean breast of everything."

"It is generally best to tell the truth," said Mrs. Frisby, in a soothing voice, as if she were speaking to a sick child; "it is the right thing to do, and as a rule much the easiest."

"I daresay you have guessed it by now; and if you haven't—I will tell it to you. My name isn't Morgan at all, but is—is—really—Adah Treherne."

"Yes, my dear, I did guess it. But I should never have referred to such a suspicion if you hadn't told me yourself."

"And yet you still keep your arms round me? You don't shrink from me?"

"Good gracious me, no, why should I? You aren't responsible for what your poor sister did. And even if you were, it wouldn't make any difference to me, for if ever it is justifiable to take away human life, I am sure your poor sister had every provocation."

The younger woman threw her arms round the elder's neck in a perfect passion of gratitude; thereby awakening once and for ever the motherly love that had lain dormant for so many years in Mrs. Frisby's soul. From that moment the empty place which had been left by the daughter who never came, ceased its continuous aching; and the large and tender heart of Caroline Frisby was satisfied at last.

"How good you are, dear Mrs. Frisby! And how I love you for being so good to me!"

"And I love you, too, my dear, though I have only known you a few hours. But two who have stood together beside Jordan can never any more be strangers to each other. I am glad you have told me the truth of your own free will; very glad. And if you wish it, I will still keep your secret from every one except my husband. But I think it right to tell you that Mrs. Price has her suspicions too—and probably the doctor—so I fear you will find it very difficult to keep up your disguise."

"I don't want to—and I couldn't if I did. I dare say that even now the—the—police are on the right track, and will soon—find us out. But what does it matter now that Zillah is safe? Whatever happens, they can never hang her now!"

"They would never have hung her; there was no question of that after the provocation that she received. The Colonel said there wasn't," replied the Colonel's wife, referring to her final court of appeal in support of her statement. "But they would have had to try her, and would perhaps have sent her to prison."

The girl shuddered. "My poor sister! And she was so young."

"I know. That was what made it seem so dreadful. But now she is saved from all that, poor dear!"

"Yes, I know she is. But it is dreadful to lose her. She and I have always been so much to each other ever since we were little children." And the bereaved sister's sorrow again choked her, and rendered speech impossible.

For a few minutes Mrs. Frisby stroked the weeping girl's hair in silence. Then she spoke. "My poor child, my heart bleeds for you! But how did Mrs. Griffith manage to take such an awful chill? Was she quite well when you left Plâs Dovey?"



## The Wisdom of Folly

By that time the girl had again sufficiently recovered herself to answer. "She had a very heavy cold then—a fearful cold—and—all that had happened—on that dreadful day—"

"Oh of course, that would upset her," said Mrs. Frisby soothingly, as if the upset had been none of Zillah's doing. "But now tell me all about it, my dear Miss Treherne. It will ease your poor mind to talk to somebody."

Good Mrs. Frisby was overflowing with sympathy; but she was overflowing with curiosity also.

"I will tell you everything. You are the only friend I have. Only please don't call me Miss Treherne—call me Adah. Miss Treherne sounds so stiff—and makes me feel lonely and homesick."

"Very well, Adah. And now tell me your story."

"As soon as we came—to ourselves—after that awful thing—had happened—Nicholas Ingoldby—who was with us—went to fetch the doctor." The girl's utterance was still choked with the sobs that come after violent weeping.

"Yes, my dear. I read all that in the papers. And then?"

"Then Sally Jones—our servant—rushed off to Llanferdovey to give the alarm. And Zillah and I—with the baby—made our escape down to the shore, where we knew there was an old boat moored."

She did not add that Ingoldby had himself suggested this course; but quick-witted Mrs. Frisby had her suspicions.

"And so," prompted that worthy matron, "you thought you could row yourselves to a place of safety before the hue—and—cry after you began. Was that it?"

"Yes. We thought we could row—to Llandudno—and catch the train there—and escape to London—and hide ourselves."

"And couldn't you?"

"The tide was against us—and the boat was old and clumsy: but I think we should have managed all right if my poor sister had not suddenly fainted—she went from one fainting fit to another—and there was I, in a small boat on the open sea, with my sister unconscious—and her baby in my arms." And at the memory of that awful night the poor girl shuddered so that she could hardly speak.

"My poor child! my poor, poor child!"

"Then the heavy rain came on—and all night long we drifted about, till I didn't care what became of us, but hoped we should all three be drowned together; I can hardly remember what happened next—it is all confused, like a horrible nightmare!"

"Did your sister rally again when the morning came?" asked Mrs. Frisby.

"Yes; and she was able to help me with the boat—so that between us we managed to row to shore—and then to make our way on foot to Llandudno. As soon as we reached the town I took a cab, and we went round in search of lodgings—and we succeeded in getting these."

"And a great mercy that you did! But was your sister very ill by that time?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Very ill indeed. She had a bad cold when we left home—and she was never very strong."

Mrs. Frisby's eyes filled with tears. "Poor thing! Poor thing! And I suppose the night's exposure brought on lung mischief on the top of a bad cold?"

"Yes; if it hadn't been for that, we should have succeeded in catching the London train and getting right away—but I saw Zillah was far too ill to attempt a railway journey—she would probably have died in the train. So the only thing to do was to take her to the first lodgings I could find, and there try to nurse her back to health. From the first she knew that she was dying—she had no doubt of it in her own mind—and she begged me to go on to London with the child and to leave her to her fate. But I would rather have died with her than do that." And the bitter tears began to flow afresh.

"There, my dear Adah, don't cry, don't cry! It was very unselfish of your sister to want you to go; and very unselfish of you to insist upon staying."

"Oh, I couldn't have left her—I couldn't have left her! We two had always been all the world to each other!"

"Of course you couldn't, my poor darling! But what do you propose to do now?"

At that moment the baby, who had been sleeping for the past hour or two, woke up and began to laugh and crow; whereat Mrs. Frisby took it in her arms and hushed it in a very ecstasy of delight. "Poor little baby, poor little motherless darling! How little she knows the terrible loss that has just befallen her!" And the good lady caressed and dandled the child in an ecstasy of delight. "I do adore babies," she said, "especially girl babies; and this is an exceptionally pretty little thing."

The baby, however, perceiving that a stranger was holding it—and moreover a stranger unaccustomed to the holding of babies—began to cry; and Mrs. Frisby was obliged to relinquish her hold of the child. "How well you manage it!" she cried enviously, watching the ease with which the younger and more experienced woman hushed the baby to sleep again, stifling her own sobs to soothe those of the infant. "I do wish she would have been good with me."

"She knows me, you see, and I've had so much to do with her ever since she was born."

"I expect you're very fond of her."

"Devoted. Zillah always used to say that Amy was as much my baby as hers. I lived with my sister; so the baby was as much accustomed to me as she was to her mother, and we took it in turns to do everything for her."

"Ah! I can see how you love her by the way you handle the dear little thing!"

The baby gradually dropped off to sleep again, and then Mrs. Frisby repeated her question.

"And what, my dear child, do you propose to do now?"

"To make no further effort to conceal myself, but to tell everybody the truth as I am telling you. My dear sister and I arranged this together before she became unconscious. If she is no longer with us to be hidden from the police, why should baby and I remain in hiding? It would be best, she said, for us to make a clean breast of it, as they couldn't do anything to her after she was dead; and then for baby and me to go right away, and begin life again somewhere under different names."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"And so it will, Adah. Your poor sister gave you most excellent advice. And have you no friends or relatives who will take you in for the present?"

"None at all. Baby and I must just shift for ourselves."

"Then, my dear, I take it upon myself to offer you a home while you look about you and see what is the best permanent arrangement that you can make; and I know that my husband will echo every word I say as soon as he hears it, and will welcome you as warmly as I shall. After your poor sister is buried and our spring-cleaning is over, you shall go back with the Colonel and me to Meadowford, and we will take care of you and nurse you back to health and happiness."

"Oh, you are too good, too good! You never saw me till to-day."

"But the moment I saw you I loved you; and love takes no account of time. If I'm going to be fond of people, I'm fond of them the very minute I first set eyes on them; and if I'm not going to be fond of them, seeing them all day and every day wouldn't make me one atom fonder. And I shouldn't want it too; for if there is one thing I enjoy more than another, it is a good, unfounded prejudice."

"And then you forget that baby and I are the sister and the child of a—a—murderess." And the girl hid her face and shuddered as she said the awful word.

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear Adah! Whatever are you talking about? Your sister was no more a murderess than I am. She very properly killed a man in order to save the life of her own dear little baby; just as I should have done myself if I'd ever been so fortunate as to have a baby to save. But to call such an act murder is absurd, besides being unkind and unsisterly, and I won't allow you to do it. Justifiable homicide is the worst that anybody could say of it; and I shouldn't put even that down in black and white, because it is so dreadfully difficult to spell."

Again Mrs. Frisby's motherly heart was thrilled to its core by the feeling of girlish arms around her neck. "Oh, you dear, dear woman! How shall I ever love you enough?"

But at that moment the colloquy was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Mrs. Frisby automatically. And even as she said it she knew what was coming.

"It is I, my love," replied her husband's voice. "May I speak to you for a moment?"

The two clinging women rose immediately to their feet.

"It is the police, Mrs. Frisby—I know it is! Tell your husband that he can bring them to me at once."

Mrs. Frisby went out on to the landing, closing the door softly behind her for fear of waking the baby. "I know what it is, William. Those interfering police have come bothering these two poor innocent girls."

The Colonel almost fell to the ground, so astonished was he at his wife's apparently superhuman powers of penetration. "My dear Caroline, you are marvellous! Positively marvellous! I never knew such a rapid intellect in my life."

"Never mind my intellect, William; there isn't time to attend to my intellect just now. That will keep. The police are perfectly right in supposing that poor Mrs. Evans was in reality Mrs. Griffith; and Miss Treherne is quite willing for them to know it, though I can't for the life of me see what business it is of theirs. So perhaps Mrs. Price had better show them up at once, and get all this unpleasantness over as quickly and as quietly as possible."

## The Wisdom of Folly

The Colonel retreated, still marvelling at the perspicacity and the common-sense of his better-half; and shortly afterwards Mrs. Price came upstairs followed by two policemen and a detective in plain clothes.

The object of their search met them at the top of the stairs. "You are looking for me and for my sister, I believe," she said, with the dignity of an outraged queen. "Here am I, and my name is Adah Treherne. And here," she added, flinging open the door of the chamber of death, "is your prisoner, Zillah Griffith."

And as the detective and the two officers entered the room and saw the calm and placid figure lying on the bed, they realised that their search was ended indeed. It was not for them to stamp with the brand of Cain that marble brow; nor to imprison with handcuffs those soft white hands, upon which the wedding-ring hung so loosely. Whatever sin the dead woman had committed was now beyond the jurisdiction of an earthly judge; for instead of standing at the bar of human justice, she had gone to appear before the higher tribunal of Divine Mercy.

## Chapter 9. A REFUGE

And how had Nicholas Ingoldby fared during the five long days that had elapsed since the murder of Owen Griffith?

Until the inquest was over he stayed on at Llanferdovey, and gave—as has already been seen—as favourable evidence as he could for the woman he loved: but when that dreadful business was concluded he went straight back to Eldhurst, there to await news of the fugitives, who, he hoped, were by this time safe in London.

As the dreary hours rolled on, Nicholas gradually realised the full force of the blow which he had sustained. At first he was numbed by the suddenness of the event and the awful horror of it; but gradually the immediate effects of the shock passed away, and he began to understand what a ghastly blank the rest of his life was going to be, uncheered by the presence of the woman whom he loved.

Until he met Adah on the road to Llanferdovey and learnt from her lips that her sister was already married, the possibility of a life without Zillah had never occurred to him. She had been the centre of all his dreams, the object of all his hopes. It was for her that he had welcomed his godfather's fortune, with her that he had looked forward to the spending of it; money, health, leisure, even life itself, were worthless to him unless they could be shared with Zillah. And now Zillah had suddenly been put out of his reach.

And yet not out of his reach altogether.

At the back of his mind there was still the thought that when the sisters were safely hidden away in some far-off land, beyond the reach of English judges and English juries, he would from time to time visit them, and refresh his soul and feast his eyes with the charm of their society and the delight of their beauty. And still farther back in his mind—almost too far for his conscious self to penetrate—there was a dim, half-defined hope that in some distant future he and Zillah might at last marry one another, and spend the remainder of their lives together in some remote foreign country, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot."

Now that Owen was dead, Nicholas's heart turned again to Zillah with a rebound of relief. When first he had heard that she was another man's wife, he made up his mind then and there that, after one final farewell, he would never see her again, but would strive with prayer and fasting to banish her beloved image from his thoughts and from his affections. But after her husband's death this attitude of mind changed. It was now no sin to worship Zillah: so worship her he would, with all his heart and mind, until his life's end.

But though the fact that she was another man's wife had altered the quality of his love towards her, the fact that she had killed that other man did not alter it at all: wherein Nicholas showed himself unlike the majority of his

## The Wisdom of Folly

kind. He was able to differentiate between a sin and a crime; and while he shrunk from the former with horror and loathing, the latter awoke in his soul nothing but an intense and overwhelming pity. The world, as a rule, judges differently. It makes up for permitting sin by strenuously punishing crime. But the wisdom of Nicholas was not the wisdom of this world, but was rather foolishness and a stumbling-block to the conventional mind. He realised this fully himself; and he smiled as he recalled the old legend of Sir Mandolet, who claimed the woman he loved, regardless as to whether she possessed the Evil Eye or not: for Mandolet was fool enough to believe that we do not love a thing because it is worthy of love, but that a thing becomes worthy of love because we love it: and Nicholas Ingoldby was every whit as great a fool as Mandolet.

Lady Ingoldby was very kind to her son just then, with the abundant kindness of one who has gained happiness at the cost of another's sorrow. We are all very tender in circumstances such as these: our sympathy is intense, our pity overflowing: there is nothing we would not do to ease the pain which another has paid as the price of our pleasure—except to cure it.

Distressed as Lady Ingoldby had been by the fearful tragedy at Llanferdovey, she would have been more than human if she had altogether suppressed a natural feeling of relief that Fate had come to her rescue, and prevented a marriage which—although she was prepared to countenance it—she would always have disliked. She cherished no animosity towards the girl whom her son had chosen—she hoped with all sincerity that Zillah would succeed in evading the clutches of the law—but her heart was filled with a secret relief and joy that now it was impossible for Nicholas ever to marry the woman that he loved. Of that dim and indistinct hope, which still haunted the inmost recesses of his soul, she had not the ghost of a suspicion: to Lady Ingoldby it was unthinkable that a man could ever voluntarily marry a woman who was guilty of murder—or could even continue to love her. She was almost glad (though she had not the slightest idea of this, and would have been terribly offended if any one had suggested it) that Zillah had capped the act of marrying Owen Griffith by killing him; for—so reasoned Lady Ingoldby in the ignorance and blindness of her heart—there was nothing in the former deed to prevent Nicholas from still loving the girl, though he could no longer marry her; while the latter action must in its very nature permanently and effectually have slain his affection. Therefore her son was now not only free to marry; he was also free to love. For which blessing Lady Ingoldby duly returned thanks to a glorified and idealised embodiment of her own thoughts and opinions and characteristics, which she honoured with the name of Providence.

Then, three days after the inquest, the blow fell.

In the evening papers—which Nicholas always greedily perused for any news of the fugitive sisters—he read that his hopes and fears were alike over and done with for ever; and that his passionate desire for Zillah's safety, and his agonised anxiety lest she should fall into the hands of her enemies, were no longer of any avail: for the crude, cruel newspaper report told him the bare fact that the woman he loved had died of pneumonia in a lodging-house at Llandudno, and that when the police found her she had already passed beyond their reach.

Then poor Nicholas felt that Fate had dealt him her crowning blow, and he fairly reeled under it. First there was the shock of Zillah's marriage to another: then the awful sight of her, in her frenzy for her child's safety, slaying with her own hand her unnatural husband; and finally there was the hopeless and crushing news of her death. It seemed almost more than he could bear, and he bowed his head upon his hands and sobbed aloud.

Thus his mother found him not long afterwards.

"Oh! my dear, my dear, what is the matter?" she cried, going up to him, and putting her hand on his hair.

He picked up the paper which had fallen to the ground, and gave it to her. After she had read the fatal paragraph she laid it down without a word, and went on stroking the bowed head. Soothed by the touch which had comforted him all his life, Nicholas gradually ceased from the tearing sobs which shook him, and laid his head upon his mother's shoulder. "It is all over," he moaned.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"My dear, it is terrible for you," said Lady Ingoldby; "but it is a blessing for the poor child herself. Think how much misery she has been saved, and how much sorrow and suffering and shame."

His mother's words roused in Nicholas his natural instinct to think of others before himself. "Do you really think it is best for her, mother? She was too young to die."

"She was too young to be tried by hard and cruel men and sent to prison, and perhaps hanged. Think of the terrible possibilities that she has escaped, and be thankful that she has been spared them all!"

Lady Ingoldby continued to soothe him with tender word and touch, until Nicholas's first outburst of agony had spent itself. Then, with infinite tact, she said, "I suppose you will be off to Llandudno to see what you can do for the poor sister. It must be awful for her alone in a strange place, and with a baby on her hands!"

Quick as thought the young man's unselfishness responded to the spur. "Of course I must go to Adah at once. I was so knocked down that I hadn't thought of it. Thank you, mother, for reminding me."

"For Zillah's sake you ought to do anything you can to help Adah and the child." Lady Ingoldby was quite sincere in these suggestions. Her heart was racked with pity for the surviving sister and the baby, and she wanted her son to do anything in reason to assist them. She was one of those by no means uncommon persons who are always ready to help others unless the sacrifice of themselves is entailed: her subconscious self was so grateful to Zillah for having died and thus put an end to any publicity which her trial for murder might have brought upon Nicholas, that it was eager to express its gratitude to the timely deceased by bestowing benefits upon the bereaved sister and daughter.

Finding that there was still something to do for Zillah, Nicholas quickly roused himself from his abandonment of sorrow, and made preparations to start the first thing on the morrow for Llandudno. Had it been Zillah who needed him, he felt that he could not have waited even an hour, but would have gone by the night mail; but as it was only Adah, he said bitterly to himself, there was no immediate hurry. To-morrow afternoon would be time enough to do all that he could for her: for—with a true lover's inconsistency—he felt almost angry with Adah because Zillah had been taken and she had been left; he grudged her the life which had survived her sister's. Also, he shrank from seeing her again, as he knew how her likeness to Zillah would torture him by reminding him of his dead love. There are some men who love a woman simply because of a physical resemblance on her part to the one they have loved and lost; there are other men who avoid and shrink from a woman for the same reason. Nicholas Ingoldby belonged to the latter class—at any rate for the present.

The morning's paper brought further details of the finding of the sisters; with the additional information that, as naturally the prosecution now fell through, the authorities would take no action against Adah Treherne for aiding and abetting in her sister's escape. And it added that the unfortunate woman, whom death had released from paying the penalty of her crime, was to be interred at Llandudno as quietly as possible.

In the morning Nicholas arrived at Llandudno; and went straight to the address which had been so widely advertised in the papers.

On presenting himself at Mrs. Price's door he asked for Miss Treherne.

"Is it Mr. Ingoldby?" Mrs. Price enquired. "Because Miss Morgan—or I should say Miss Treherne, but Miss Morgan seems to come to my tongue more natural—like—thought as how very likely you might call after seeing the death of poor Mrs. Griffith in all the papers, so sudden and yet perhaps all for the best, things being as they are and everything providential; and she gave orders that you were to be shown upstairs at once, given as you are Mr. Ingoldby indeed."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Yes, my name is Ingoldby; Nicholas Ingoldby."

"Then, sir, pray walk this way, taking care, if you will excuse my mentioning it, of the dining-room doormat, which is apt to trip you up if you don't notice it at the bottom of the stairs."

Nicholas followed the garrulous old woman, though his spirit quailed at the thought of the meeting with Adah, and of the painful memories she would conjure up of his lost love, tantalising—as so many women do—both by her likeness and her unlikeness to her sister. But when Mrs. Price ushered him into the sitting-room, he was surprised to see not Adah at all, but a comely, middle-aged woman.

"I am Mrs. Frisby," she said, advancing to meet him with outstretched hands; "and Miss Treherne has asked me to interview you in her place. Do sit down."

Nicholas did as he was bid. "I hope Miss Treherne is well," he said; "or at any rate as well as one could expect."

"She is terribly shaken, poor dear, terribly shaken and upset! And that is why she did not feel equal to seeing you, should you call, but begged me to see you and explain. She was sure you would come as soon as you learned from the newspapers where she was: but she says she simply couldn't bear to see you at present, or any one else so closely connected with the tragedy that has just occurred."

"I quite understand it," said Nicholas, with a sigh of relief. Though he had felt it his duty to come to her aid, he was immensely relieved to find that his interview with Adah was indefinitely postponed.

"Poor Adah is wonderfully calm and composed, considering all things. But she has passed through an awful experience, and it has left its mark upon her," Mrs. Frisby continued. "We must do all in our power to help her to keep up until after her sister's funeral; and I am quite sure that the excitement of seeing you—whom she last saw at the very moment of the catastrophe—would be too much for her." Mrs. Frisby did all in her power to soften, as she thought, the young man's disappointment at not being allowed to see Adah Treherne; little dreaming that he shrank from the ordeal as much as did the girl herself. But she was still labouring under the impression that he was in love with the unmarried sister; and she could see for herself how deeply he was suffering, and what agony the whole affair had been to him. "Colonel Frisby and I," she went on, "have decided to take Adah back with us to our own home as soon as the funeral is over, and there to take care of her and help her to throw off the effects of this terrible affair. And then after a time—when she has recovered herself a little and got over the first violence of the blow—you must come and see her there."

"Thank you, Mrs. Frisby, you are very good," replied Nicholas; but even the romantic Caroline could not hide from herself that his manner was scarcely that of an adoring lover. He hardly seemed to care whether he saw Adah or not.

"I have advised her to break away from her old surroundings altogether, as I find she has now no ties; and to begin with a new life under a new name. Don't you think I am right, Mr. Ingoldby? The name of Adah Treherne will always be associated with this terrible business, and that may be a disadvantage in after years, both to herself and to the child. Some people are so dreadfully narrow-minded about things of this kind."

"I think you are quite right." Still Nicholas spoke in that (to Mrs. Frisby) inexplicably indifferent voice.

"When she came here she took her mother's maiden name, that of Morgan; and I don't think that she could do better than stick to it. After all, one seems to have a sort of right to one's mother's name, don't you think?"

"Quite so."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"And I want her also to be called by her second name Gwynneth—also her mother's name, she tells me. It is prettier than Adah, and quite free from all painful associations."

But poor Nicholas could not bear any more talk of Adah and Adah's plans, when his heart was aching for details concerning the last moments of the woman he loved. "Please tell me about Zillah, and how she died," he pleaded abruptly, interrupting Mrs. Frisby's flow of conversation.

The good lady pulled up short. She felt—though she did not know why—that she had been pursuing a wrong track. She had tried her utmost to make things easy for this much-to-be-pitied young man, and instead she had been making them more difficult. So she straightway changed her tactics. "The poor dear died quite peacefully and happily," she replied, "holding my hand."

"Peaceful and happy, did you say?" repeated Nicholas with a sob. "Thank God for that!"

The true state of affairs was suddenly revealed to Mrs. Frisby. "You were very much attached to Zillah?" she remarked tentatively.

"I loved her with all my heart."

"Then however came you to let her marry such a creature as Owen Griffith? Adah tells me you knew them both before Zillah's marriage; and surely you must have seen that he was the sort of man that any nice-minded wife was bound to kill sooner or later. My only wonder is that she bore with him as long as she did. But why on earth did you let her marry him in the first instance?"

"Because I was a fool—an arrant fool! Do you see, it was in this way. I fell in love with Zillah Treherne the first moment that I ever set eyes on her: and I shall love her to my life's end, and through all the succeeding æons of eternity. But I was poor, with no prospects, and I thought I had no right to engage the affections of a young and beautiful girl: so I never told her of my love. Now—too late—I see what a mistake I made!"

"Oh dear, oh dear, how like a man, and especially a good man. As I have said before, there's nobody so cruel as a conscientious man with a sense of duty. The Spanish Inquisitors were that sort, and there've been plenty like them ever since."

"As soon as I was in a position to marry, I went straight back to Llanferdovey to ask Zillah to be my wife; and then I learnt that she had been married for over a year to Owen Griffith."

Mrs. Frisby sighed. "If you'd had less conscience and more common-sense it would have been a good deal more comfortable all round, Mr. Ingoldby. But men are as they are made, and it's no good trying to alter them. All we poor women can do is to take them as they are, and make the best of a bad bargain."

"I have been a fool, as I say: but I think I have been well punished for my folly." Ingoldby's lip quivered, and at the sight of this Mrs. Frisby softened immediately: though even then she could not quite forgive him for having preferred Zillah to Adah.

"They must have been a wonderfully taking pair of sisters," she said; "for I fell in love with Adah at first sight, just as you seem to have done with Zillah. I never saw the poor dear till two days ago; and yet already she has so twined herself round my affections—and also round the Colonel's—that we are anxious to induce her finally to come and live with us as our adopted daughter: as she seems to be the one girl in all the world that can take the place of that daughter of our own who, to our undying regret, was never born."

"You are very good to show such kindness to a stranger."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"It isn't our goodness but her charm that is responsible; the same charm that attracted you in the case of the younger sister—evidently a family characteristic."

"If you feel it in Adah, you'd have felt it ten times—nay a hundred times—more in Zillah."

"Perhaps so; and even as it was, the strong resemblance between the two sisters struck me. But of course Zillah was actually dying, and looked most dreadfully ill; though even in that condition her beauty was apparent."

Nicholas groaned at the idea of how that beauty must have faded. "If you thought her beautiful even then, think what she must have been in the pride of her youth and her health! She was a perfect dream of loveliness! But I can understand that to any one who had never seen Zillah in her prime, Adah Treherne would seem a very beautiful woman."

"Well, certainly I think so, and so does my husband: one of the most beautiful women we have ever seen."

Nicholas rose from his seat. "I do not think I need trespass any longer on your kindness, Mrs. Frisby. Please tell Adah that I fully understand her reluctance to see me just yet, but that I shall hope to see her later on, when she has somewhat recovered from the effects of this awful shock and sorrow. And tell her that if ever she needs a friend, she has only to write to me at the old address at Eldhurst; for I shall always be ready to do anything in my power to help her or the child for Zillah's sake."

"But before you go, she asked me to give you this," said Mrs. Frisby, also rising and handing to Nicholas the pocket-book of banknotes which he had given to Adah on the day of the murder. "This contains all the money that is left, and she will pay back what she spent as soon as she is in a position to do so; and in the meantime my husband and I will see that she has everything she wants. Also she particularly asked me to tell you that your loan helped to soothe the last hours of her sister as nothing else could have done; and that, thanks to your generosity, poor Zillah died in peace and comfort."

"I cannot take that back. It was all I could do for the woman I loved in the hour of her extremity. Let me have the comfort of knowing—it is the only one I have—that I was able to do something for her at the end. Keep it, please, Mrs. Frisby; and spend what is left, after Zillah's funeral has been paid for, some day upon Zillah's child."

"Then good-bye, Mr. Ingoldby. You have my deepest sympathy. And at some future time I hope you will come and see Adah and us at Meadowford."

"Thank you, Mrs. Frisby; I shall be very happy to do so, though not just at present. I shall come to the funeral to-morrow, though I shall not speak to anybody, as I feel it would be too cruel to intrude upon Adah at such a time; and now that she has found two such true friends as yourself and Colonel Frisby, I feel I can leave her with an easy mind. And there is just one other thing, Mrs. Frisby; might I see my darling just once more, before her beautiful face is buried out my sight for ever?"

"I am sorry that you can't, Mr. Ingoldby, but the coffin was closed this very morning."

"Then I must be content with remembering her as she was in her glorious youth and beauty, before disease had laid its disfiguring touch upon her. Good-bye."

And with eyes blinded by tears, Nicholas made his way out of the house which contained the form of his best-beloved, his heart bleeding with its agony of unavailing remorse and regret.

## Chapter 10. GWYNNETH MORGAN

Nicholas duly attended the funeral; which took place at Llandudno two days after his interview with Mrs. Frisby.

In spite of every effort to keep it quiet, there had inevitably been a great deal of public curiosity and interest excited, first by the murder and then by the death. This curiosity and interest were to some extent displayed at the graveside of her who had suffered so deeply, and whose name had been so much before the public during the week preceding her decease.

The only mourners were the bereaved sister, Colonel and Mrs. Frisby, and Nicholas himself; and as they stood by the open grave and heard the solemn words of the Burial Service, the pity of it all so overwhelmed the young man that he felt as if it was indeed more than he could bear. For through it all loomed the horrible thought that if only he had told Zillah of his love a year and a half ago, not only would he himself have attained his heart's desire, but she would now be enjoying the delights of a happy and honourable wedded life, instead of being laid to rest in an untimely and dishonoured grave. He was to blame for it all, he felt; for the misery and the disgrace and the death; he who would willingly have laid down his life to shield from an hour's unhappiness the woman he loved! And the crowning irony of it all was that he had done it to save her, as he thought, from the transient pain of an untoward love affair. Verily in shielding her from the summer breeze he had exposed her to the whirlwind: in guarding her from a passing shower he had let loose upon her the water-spouts of the deep!

He did not attempt to speak to the black-robed, deeply-veiled figure that stood on the other side of the Colonel and Mrs. Frisby, as they were all grouped together by the open grave. He could not see her face, nor discern the expression of her features: but he could tell how terribly the poor girl was feeling her sister's death by the sobs that continually shook the slender form—that form which so reminded him of Zillah's, that a fresh wave of anguish swept over him as he looked at it, and thought that never again should he see his love standing amongst the flowers as she had stood that last morning at Plâs Dovey, until she came to greet him across the fadeless fields of asphodel which bloom for ever in the Paradise of God.

When all was over, Nicholas went to a stone-mason's and gave orders that a white marble cross—bearing just the name of Zillah Griffith, and the date of her birth and death—should be placed over the newly-made grave. And for a long time afterwards—until time and circumstances had extracted the sting from his sorrow—Nicholas made a solemn and sacred pilgrimage to Llandudno every year on the anniversary of the funeral to lay a wreath of her favourite primroses upon Zillah's grave.

On the day following he left Llandudno for Eldhurst without making any further attempt to see Adah or Mrs. Frisby; and there he tried as hard as he could to take up the threads of life again. But the aim of his hopes and ambitions was gone—the mainspring of his existence was broken. His chief—in fact his only—pleasure now was to wander in the beautiful old orchard behind Courtyard House, and in the lane beyond the palace, from which on a clear day he could see the panorama of London in the distance; and to picture in imagination the great events that had once happened there, just as he had done when he was a boy. Again he seemed to hear the blare of trumpets and the clash of arms as the knights rode under the fine old gateway into the tilting-yard: again he took part in those Councils of State which used to be held in the great banqueting-hall, and again he mused on the vanity of earthly pomp and circumstance which had once held such regal sway at Eldhurst, but the participators in which—like most of the fair palace itself—had long ago crumbled into dust. Once more also he stood by the little pool, which as a child he had believed to be bottomless, and dwelt in thought upon that mysterious, primæval world of Nature that is so near to, and at the same time so far from, mortal ken; and once more he felt that thrill of magic, which now and then seems to turn the whole riddle of existence into a wonderful fairy tale. And gradually his dreams and his visions wrought their spell upon his mind, until he began to see that behind everything—before the very beginnings of things and beyond their ending—there was a rhythmic Order at work, a definite Will and Power. Nothing had happened by chance or accident—all would eventually tend to the

## The Wisdom of Folly

completion of some Divine and transcendent scheme. Life was no hopeless muddle, no formless phantasmagoria; but a carefully painted picture, a magnificently planned cathedral, a gloriously conceived oratorio. And as he meditated and penetrated further, it was revealed to him that behind the picture was an Artist, behind the oratorio a Divine Composer, behind the cathedral an Architect: and these conclusions brought rest to his soul. For if this indeed were so—and he knew that it was so, though how he knew it he could not say—then the story of his love for Zillah Treherne was no unfinished strain of music—no broken and ruined pillar: but the beginning of a melody which should one day swell the mysterious song of the hundred and forty and four thousand—the unfinished shaft of a column which was destined to support one of the mystical gateways of pearl.

Then he thought upon the legend of Mandolet the Fool, who had done nothing worthy of fame save loving one woman with a perfect love: who had neither fought sword in hand for the Faith in the wars against the heathen who held the Holy Sepulchre, nor yet served the Church in the monastic seclusion of a cloistered Order: yet who—because he had loved so perfectly and so purely that his love had power to save from perdition the soul of the woman that he loved, and because such love as that is accounted by Holy Church as a symbol and a sacrament of the mystical union between herself and her Lord—had finally been accounted worthy to catch a fleeting glimpse of the blessed vision of the Sacred Grail.

As the first agony of Nicholas's grief abated and he grew more content, he began to feel and to succumb to the fascinations of a literary life. Perhaps no one writes so well as the man who is contented without being happy—just as nobody writes so badly as the woman who is happy without being contented. In order to accomplish good literary work, one must possess one's soul in patience—if not in joy. Restlessness is the relentless enemy of all abiding artistic creation: which perhaps accounts for the fact that the secret of perfect architecture died with the Middle Ages. The rest and repose of the quiet life at Eldhurst, with its atmosphere of peace and its wealth of historic associations, so wrought upon the mind of Nicholas Ingoldby that gradually he became a master of the great art of painting in words. His books were never popular in the ordinary sense—never astounded an admiring world by the grandiloquence of their reviews or the immensity of their editions—but they were accounted as text-books upon history and literature by a select and cultured public.

It was about six months after the tragedy at Llanferdovey that Nicholas received a long and bulky letter from Meadowford. At first he could not tell from whom it came, as the writing was unfamiliar to him; but, on looking at the end of the letter, he saw the signature of Adah Treherne: whereupon it struck him, with a pang of regret, that this was the first letter he had ever received from Adah, while he had never received one from Zillah at all. Yet if only he had followed his natural impulse and written to Zillah immediately after his first return from Llanferdovey, telling her of his unalterable love for her, and begging her to wait for him, however long that waiting-time might be, by now he would have been the happy possessor of a veritable sheaf of love-letters all signed with Zillah's beloved name!

The letter ran thus:—

"My Dear Nicholas,—I hope you will not think my long silence is that most empty of all the silences—the silence of indifference—for that would show unpardonable ingratitude on my part towards one of the best and kindest friends that woman ever had. I think that long silences are always difficult and trying things. They are blank spaces which one is but too ready to fill with words and actions out of one's own imagination: and that is where the difficulty and the danger of silence lies. If my friend speaks, he speaks his own words: and all that I can do is to read my own meaning into them: a practice not without its dangers also, though the dangers are limited. But if my friend is silent, my imagination runs riot in inventing terrible and innumerable tidings that he may be wanting to say and refraining from saying: and the dangers of this practice have no limits whatever. For my part I always deny the truth of the saying that speech is silver and silence is golden. Speech sometimes is made of silver, I admit: and sometimes of a baser metal. But silence is never made of gold: it is made rather of clean slate, upon which all the hearers of it (if you will excuse the bull) can write whatever their divers imaginations dictate. When people are silent I always imagine it is because they are thinking things too disagreeable to be said: and I

## The Wisdom of Folly

generally end by thinking they have said them. It is possible to misunderstand speech; but it is almost impossible not to misunderstand silence.

"Therefore I should not blame you if you deduced horrible things on my part from my silence of six months: so I am changing the false gold of that commodity into the genuine if somewhat defaced coin of speech; and am having recourse to the written word to explain to you that when first I came to Meadowford with my dear friends, Colonel and Mrs. Frisby, I had a severe and almost fatal attack of brain-fever, which nearly took my life, and then tried to compromise matters by taking my reason instead. But I succeeded in declining either bargain: and now, I am thankful to say, I am quite well again, though not very strong in mind or body.

"After my recovery I was naturally anxious to find some employment which would provide a living for myself and the baby, who, I am sure, is as dear to me as she ever was to her own mother. I know it is not the fashion to glorify the love of aunts: the love of parents and children, of husbands and wives, and above all of lovers, are the only forms of affection that bear the hall-mark of romance. When the passion of Motherhood takes the stages all the world applauds it as not of the best parts in the great drama of life. But the rôle of Aunthood is relegated to light comedy, and regarded as rather a poor part even there. I believe that there are aunts whose love almost, if not quite, equals a mother's in depth and tenderness and intensity: yet they enjoy neither the claim nor the credit of it. I think that one of the hardest things in the life of a single woman is, not that she has her tragedies—the married woman have those as well: but that the world persists in regarding those tragedies as comedies, if not burlesques, and staging them accordingly.

"But to return from single women in general to myself in particular. When I suggested to Colonel and Mrs. Frisby that I should set about earning a living for myself and baby, they refused to listen to such an idea for a moment: but insisted instead that we should stay on with them, and that I should become their adopted daughter.

"At first—with that absurd shyness of receiving favours which a somewhat decadent civilisation has taught us—I demurred at accepting such boundless kindness at the hands of people upon whom neither baby nor I had any claim whatsoever, save the all-powerful one of the stranger and the fatherless; but, as I gave further consideration to the matter, I realised how sorely these dear people needed a daughter—a need which would grow greater instead of less as time went on, bringing an increasing burden of years and infirmities. It seemed to me that for once in a way I might give other people credit for knowing their own business better than I did; and that if I acceded to the dear Frisbys' wishes, I might in the future pay back to them some small portion of my debt to them in the past. So I gave in at last, and accepted their generous offer; and here am I, firmly planted and taking root in the sweet little Midland village of Meadowford, in a state of peace and contentment which seemed utterly impossible to me six months ago. For a wonderful prescription, composed of fresh air and country life—and the tender loving-kindness of two of the best people I ever knew—and the constant companionship of a little child, has healed my soul as I never thought it could be healed again. Health lies in the breath of the country and in the hands of children; as the King's Evil was cured by the touch of a Monarch, so most evils are cured by the touch of a little child.

"I should like to introduce you to all the ins-and-outs—the stupendous trifles and the overwhelming details—of a typical Midland village. Everything is of such supreme importance that one loses one's sense of respective values; and I am never quite clear whether I am standing in the innermost circle of provincialism, or on the outer fringe of eternity.

"There is also much to make one laugh: and thank, Heaven, I am learning to laugh again! I so often think of you and the long talks we used to have together that happy, happy summer at dear old Llanferdovey; and I have learnt to understand so many things that you said there, which I didn't understand a bit at the time, though of course I pretended that I did, and you believed me! You were the only clever man, except father, who had ever talked to Zillah and me: and father's talk was much more like the soliloquy of Hamlet than the remarks of an ordinary parent to his children. But your conversation and your ways of looking at life seemed to wake up something in my

## The Wisdom of Folly

soul that had always been asleep till then; and that something has gone on growing and expanding ever since. Father taught me to read, and to read much: but it was you who first taught me *how* to read; and I have read a great deal since I acquired the taste. If it hadn't been for my books, I don't know how I could have lived through that awful year at the Plâs! And now that I have opportunity and leisure, and my interest in life is coming back again, I find in the world of books one of my greatest pleasures.

"The only condition that my kind friends the Frisbys have imposed upon me, in return for all their goodness, is that I shall change my name. Naturally they do not wish to be associated in any way with the awful tragedy of last spring; and I myself shall be only too thankful to start fresh, unhampered by a name that—in connection with that of my poor sister—was in everybody's mouth six short months ago. Therefore I have adopted the surname of Morgan—my mother's maiden name—in lieu of Treherne. It was the name I assumed in those dreadful days when Zillah and I were flying from the police; and—strange to say—it was also the name of a married and long dead sister of Mrs. Frisby. Therefore under the name of Morgan I can be introduced to people as her niece, and can call her, as she wishes me to do, Aunt Caroline, without exciting awkward questions and unnecessary comments.

"The name of Adah she does not like: and she also fears that it may some day recall to some one the identity of the unhappy sister of Zillah Griffith: therefore she has insisted on my being called by my second name—that of Gwynneth. I am glad of this, as I have always liked my second name better than my first; especially as it also was my mother's. I always wanted to be called by it when I was a girl at home: but father never would allow us to be anything but Adah and Zillah, as he had a strong preference for Scripture names, and disapproved of all others as rather worldly!

"So now, my dear Nicholas, please remember that Adah Treherne is dead and gone, and that Gwynneth Morgan has, phnix-like, risen from her ashes; and is trying to build up an entirely new life upon the ruins of Adah's old one. I wonder if she will succeed, and if the past is ever really dead; or whether it will come to life again when she least wants or expects it. But in one thing Adah Treherne will always be Adah Treherne; and that is in her unflinching and grateful friendship for Nicholas Ingoldby.

"I want to see you again some time to thank you, however inadequately, for all that you did in our hour of peril for Zillah and me. But not yet. I have so recently recovered from such a severe illness, that I fear the sight of one who was closely connected with the awful tragedy of my life would be too much for me at present, and might bring back the dangerous nerve and brain symptoms. But after a while, when time and care have still more healed my broken heart, I shall write and say Come, and I know you will come at once.

"With more gratitude than I shall ever be able to express,

"I remain, dear Nicholas,

"Yours (for the last time)

"Adah Treherne."

Such was the letter which Nicholas received from the girl to whom he had shown himself so true a friend in her and her sister's hour of need. At first it brought back with overwhelming force all his tender recollections of and passionate regrets for Zillah. It recalled sweet memories of the two beautiful sisters, and the happy days that he had spent with them at Llanferdovey two years ago. But it did more than that. For the first time it roused his interest in Adah Treherne as a person on her own account, and not merely as an appendage to Zillah. Up to now he had only thought of her and regarded her as Zillah's sister: it had never occurred to him to consider her on her own merits as a separate entity; but now, as never before, it struck him that Adah had a personality of her own, and an interesting personality too; and he felt his heart stirred with a vague longing to probe deeper into that

## The Wisdom of Folly

personality. When the sisters were together the younger had always completely outshone the elder, throwing the latter into the shade by the power of a quicker fund and a more vivid beauty. Adah was too much like Zillah to be a contrast to her—too little like her to be a rival.

"And the fact of the matter is," said Nicholas to himself with his usual clear-sightedness, "Adah was so unselfish that I believe she deliberately put herself in the background in order to enhance Zillah's charms. My darling would always have been the more attractive and brilliant of the two; she couldn't help it, she was much prettier and gayer than her elder sister: but I am certain—judging from this letter—that Adah could have been far brighter and livelier than she was, if she had not consciously effaced herself for the sake of her younger sister. But that is the way with some women; they carry unselfishness to such a pitch that it becomes almost a disease. And this arises from a mistaken and a misguided sense of duty; for every woman has the right to live her own life and to develop her own character. But many women—and they are usually elder sisters—do neither the one nor the other. And the pity of it all is that it is generally a wasted sacrifice—a sacrifice of fools. The younger sisters do not need, do not even desire, such abnegation. They are strong enough and fascinating enough to hold their own without it. My Zillah could not help herself from being more attractive than her sister: but she would always have wished that sister to be as attractive as in her lay, and to make the very best of herself. And the worst of those dreadfully unselfish people is that they make their beloved ones selfish, whether they will or no: the latter cannot help themselves they are transformed into unwilling and often unconscious vampires, by having unnecessary libations of life—blood continually outpoured at their feet! This is evidently how poor Adah behaved herself in the past to Zillah; and—unless I am no judge of character and am grossly mistaken—this is how Adah will behave herself in the future to Zillah's child."

So mused Nicholas after the perusal of the letter; and the result of his meditations was a conclusion that—in spite of her unwise and unnecessary unselfishness—the woman who wrote that letter was a woman worth cultivating, and a woman whose friendship and *camaraderie* would help a man considerably on his way through the world.

In the old Llanferdovey days it had never occurred to Nicholas to consider the mental attributes of either of the Treherne girls; their youth and beauty had been quite enough for him. But he was somewhat older now both in years and in experience, and therefore not as indifferent to a woman's intellectual capacity as he had been then. He did not know why this letter should have so charmed his fancy and stimulated his imagination. It was a good enough letter in its way, but there was nothing in it to account for the interest which it suddenly aroused, except perhaps the very obvious reason that it was written by a young woman to a young man. Still the fact remained—though Nicholas himself was unable to explain it—that this letter did attract and interest him as he had never expected to be attracted and interested by a woman again. In some undefined way it struck chords in his being which he had imagined were silenced for ever. Behind the writing he felt there was a personality; and a personality, moreover, with which he had a strong affinity. He wondered that he had not been conscious of this affinity between himself and Adah in the Llanferdovey days: but then he had been so enchanted and intoxicated by Zillah's charm and Zillah's beauty that he had given no thought to Adah at all. It is only when the greater lights are extinguished that men learn the value of the lesser ones. Who in the full blaze of noonday turns for guidance to the stars?

Nicholas put the letter in his pocket, feeling that life had still something to offer him in the friendship of Adah Treherne. Love, he felt, he had done with for this life; it was buried in Zillah's grave. But the joy of friendship still remained to him: and it seemed that Zillah's sister was the one who would kindle the fire of that joy in his desolate heart.

So he took heart of grace, and looked forward with pleasure to the time when Adah should have sufficiently recovered herself to allow him to go to Meadowford to see her: and meanwhile he decided to write to her as often as he decently could, in order to get one of her charming letters in return.

## Book 2

### Chapter 11. MEADOWFORD

"Gwynneth, my dear, I have a bit of news for you: quite a nice, spicy little bit."

"Have you, Aunt Caroline? Then please tell it to me at once, as you know I'm never a good hand at guessing. I haven't got what Nicholas Ingoldby used to call an acrostical mind."

"No, you haven't: that's the only fault I have to find with you. Now I, on the contrary, love to guess things. It makes me quite angry when William tells me anything without first letting me ask twenty questions about it."

The younger woman smiled. "I wonder what you look like when you are angry, dear Aunt Caroline."

"Very much like you look at any other time, only rather redder in the face. I've got past the age of flashing eyes, and quivering lips, and all the other becoming signs of rage that makes the tantrums of the heroines in novels so beautiful. But I must confess that I think the beauty of temper, like the beauty of tears, is confined to works of fiction: I've lived for over fifty years in the world, and I never yet met the woman who looked pretty when she was cross or when she cried!"

"But what about your wonderful piece of news?"

"Which you don't want to guess. As I was just saying, *I* can't bear to be told that Mr. Jones is engaged to Miss Smith; I like to be told just there is an engagement about, and then to ask the colour of their eyes and hair, and their respective ages, and if they are tall or short, and rich or poor, and so to get at it in that way."

"Then is this great piece of news an engagement Aunt Caroline? I can't for the life of me think who there is in Meadowford to be engaged; and, still less, who to be engaged to."

"It isn't an engagement at all—at least not at present; but it's the sort of thing that may lead to an engagement at any moment. It's a new young man that's coming!"

The girl who had been addressed as Gwynneth, laughed:

"Uncle William is quite right; you are an incorrigible match-maker. I don't believe you ever see an unmarried man and woman speak to each other without wondering if they are going to fall in love."

"That is so: I never do. In fact I don't see the use of unmarried men and women speaking to each other at all if they are not going to fall in love: it seems to me pure waste of time."

"Then don't you believe in Platonic friendships, Aunt Caroline?"

"Electro-platonic friendships, I call them—all sham and pretence! If two young people see a good deal of each other and don't fall in love, mark my words, there's something wrong somewhere—very wrong indeed: and, what is worse than wrong, very unnatural! Why, when I was a young girl, I should have been ashamed of myself if I'd seen much of a young man, and there hadn't been what we used to call 'passages' between us. Positively ashamed! And I wasn't a pretty girl, either."

"But you must have been very attractive, Aunt Caroline: you are attractive now. You have any amount of that indefinable gift which people call charm."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Humph! I don't know much about that: that's according to taste. But, charm or no charm, I could talk to a young man: and that's what girls are born into the world for. I'm sure I've no patience with some of the girls of to-day, who've no more idea of talking to a young man than they have of talking to a rhinoceros: or else they talk to him as if he was another girl, and have a tremendous friendship with him that they say 'means nothing.' I should like to know what sense there is in a friendship that 'means nothing'? None at all. They might just as well be squirrels running round and round in a cage. To my mind the whole point of a friendship between a young man and a young woman is that it does mean something, and that something is a wedding."

"You find no place in your economy for old maids and bachelors, then?"

"None at all, my dear Gwynneth. They are like the saucers in a tea-set when all the cups have been broken, or the soap-trays that are left out of smashed-up toilet-sets. There's nothing to match them."

"But you haven't told me yet who is the bright, particular young man whom you have in your eye at present."

"I'm coming to him. Lord Mershire has just appointed a new agent in place of that horrid Mr. Brown. His name is Ketteringham, and he is quite young, and he is coming to live at the cottage opposite the church. And from all I can hear of him I think he will be just the husband for you, Gwynneth: and you would live in the cottage too, and I could see you every day."

Gwynneth laughed outright. "Well done, Aunt Caroline! You have got it all cut and dried. But aren't you counting your chickens before they are hatched? Mr. Ketteringham may not fall in love with me."

"Nonsense! I shouldn't like to be so un-Christian as to take it for granted that any young man could be such a fool."

"And given that he did, I might not fall in love with him."

"Then I should have no patience with you. Tall, young, good-looking and a gentleman—so I heard from Mrs. Marsh: what more can a young girl want?"

Suddenly the smile faded out of Gwynneth's face and it became very sad—preternaturally sad for a woman not many years on the shady side of twenty. "But you forget, Aunt Caroline: a girl with the history that I have had can never marry."

"And why not, I should like to know?"

"What man would care to marry the sister of Zillah Griffith; the sister of a woman who would have expiated her crime in gaol, if not on the gallows, had she not mercifully been taken away from the terrible consequences of her sudden fit of anger?"

"My dear, you shouldn't speak of your sister in that way."

"I don't want to say anything unkind about my sister, Heaven knows! For she was my only sister and was all the world to me. But as I get farther away from her tragedy, and see it more in its true light, I cannot help realising that Zillah's crime—however many excuses we may find for her in the horrible cruelty of her husband—will always cast its shadow over Amy and me."

"My dear, my dear, how often must I tell you that you are perfectly morbid upon that subject? Three years ago, when you became Gwynneth Morgan, you ceased to be Adah Treherne; and you threw off, once and for all, all Adah Treherne's sad associations. Can't you forget that Adah Treherne ever existed?"



## The Wisdom of Folly

"Alas! I cannot: neither can I forget that I once was she. No, dear Aunt Caroline, hide it as we can, run away from it as we may, there is no undoing the past—no really getting away from it. I may take the name of Morgan instead of Treherne—you may call me by my second name instead of my first—but still, under it all, the fact remains that I am the sister of a woman who killed her husband."

"It is written that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children (and I never quite understand that, though as it's written in the Bible I leave it, hoping it will be all for the best); but not the sins of the brothers and sisters."

"Still they frequently are. And in the case of my poor little Amy it is the sins of the father and the mother; and her lot is bound up with mine."

"Now, my dear Gwynneth, do take a common-sense view of the matter. Do you really think that any man who truly loved a woman would object to marry her because years ago her sister—in a fit of most justifiable anger—killed a most unjustifiable husband?"

"I do."

"Then I don't: and I'm thirty years older than you are, and know more of the world than you do."

"And, at any rate, most men would look askance at Zillah's daughter, if not at her sister."

"That I grant you. But you aren't Zillah's daughter."

"But Amy is. And I will marry no man who doesn't include Amy in his offer to marry me."

"Then, my dear, you will make a great mistake. I will always undertake to look after Amy and to see that she is properly provided for after I am gone. I am old and married, and an encumbrance of that kind can't do me any harm. But if you persist in always having the child living with you, it may prevent lots of men from marrying you."

"Then, my dear Aunt Caroline, it must prevent them: for I will never let any man separate me from Amy. She is my only sister's legacy to me, and nothing and nobody shall ever induce me to part from her."

Mrs. Frisby sighed and turned away. She had now lived for three years in the same house as her adopted daughter, and had learnt how ready Gwynneth was to sacrifice herself and everybody about her to Amy and Amy's interests. There was something pathetic in the girl's love for the helpless child: it seemed as if her whole nature had become absorbed in her passionate devotion to Amy. No mother could have cared for the little thing more intensely nor watched over it more tenderly than she did. All the hidden affection of her deep and loving nature, which had been so terribly wounded by her sister's sudden and premature death, poured itself out in a wealth of love for the child who was now her only living kin.

Gwynneth Morgan was one of those women who cannot live without loving: and yet, alas! she had so few people to love. She had no husband on whom to lavish all the devotion with which her heart was overflowing; and the sister, who had once been all-in-all to her, was dead; therefore it was but natural that she should love the one thing left to her with a love surpassing the ordinary love of women for their sister's children. She had much love to bestow, and Amy was all that she had left upon which to bestow it: therefore was it surprising that her love for the child should become an absorbing passion?

Her affection for her good friends, the Frisbys, was very real, very deep: her memory of Nicholas Ingoldby was a tender one, for not only had he shown himself such a real helper in her hour of need, but he was bound up with

## The Wisdom of Folly

her recollections of the happy days at Llanferdovey before all this dreadful trouble and anguish had come upon her: but the supreme object of her love—the pivot on which all her actions turned—was the little girl who had been left to her sole charge.

It was now over three years since the day when Colonel and Mrs. Frisby brought her home with them—a wreck both physically and mentally from the effects of the awful experiences through which she had just passed—to the pretty little village of Meadowford: and these three years had worked wonders in her. Although she was old in experience she was young in years; and there is a marvellously recuperative power in youth. She had passed through a night of sorrow and mourning, yet still for her the light was not permanently darkened; the storms of heaven had beat upon her head and almost overwhelmed her with their fury, yet now the clouds returned not after the rain: for she was still on the sunny side of twenty-five.

Since she recovered from the illness which followed the terrible catastrophe, her life on the whole had been a happy one. There was but little excitement in it; but she had had more than enough excitement to last her for the rest of her days. There had likewise been but little variety in it; but the thing she longed for, after her awful experience, had not been variety, but peace.

And then she had Amy. To those who are not lovers of children it would be impossible to explain the exquisite happiness to be found in the constant companionship of a little child; and to those who are lovers of children, there is no need of any explanation, for they too have drunk of this fountain of living water, and have tasted its ineffable and inexplicable bliss.

Through all these three years Gwynneth had never once seen Nicholas Ingoldby. She had corresponded with him regularly, and his letters had become one of the greatest interests of her life: but she had never fulfilled her promise of asking him to come to Meadowford. Colonel and Mrs. Frisby had frequently urged her to invite him in the early days of her residence with them; but she shrank so obviously from the ordeal of seeing again one who was so intimately connected with the awful tragedy of her life, that they gradually ceased to suggest his coming; though this cessation was a sad trial to Mrs. Frisby, who had set her heart upon arranging a marriage between him and Gwynneth.

"I wish to goodness Gwynneth would invite that nice young man to come and see us for a week end," the good woman had remarked one day to her devoted husband, some little time after the girl came to live with them: "I always think a week-end is such a good opportunity for helping on a bit of love-making. First there is the Saturday afternoon, when the man has nothing to do; and men are always more inclined to make love on holidays than on working days. And secondly there's the Sunday with its peaceful, religious feelings; and there's nothing that helps on a love affair so much as a bit of religion popped in."

"Yes, yes, my love, there is a great truth hidden in your words—a great and, I may say also, a profound truth: namely, that our sentimental and our religious emotions are nearly, in fact intimately connected."

"I don't know anything about being intimately connected: I only know that when I was just on the tip of falling in love with you, a walk home from church together on a Sunday evening after singing 'The day is past and over,' and all the hedges covered with may-blossom, clinched the matter as far as my feelings were concerned."

The Colonel took his wife's hand and kissed it. "A most happy conclusion, my love, a most happy and blessed conclusion! But surely you loved me for my own sake as well?"

"I dare say I did; but I never found it out till you sang the tenor part so sweetly in 'The day is past and over,' and the hedges smelt of hawthorn, and all the sky was pink. And that makes me wish that Nicholas Ingoldby would come down here for a week-end and sing hymns beside Gwynneth in Meadowford Church. I dare say he wouldn't need as many as we did; for we had to begin from the very beginning, and he was in love with Gwynneth's sister

## The Wisdom of Folly

first, and so could begin in the middle, so to speak. You never were in love with any of my sisters, you see."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Colonel hastily, his feelings for the moment running away with him. Then conscious that he had been guilty of some discourtesy towards his adored Caroline, he added: "I only mean, my love, that your sisters, though estimable women in their line—very estimable and admirable women—did not appeal to me in the same way that you did."

"And quite right too, though I dare say several of them would have suited you better!"

"No, Caroline, no. I could not possibly have done with several—even with one of them."

"Still it might have been better for you in the long run. I'm sure Jane would have managed your digestion a million times better than I've done, as she always seems to know by instinct what will disagree with a man."

"It is an all-embracing knowledge," added the Colonel dryly; "and apparently includes everything except boiled chicken and baked custard."

"And Emma would have made an excellent wife to any man who had the sense to marry her," continued Mrs. Frisby reflectively: "I often wonder nobody had."

"The instinct of self-preservation is strong in the human race," murmured the Colonel.

"And poor Maria was a great saint. I dare say you'd have been a saint, too, William, if you'd married Maria."

"Doubtless I should have been—in Heaven."

"I don't know how it is," Mrs. Frisby went on, still in a meditative mood; "but men hardly ever seem to do justice to their wives' relations."

"As much justice as wives in return mete out to their husbands' next-of-kin, I fancy."

Mrs. Frisby shook her head. "I don't know about that. But still there is one thing that I've noticed; and that is, that women invariably catch cold when they go to stay with their husbands' relations. Nine times out of ten if a married woman catches a cold, she eventually traces its origin to a visit with her husband's people. It often amuses me to talk at Christmas and Easter and those sort of family seasons with women who've been visiting their in-laws, and to hear them one after another saying how it gave them cold."

"Yet the temperature of every home from which a son has gone forth to be married, cannot automatically fall below the normal. There must be something in the imagination of the ladies to account for this."

"I never bother about accounting for things, as you know. I only deal with facts as they are."

"Or rather, with facts as they appear to you, my love."

"Well, how can I possibly deal with them anyhow else? If I didn't see things as they appear to me, I shouldn't see them at all, considering that I don't squint. And the thing which is appearing to me just now is what a blessing it would be if that nice young Ingoldby, who so took my fancy by his conduct at the inquest, would fall in love with our Gwynneth."

"But you told me he was in love with Gwynneth's sister, Zillah."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"So I did: he told me so himself in strict confidence."

"He couldn't very well be in love with both sisters at once. "

"Who wants him to be? Oh, William, how stupid you are! Zillah is dead and buried, and a very good thing too, considering what she'd done, though I wouldn't let Gwynneth hear me say so for worlds. And now I consider it is time for young Ingoldby to turn his attention to Gwynneth—or Adah, as he used to call her."

"But, my dear Caroline, as I have told you before, it does not follow that if a man falls in love with one sister he will necessarily fall in love with the other."

"It makes it much more likely, I think: and especially when the sisters are as much alike as Adah and Zillah Treherne were."

"I don't see it at all. You and your sister Emma. were very much alike when you were girls; but if I had not had the good fortune to win you, it would never have occurred to me to propose to Emma."

"Then it ought to have done: and a very good wife she would have made you! If sisters are pretty much the same height and age, and have the same coloured hair and eyes, I don't see that it can make much difference to a man which of them he marries. He must be a very fussy man if it does! And I should have thought that all young Ingoldby's affection for Zillah could have been passed on to Adah, seeing that she was no stranger, but her own sister."

"Well, my love, it is no use our arguing, and time will show which of us is right. But all I can say is that I shall be surprised—very much surprised—if Ingoldby transfers his attachment for Zillah to her elder sister."

"And I shall be very much surprised—and, what is more, very much disappointed—if he doesn't. For I'm sure that any one who behaved as nicely at an inquest as he did, couldn't fail to make a good husband!"

This conversation occurred some twelve months after Gwynneth had become a permanent inmate of the Frisby's house; and for several years afterwards events had not the chance of proving either the Colonel or Mrs. Frisby in the right, as Gwynneth. steadily refused to allow Nicholas to come and see her. She had found a safe haven after a terrible storm; and she dreaded anything which could interfere with her newly-acquired peace. A meeting with Nicholas would, she felt, reopen all the old wounds, and bring the dreadful past back to life once more; and she had not the courage to face such an ordeal. Therefore she kept up her correspondence with him, and found great and continued pleasure in it; but she shrank with unabated dread from the trial of meeting him again face to face.

The Frisbys lived in an old, square, red-brick house, close to the high road leading from Silverhampton to Merchester; from which road it was screened by a red-brick wall almost as high as the house itself. On the other side of the house was a large, old-fashioned garden, terminating in fields which sloped down to the river. Beyond the river was a long ridge of rising ground, covered with woods, and dotted with the grey, pointed spires and red cottage-roofs of picturesque little villages. And beyond this again, forming the horizon-line, was a vast tract of wild, uncultivated heather-land known as the Chase.

The village of Meadowford—like its fellow-villages on the other side of the river—boasted a few red-tiled cottages and a grey-spired church; and it also contained in addition to the little vicarage, a large white house belonging to the squire, and a smaller red one which Colonel Frisby had considered himself fortunate to secure. It was one of these typical Midland villages, which hug the road and do not stray far from the highway on either side; and it is well that they do not, as the highway is the only permanent means of transit; the country lanes though exquisitely lovely in spring and summer, are simply impassable in autumn and winter.

Such was the village where Gwynneth Morgan lived for three quiet and uneventful years, before Roland Ketteringham came into her life to awaken the slumbering depths of her nature, and destroy its tranquillity and mar its peace.

## Chapter 12. RIVAL CLAIMS

"So you have got a job at last, Roland, and are going to live at Meadowford as Lord Mershire's agent. Happy man! How I envy you having something to do; and, still more, being able to do it."

"Never mind, Nicholas, old boy: you'll be working again yourself soon. I am sure your eyes are better than they were."

Nicholas sighed. "I don't think they are. I know how irritating it is when one asks invalids how they are, and they keep on saying no better: it seems to show a certain indifference to the kindness of the inquirer. Nevertheless—knowing all this—my innate love of truth compels me to say that my eyes are not any better than they were."

"I say, that *is* a bore!" was Roland's best attempt at consolation.

"It is: a most confounded bore: and a greater bore to me than to anybody else! I saw the oculist again yesterday—if peering at him through these hateful coloured glasses can be called seeing; and he gives me the comforting assurance that it may be for years and it may be for ever that my blindness will continue, like the separation from Kathleen Mavourneen."

"By Jove, that is bad luck!"

"So it is: uncommonly bad."

The last three years had dealt hardly with Nicholas Ingoldby, and had made him look ten years older than he looked when he went down to Llanferdovey to ask Zillah Treherne to be his wife. First, the terrible tragedy which had spoilt his life and hers, had knocked all the elasticity of youth out of him once for all: and, secondly, an affection of the eyesight brought on either by nervous shock or by overwork—the doctors could not decide which—had made his ugly face still uglier by the addition of dark-tinted spectacles. This disfigurement Nicholas did not mind: now that Zillah was no longer there to see him, he did not care how ugly he looked: but what he did mind was that his literary work was curtailed thereby, as he was only able to write for a very short time every day; and what he minded, even more than this was his inability to discern distant and even moderately near objects, owing to the weakness of his sight and the darkness of the glasses which he was compelled to wear in order to preserve his eyes from the light. He had so loved a distant view in the old days, and had been so keenly alive to the spiritual stimulant of gazing at a land that is very far off. It had been such a refreshment to him when he felt depressed or weary, to walk in the Bridle Lane (as it was called) at the back of Eldhurst Palace, and see the towers of Westminster and the dome of S. Paul's gleaming in the golden light: and to feel that the mighty heart of London was throbbing so near to him, and that he was not alone in his disappointment and sorrow, but was one of a mighty and innumerable army of martyrs, all bearing their appointed burdens and fulfilling their allotted tasks. And again, on other days, it had exhilarated him to walk in the field-path near the remains of the old conduit, and to see the lovely expanse of fair Kentish country lying at his feet: for then he felt the soothing touch of Nature, and heard her voice whispering to him her message of inexplicable peace. Now those simple and healthy pleasures were no longer within his reach. He could not even see from one end of the grand old banqueting-hall to the other, nor distinguish clearly the features of those with whom he talked. But the oculists had assured him that his one chance of regaining his eyesight was to preserve it by the constant use of spectacles which, for the time, almost obscured it: so he was compelled to submit to their decrees.

## The Wisdom of Folly

But there was one thing that he had never failed to do, however bad his eyes might be: and that was to write regularly to the woman whom he still thought of as Adah Treherne, though he now always addressed her as Gwynneth Morgan. And to him, as to her, this correspondence had become one of the chief interests of life.

He had never attempted to disobey her dictum and go down to Meadowford to see her: it would probably have saved them both from many sorrowful years if he had: but once again Nicholas acted according to his nature and sacrificed both himself and a woman to his over-scrupulousness with regard to her. Being endowed with an almost feminine keenness of sympathy and quickness of perception, he to a great extent entered into Gwynneth's involuntary shrinking from meeting again one who had been so intimately connected with the tragedy of her life: and he was the last man to set his own wishes before a woman's. At first he was disappointed: he would have liked to see Adah again, and to talk to her by the hour about Zillah: his letters were half-full of the latter even yet. It was Zillah to whom he had given his love, while Adah had only had his friendship; and friendship does not drive a man to the side of its object as does love. After a time Nicholas settled down to things as they were, and accepted them: a usual custom of his, which proved sometimes wise and sometimes foolish. In this case—as in the case of his accepting the hopelessness of his early love for Zillah and keeping silence about it—the custom proved very foolish indeed: but each man must act according to his nature, and must take the consequences of his unselfishness—as well as of his selfishness—on his own shoulders: though unfortunately other shoulders besides his own are sometimes involved in the transaction.

It would be difficult to define the exact state of Nicholas Ingoldby's feelings towards his faithful correspondent. Had any one suggested that he was in love with her, he would probably have denied it, and would have sworn that his heart was buried in Zillah's grave. He had never felt the slightest inclination to fall in love with Adah in the old days at Llanferdovey; but then Zillah was on the spot, absorbing all his thought and attention. Moreover, they were all three so young then, that their hearts and brains had but little to do with one another. It is not in early youth that intellect and fancy meet together, or that passion and comradeship walk hand in hand. In life's springtime love and friendship seem separate articles: it is only in the summer and autumn that we recognise them as one. At Llanferdovey Nicholas had never discovered that Adah was the more intelligent of the two; he had only perceived that Zillah was the lovelier.

But now he was older and sadder and wiser than he had been then; and the sense and humour of the letters from Meadowford proved wonderfully attractive to him, with their graphic descriptions of village life and their ready comments upon it, while the fundamental sadness, which underlay all their apparent lightness, charmed him even more than the lightness itself; for Nicholas belonged to that saddest race of all living men—the born jesters of the world.

Many years before his birth, a great-uncle of his had a strange experience. Richard Ingoldby (that was the great-uncle's name) received an appointment under the East India Company; and just before starting out for the scene of his new duties he happened to stay for a few days in an English country house. There he fell in love with one of the daughters; but did not realise how deeply his affections were involved until he had bidden good-bye to the young lady and sailed for his new berth. When he got out to India he wrote to her asking her to be his wife; but explained that, owing to certain circumstances connected with his appointment, into which it is not necessary to enter here, he would not be in a position to marry her for a year or two: which, in those days of long engagements, seemed the most ordinary course of events. So he and the girl became engaged, with the full sanction of her parents; and the lovers corresponded regularly, growing more and more mutually devoted as their letters revealed the hidden heights and depths of each to the other, until Richard Ingoldby was in a position to make a home for his bride and to ask her to come out and marry him: which he accordingly did.

But unfortunately, when he stayed those few days in the country house, he made a mistake as to the Christian names of the daughters; with the result that when he wrote to Lucy he believed that he was writing to Louisa. To Lucy he proposed, by Lucy he was accepted, and with Lucy he corresponded for two long years: yet it was to Louisa that he lost his heart at first sight, and it was to Louisa that he believed he was engaged to be married.

## The Wisdom of Folly

Duly at the end of two years Lucy came out to be married; and it was not until he went down to the ship to meet her that he found out his terrible mistake.

Being a member of that egregiously unselfish family which a couple of generations later produced Nicholas, he was not long in deciding how to deal with the matter. He straightway married Lucy, was for thirty years an excellent husband to Lucy, and never told the secret of his life's mistake until Lucy and Louisa were both in their graves.

There is no doubt that in the end Richard Ingoldby loved Lucy far more than he had ever loved Louisa, inasmuch as the devotion of the husband transcends that of the lover: but the question was—with which sister was he in love at the time of his marriage? A question that he himself was never able to answer.

True, his fancy had been captured by the face and form of Louisa when he saw her first at her own home: but he had learnt to love the heart and mind of Lucy as they were gradually revealed to him in her long and unreserved letters: then which was the woman whom he really loved?

Such was the history of Richard Ingoldby; and history seemed about to repeat itself in the case of his great-nephew Nicholas.

The latter had plenty of time for inward reflection and self-analysis in the hours of enforced idleness which the affection of his eyesight involved; and in those hours he frequently tried to dissect his mingled feelings, and to discover what place Adah Treherne had taken in his life. Sometimes he thought that he was beginning to care for her too much, and that such caring was a mark of disloyalty towards the memory of his beloved Zillah; and on such occasions he decided to bring the Meadowford correspondence to a close, and to drive all thoughts of Adah out of his heart for ever. But in less austere and self-denying moods, he wondered whether he were justified in thus sacrificing the whole of his life to a memory; and whether, if happiness passed his way again, he had not the right to seize it this time and refuse to let it go. Had Zillah lived, he said to himself (and said it in all truth and sincerity), no other woman could ever have come between them; but was there any real disloyalty to her, he wondered, if—she being dead—he gave the remainder of his spoilt life to Adah? It would make both Adah and himself happier, he felt sure; then would it not have been Zillah's wish that he should link his lot with that of her sister? Had Zillah ever loved him, he would have viewed the matter differently: in that case he would have considered it flagrantly disloyal on his part to offer affection to any other woman. But Zillah had not loved him; of that he was absolutely certain. In fact on looking back to the old days at Llanferdovey in the light of later years and experience, he realised that, if either of the sisters were in love with him then, it was certainly not Zillah. Little things which he had not noticed at the time, owing to his absorption in the younger sister, came back to his memory now, and showed him that if Adah did not love him then she was perilously near doing so; but—with her characteristic unselfishness—she deliberately put herself on one side in order that her adored younger sister should be happy and beloved.

Adah had exercised no fascination for him then; he freely admitted it; in his dazzled eyes she was nothing but Zillah's sister. But after the letters from Meadowford had grown to be one of the greatest interests of his life, he gradually found himself becoming deeply interested in the personality of the writer.

Had he been a sensible man he would have gone down to Meadowford—without her permission if he could not go with it—and would have asked her then and there to be his wife, and would have repaired the broken threads of their two lives by joining them together. But no one who knew Nicholas Ingoldby ever accused him of being a sensible man, or expected him to behave in a sensible manner. Therefore he wasted valuable and irredeemable time by letting (not "I dare not," but) "I ought not" wait upon "I would"; and by splitting hairs, first as to his duty towards the dead sister, and then as to his chivalry towards the living one; until another and wiser suitor stepped in and robbed him of his inheritance among the Sons of men—his right to woo and to wed the woman of his choice.

## The Wisdom of Folly

It had stirred him deeply when he heard that Roland was going to live at Meadowford. It seemed so strange to think that Roland would see Adah and would touch her hand and hear her voice, while he was allowed none of these privileges. Another man would probably have taken them without being allowed, and would have fared all the better in consequence: but not so Nicholas Ingoldby.

He was a dreamer by nature, and Adah had become so much a dream-woman to him that the notion of marrying her was as yet a dim and unformed idea, hovering somewhere in the hazy distances of his mind. For the present it was enough for him to pour out his soul to her on paper, and to receive similar outpourings from her in return: wherein Nicholas showed that there was a strongly feminine strain in his nature.

There is something of the woman in every man; and in some more than in others. There was so much of the woman in Nicholas that now and then it seemed as if there were also in him something of the schoolgirl.

He and Roland were sitting in the old orchard at Eldhurst, which was always a thing of beauty at this time of year. The trees were covered with a wealth of snowy blossoms, and the ground, too, was white with the droppings from the trees. When the spring breeze stirred the branches, fresh showers kept falling, which looked indeed like that snow in summer which is as welcome as news from a far country. Marvellously fair was that wonderful old orchard, with its profusion of pure white and bright green, making a delightful contrast to the rich tint of the red walls that surrounded it, and to the deep brown of the old fish-pond standing in its midst; the perfect scheme of colour being completed by the cold grey walls of the palace on the farther side of the wall, and the dark green of the cedar-tree overshadowing it. It was a picture to gladden the soul of any artist by its typical English beauty: and the heart of Nicholas grew heavy within him as he realised how lovely it must all be looking, and yet could only catch hints of its well-remembered beauty through a pair of dark spectacles.

"So you are going down into the Midlands to live at Meadowford," he was saying to his cousin, "as Lord Mershire's agent. Do you think the place will suit you permanently, or that your roving spirit will finally fly farther afield in a successful pursuit after filthy lucre?"

"It will suit me as long as I am a bachelor: but Lord Mershire does not pay his agent enough to marry upon."

"How thoughtless and inconsiderate of him! But perhaps he upholds the celibacy of agents, as some people uphold the celibacy of the clergy. And, after all, there is much to be said in favour of the celibacy of agents: their wives will then no longer quarrel with the wives of the various tenants, nor yet resent the patronage of the lady of the manor, thereby obliging the agents themselves to resign their respective posts. You will find that nine times out of ten when a man gives up a good appointment, it is on account of his wife's having quarrelled with somebody of importance about something of no importance at all."

"You see," continued Roland, pursuing the even tenor of his thoughts, undisturbed by Nicholas's vagaries, "Lord Mershire's principal agent lives in the north of the county, and looks after his big estates there; so the agency of his smaller property in the neighbourhood of Merchester is a very inferior sort of affair. I took it because I was out of a job; but I only mean to keep it while I look out for something better."

"O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!"

"The idea at the back of my mind is that eventually I shall go out to my uncle Roger in Australia. He has no children, and is doing very well: and perhaps he might, if I pleased him, make me his heir. Anyway, I believe I could make more money out there than I ever can here; but I don't feel quite ripe for it until I have mastered my profession as a land-agent."

Nicholas clasped his hands in mock admiration. "O noble judge! O excellent young man! How much more elder art thou than thy looks!"



## The Wisdom of Folly

"It's all very well for you to make fun of me, Nick," replied Roland with imperturbable good humour; "but I've got my own way to make in the world, and I must set about doing it. You must remember I haven't had a fortune left to me as you have, you lucky fellow!"

"But you have your eyesight left to you, and your power to be happy: and I think that those two together are quite equal to eight hundred a year," said Nicholas dryly.

"Look here, Nick, don't talk like that. I know how hard hit you were over that dreadful Llanferdovey affair, and how it knocked you over altogether. But use a little commonsense, man, and don't let it spoil your whole life. After all, there are other women in the world besides Zillah Treherne."

Nicholas thought that there was certainly one other woman: but he did not give expression to this thought. "Yes; you knew all about it at the time, Roland," he said, "and what a tremendous blow it was to me. Of course I am what people call 'getting over it': we can 'get over' anything in time, I suppose—even the cutting off of the right hand and the plucking out of the right eye; but life will never be the same to me again."

"Then you'll have to make it the same. It is ridiculous to talk of life being over at twenty-three; and you were barely twenty-three when that awful thing happened."

"But somehow I have a sort of feeling that it wouldn't be loyal to Zillah if I fell in love with somebody else, and married, and lived happy ever after."

"Good Heavens, Nicholas, what an awful rotter you are! That's just the sort of idea you would have, and it's absolute nonsense! If you've got a wife, stick to her, and don't go dangling after other people. That's what I say. But if you haven't got a wife, or if she's dead or anything of that kind, or, still better, if she was never your wife at all, but you only thought you'd like her to be—then for goodness' sake don't get any nonsense into your head about always being true to her and stuff of that sort!"

"Then you don't think it would be horrid behaviour on my part if I did eventually care for some one else?" asked Nicholas, who had a high opinion in spite of his jeers at it, of the commonsense of his cousin Roland.

"Good gracious, no! How could it be? If Zillah Treherne didn't mind marrying somebody else when you were alive, I don't see how she could possibly object to your marrying somebody else when she was dead. It isn't as if you'd been married or even engaged to her: though even in that case I should have advised you to be happy with some one else if you could."

"You have much sense, Roland, of a commonplace and commercial kind, and I shall give due weight to your words of wisdom. You may be stupid or mercenary or even pig-headed, but you could never behave like a fool: while I am incapable of behaving like anything else, in spite of my undeniable gifts of mind and spirit. And now, to change the subject, I know some people who live at Meadowford, and I wonder if you will come across them."

"What is their name?" asked the agent-elect.

"Frisby: Colonel and Mrs. Frisby. A most charming couple, who always remind me of Sidney Smith's delightful description of a similar pair: 'One couldn't help liking them, because he was so ladylike, and she was such a perfect gentleman.' Such are the worthy and fascinating Frisbys." As a matter of fact, Nicholas had only seen Mrs. Frisby once, and the Colonel not at all: otherwise he would not have given such an incorrect description of them: but they had become so real to him through the vivid descriptions of them in Gwynneth's letters, that he pictured them as old friends.

"Have this excellent couple any children?" Roland further inquired.

"Only an adopted daughter, Miss Gwynneth Morgan, and an extremely youthful niece of hers—the child of her dead sister."

"Well, Nick, I will look them up when I get to Meadowford."

"Do," said Nicholas, fondly hoping that through his cousin he would get into touch with Adah once more, and be able to hear about her, even if she still declined to see him. And surely she would soon sufficiently have recovered from the shock of her sister's death and the preceding tragedy, to be equal to meet him again face to face. But on one point his chivalrous mind was made up. He would never go to Meadowford without her permission, however much his heart might yearn to do so: a woman's wish should always be to him as law. Wherein poor Nicholas again showed himself no unworthy follower of Mandolet the Fool.

## Chapter 13. FRESH HOPES

It was not until after Roland had gone to Meadowford that the idea of marrying Adah Treherne assumed in Nicholas's mind the form of practical politics. Until that time he had been content to delight himself by penetrating into the inmost recesses of a woman's mind, without giving much thought to the woman herself apart from her intellectual attributes. True, the notion of eventually marrying Adah had now and then occurred to him, but only in a very dim and nebulous form; and had been summarily dismissed, as often as not, as a sign of disloyalty to his beloved Zillah.

But, manlike, as soon as Nicholas imagined another man sharing his friendship with Adah, that friendship began to resemble love more closely than it had ever resembled it before: and he seriously set about analysing his own feelings in order to find out whether he loved Adah enough to marry her, or not.

On the whole, he wished that Roland had obtained an appointment in some other place than Meadowford. He felt that his friendship with Adah was a very pretty friendship as it stood; and so far it completely satisfied him. He would have been content to go on interminably with his calm and uneventful life in peaceful Eldhurst, finding his only recreation in the weekly letters from Meadowford. It was strange, perhaps, that so young a man should have been so easily satisfied: but first his lonely childhood, and then the terrible sorrow of his early manhood, and now his quiet existence owing to his defective eyesight, had made Nicholas Ingoldby far older than his years. And further, it must be remembered that his love for Zillah Treherne had been such an absorbing and overwhelming passion, that it would be impossible for him ever to love another woman quite as he had loved her.

It had been an occasion of much surprise to him—and also of a little self-reproach—when he discovered how strong a fascination the letters from Meadowford exercised over him. He could not have believed that any woman except Zillah could have occupied his thoughts as the woman whom he now called Gwynneth had begun to occupy them. But, when all is said and done, a purely intellectual attraction is a pale and feeble thing compared with a personal one; and so it came about that although the thought of Adah was now the principal interest in his life, he was content to go on for month after month and year after year, without seeing her face or touching her hand or hearing her voice.

But when another man began to enjoy these privileges, the masculine side of Nicholas's nature—which had been stunned and crushed by the awful experience of seeing the woman he loved slay her husband with her own hand—gradually woke up to life again, and began to assert its prerogative of possession. The thought of sharing Adah's friendship with another man became hateful to him.

Women, as a rule, do not mind sharing a friendship; that is to say, when the friendship is a real friendship, and not love masquerading in the part: but even if a man's feeling for a woman is friendship pure and simple, without any flavour of love in it at all, he cannot endure the idea of sharing it with another man. Which masculine

## The Wisdom of Folly

characteristic explains a great many of the marriages of middle life. Frequently the elderly suitor is not in the least in love with the lady, and does not really wish to marry her: her friendship is all that he needs: but he needs this so much that he would rather marry her than lose it; and so saddles himself with a wife sooner than lose a friend.

Such was the case just now with Nicholas Ingoldby, who—owing to character and circumstances—had the thoughts and feelings of a middle-aged man rather than of a young one. That Roland might win Adah's love did not occur to him: he only hated his having part or parcel in her friendship. Perhaps this showed a certain stupidity on his part: but to him Adah had always seemed lacking in that personal charm which had so strongly characterised her sister; and it is difficult for any man to believe in another man being attracted by charms which have exercised no attraction for him: Hence the ordinary man's incredulous attitude, slightly tinged with humorous contempt, towards those men who are in love with his sisters. To every normal and healthy-minded brother, his sisters' love affairs are more or less of a joke, and he scorns or laughs at them accordingly: and in the old days at Llanferdovey Nicholas's regard for Adah had been so thoroughly fraternal that it would never have occurred to him seriously that anybody could fall in love with her. To confess the truth, his feeling for her was brotherly even yet, though characterised by an intensity of interest which few brothers after the flesh feel in their feminine next-of-kin. All the passion of his nature had been expended upon Zillah. But even brothers can be jealous: and jealous Nicholas undoubtedly was, though in a brotherly fashion, when he pictured his cousin enjoying the companionship of Adah Treherne.

He did not really want to marry Adah: of that he felt sure. But he would sooner marry her than share her regard with another man: and he would far sooner marry her than lose her altogether: which he knew was quite within the range of possibility, as there was no tie of relationship between them.

It was not without many a struggle against his old love for Zillah, that Nicholas at last made up his mind that he would ask Zillah's sister to be his wife. After the passionate intensity of his first love, this tepid and half-fraternal affection was but a tame and tasteless affair. But the idea of a life uncheered by the friendship of Adah and the stimulus of her letters, seemed absolutely impossible and insupportable to him: so he decided that, as he had missed the best in life, he would take the second-best; and that, as love and happiness had been denied him, he would accept in their stead congenial companionship and peace.

At first he thought that he would write to Adah asking her to be his wife: but on second thoughts it occurred to him that it would be better to see her once again before taking this irrevocable step. There was no doubt that though her mind—as revealed in the correspondence of the last three years—had attracted him enormously, her personality—as he knew her four or five years ago—had not attracted him at all: in fact it had struck him as remarkable that he should find such compelling charm in the letters of a woman whose conversation had not charmed him in the least: a proof, he thought, of how we poor mortals are handicapped by the limitations of manner and appearance. Zillah's society had gone to his head like wine: Adah's had left him unmoved: and as married life cannot entirely be carried on through the medium of correspondence, Nicholas thought it would be well to see Adah again, and find out how her personality now affected him, before definitely asking her to become his wife. For at the bottom of his heart, and in spite of all the family traditions to the contrary, he doubted whether his great-uncle Richard had ever really loved Lucy as well as Louisa.

He consulted his mother upon the subject one afternoon, when he was lying in a hammock in the old orchard, and she was sitting beside him.

"By the way, mother," he began, "I've been thinking about old Uncle Richard, and wondering which of the two sisters he really liked best."

"I wonder whatever brought Uncle Richard's love affairs into your head just now," remarked Lady Ingoldby. "I'd forgotten he ever existed."

## The Wisdom of Folly

Nicholas knew what had brought Uncle Richard's love affairs into his mind just then; but he did not choose to enlighten her. "Which do you think he really liked best?" he persisted.

"No one ever knew."

"I didn't ask you what you *knew*, but what you *thought*. That is why the question—or rather your answer interests me. The things that we know are never as interesting as the things that we only think; since Knowledge has limitations, while Imagination has none. Thinking involves a certain amount of feeling, and knowing involves no feeling at all. A man doesn't love a woman because he knows she is good, but because he thinks she is beautiful. I hate the people who know that I am ugly; but I love those who think that I am clever; and most of all I love those who know that I am not attractive, and yet all the time think that I am. Thought, in distinction from Knowledge, is Imagination; but Thought, in opposition to Knowledge, becomes Faith. Now which of the two sisters do you think Uncle Richard liked best? This is for the third time of asking."

Lady Ingoldby smiled. "It is rather difficult to say. He really could have known so little of Louisa, as he only stayed for a day or two in the same house with her, I believe; and in those days men and girls did not talk as freely to each other as they do now. And he must have got to know Lucy very well indeed, after corresponding with her regularly for two years."

"He must! When a woman takes to pouring out her soul on foreign paper, there is not much that is left unrevealed. And I daresay she crossed her letters, too."

"Not a doubt of it."

"And underlined the most self-expressing words: a way they had in the thirties!" added Nicholas.

"Thus, you see, he must have known the real Lucy very well indeed, and the real Louisa not at all."

"But, my dear mother, that would not have prevented his loving the unreal Louisa far better than he had ever loved the real Lucy; in fact, quite the reverse. We like people for what they are: but we love them for what we imagine them to be."

"That is true. And therefore I think the happiest marriages in the long run are those that are founded on liking rather than on love. Love merely means personal fancy: while liking includes congenial companionship."

"Dear mother, what an atrociously and irredeemably feminine idea!"

"And you must admit that, after once people are married, they see each other as they really are, and not as they have imagined each other to be."

Nicholas raised himself into a half-sitting position, so as the more emphatically to contradict his mother's statement. "I don't admit it at all! I flatly deny it! If a man is really in love with his wife, he never sees her as she really is; but in time she really becomes what he imagines her to be. And if a woman really is in love with her husband, the light of her eyes never falls upon his defects; but his defects wither and shrivel and die, because they are deprived of the life-giving light of her eyes,"

"Well, my dear boy, I have been married, and you haven't," began Lady Ingoldby; but her son interrupted her—

"Exactly; and therefore I know much more about the matter than you do. Is it the performers in a ballet who have the best idea of the general effect of the figures? Is it the rank and file of an army that form the truest estimate of the general's strategic efficiency? No, no! Believe me, dear mother, truth is revealed to the eye of the onlooker."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Nevertheless I stick to my original opinion that Uncle Richard was far happier with Aunt Lucy than he would ever have been with her sister Louisa."

"I dare say. But who that is young asks for prosaic happiness? All men, who have any youth left in them, would far rather be unhappy with the woman they love than happy without her. The bachelor who left his fortune among the three women to whom he owed his happiness—the three women who had refused him—was old, terribly and hideously old. No man who had ever been really young could have done such a thing."

"Yet age brings wisdom, my son."

"And youth brings delightful and glorious folly. Surely the living folly of youth is better than the dead wisdom of age!"

"I'm not so sure about that. When I was a girl, the happy days were the days on which something happened; now, the happy days are the days on which nothing happens; therefore the average of happy days is higher than it was then."

"But the happy days have lost in quality what they have gained in quantity," persisted Nicholas. "The nectar of later years is a non-intoxicating beverage. I've no doubt that when he grew old, poor Uncle Richard thanked Heaven fasting for the solid comfort of Aunt Lucy's companionship; but all men when they grow old offer up heartfelt pæans of gratitude for gifts for which they wouldn't have said 'thank you' in the days of their youth. At Harvest Festivals, for instance, we decorate our altars with barley and potatoes and pumpkins, and offer up humble and hearty thanks for the same; we, who earlier in the year crowned our heads with blossoms, and fed among the lilies, and learned the secret hidden in the heart of the rose, thinking meanwhile that we owned as our rightful heritage all the glory of the earth and the fulness thereof! Just the difference, my dear mother, between autumn and spring."

Lady Ingoldby sighed. She, too, had once been young. "Then do you think that Uncle Richard would have been happier with Louisa after all, Nicholas? Is that what you are driving at?"

"I don't know that he would have been happier; but I'm quite sure he would rather have married her. I don't believe that the sort of knowledge of people one gets out of letters is enough to marry upon; one wants a little physical charm as well. If I'd been Uncle Richard, I'd far rather have married Louisa whom I fell in love with at first sight, even though she and I hadn't one idea or opinion in common, than I'd have married Lucy who had echoed my every written thought and sentiment for two long years!"

"I am twenty years old than you, Nicholas, and I am quite sure you are wrong."

"And I am twenty years younger than you, mother, and I am quite sure I am right. But the question I am now debating is not between Lucy and Louisa—in that case I should give my vote to Louisa without a moment's hesitation: my point is, supposing that Louisa had been entirely out of reach—dead for instance, or married to somebody else—would his feeling for Lucy, which was entirely the result of those two years' correspondence, have been sufficient to make him happy in the second-best sort of way for the rest of his life?"

"Of course it would. As a matter of fact it did."

"It would have been better than nothing, you mean? Better than solitary bachelorhood?"

"Infinitely better. Incomparably better," replied Lady Ingoldby, to whom it was a real trouble that, since his disappointment three years ago, no idea of marriage ever seemed to have entered her son's head.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Well, mother, I shall never love another woman as I loved Zillah Treherne: I have no doubt upon that score: my best love was buried in her grave. But two or three years ago I was brought into contact with a girl called Gwynneth Morgan, and formed a very real friendship with her, and she and I have corresponded regularly ever since. I can never love her as I loved Zillah; she will never be, so to speak, the Louisa of my life; but her mind, as shown in her letters, is very congenial to me, and of late I have been wondering whether she could be to me as an Aunt Lucy; I mean, of course, as Aunt Lucy was to Uncle Richard; Heaven forbid that she should ever be as an aunt to me! I'm not much of an aunt—fancier myself, never having kept any tame ones. I know nothing about their habits or their ways."

Lady Ingoldby's heart gave a throb of joy. Now that Nicholas's sight had become so feeble, he was sadly dependent upon feminine care and companionship; and—as he had no sister—she longed for him to have a wife to look after his health and his comfort after she herself was gone. "Dear, I am so glad!" she exclaimed. "Tell me more, about her."

"She has no father or mother, but is the adopted daughter of a Colonel and Mrs. Frisby who live at Meadowford; delightful people in their way, which is the way of the early Victorians: made of the best mahogany, upholstered with the finest rep, and furnished with family albums and venetian blinds. You know the sort."

"Is she good-looking?"

"Very. If I had never seen Zillah, I should call her beautiful; but Zillah spoilt me for all inferior types of beauty."

"And clever?"

"Hardly clever, but extremely intelligent. It is with her intelligence that I have fallen in love; as intelligence, though a horrid word, is not a bad sort of thing. This isn't the best way of falling in love, I admit: but it is all I am up to now. I fell in love with beauty once and for ever: and I can never do it again."

"Has she any brothers or sisters?"

"None. She is absolutely alone in the world, save for her adopted parents and a little niece—the child of a dead sister; which, by the way, proves that I am a bit of an aunt—fancier after all!"

"No money, I suppose? Not that that matters, however, since you have enough for both; and girls who bring nothing ought not to expect too much (though, as a matter of fact, they generally do)."

"She will have something," replied Nicholas, "though not a large fortune. But Colonel and Mrs. Frisby are comfortably off, and will leave everything they have, I believe, to their adopted daughter."

"I conclude she is young?"

"About five—and—twenty; under rather than over."

It did not occur to Lady Ingoldby to ask Nicholas where he had met Gwynneth Morgan. He had travelled for the best part of a year after his great sorrow, and she concluded that he had come across her then.

"I am delighted at what you have told me, Nicholas," she said, "and I wish you all the happiness that you deserve, which is saying a good deal. You are the last man to be happy as a bachelor—especially in your present state of health. And so I can assure you that I shall welcome Miss Morgan as a daughter with all my heart."

## The Wisdom of Folly

It was the greatest relief to Lady Ingoldby to feel that at last the memory of Zillah Treherne was to be wiped out of her son's life. Had she known how closely Zillah and Gwynneth were connected, her joy would have been turned into mourning; but that was a thing which her son never intended her to know—neither then nor at any future time.

Emboldened by his mother's openly—expressed approval, Nicholas decided to go down to Meadowford forthwith and put his fortune to the test. But, with characteristic chivalry, he wrote first to Adah begging her to remove her prohibition and to allow him to see her face to face once more: adding that he would do all in his power to make the meeting as little painful, to her as possible.

By return of post he received the following reply:

"My dear friend—How nice of you still to want to come and see me, and yet not to want it until I want it too! I am afraid I have been very horrid and selfish all these years in saying you must not come; but you will understand—because you understand everything and everybody—how dreadfully I have shrunk from seeing anybody who was so closely connected with the tragedy of my life, and from the opening of the old wounds which such a meeting would necessarily involve. But the moment that I heard from your cousin of the recent affection of your eyesight, and realised all the depression and suffering which such an affection must entail, I repented me of my own folly and selfishness, and decided to write and ask you to come to Meadowford, if you thought that such an excursion would in any way relieve the monotony of your present semi—invalid existence. And now, before I have properly laid down and cemented the pavement of my good intentions, I receive a letter from my faithful friend Nicholas, asking if he may come. So I hasten to say *Yes* with all my heart.

"I know that you will make the meeting as easy as you can. When did you ever fail to make things as .easy as you could for everybody connected with you? And after the strain of the first meeting is over, I feel sure that we shall both be the happier for seeing each other again.

I like your cousin extremely. He is so cheerful and sensible, and so extraordinarily good—looking. But I think the thing about him that attracts me most is the utter absence in him of anything that is morbid or sensational or even sentimental. People who have gone through what you and I have gone through, Nicholas, are frightened of anything approaching sensationalism. We have been too unhappy ever to enjoy unhappiness—though, as far as years go, we are still young enough for that. I think one of the saddest things about being unhappy when one is young, is that one is thus robbed of the privilege of enjoying unhappiness—a royal prerogative of youth! But we lost that for ever, Nicholas, you and I—on that awful spring morning more than three years ago! There will be no more happy unhappiness, no more delightful misery for us now any more.

"Come and see me soon, and let me try to help you a little in your trouble about your eyesight, as you helped me in my trouble more than three years ago. It would be such a pleasure to me to feel that I could in some way repay the great debt that I owe you: and yet it is a still greater comfort to me to know that I never can repay you as long as been that woman and you that friend.—Yours in all sincerity,

"Gwynneth Morgan."

"How like her," exclaimed Nicholas to himself after he had read the letter, "to forbid me to come and see her as long as she thought I was well and strong: and then to withdraw her prohibition the minute she heard from Roland that I was seedy and down—hearted and needing help and care! Surely there never was a more unselfish woman created than Adah Treherne. But I must try not to think of her as Adah any more, lest I should some time inadvertently say the name aloud, and so betray her secret: and—if she will consent to marry me—I must also try not to feel towards her as Adah any more, for my affection for Adah in the old days was too calm, too brotherly; but I must henceforth think of her as Gwynneth—as a new personality who has come into my life—for whom I feel neither the absorbing adoration that I felt for my Zillah, nor yet the purely brotherly regard that I felt for

Adah, but a deep, if temperate, devotion which will last as long as I live."

## Chapter 14. NICHOLAS AT MEADOWFORD

It did not take Roland Ketteringham long after his arrival at Meadowford to establish a very friendly footing between himself and the inhabitants of Meadowford House. It was easy for Roland to get on well with strangers: partly because he was so good-looking, and partly because he was not hampered by quick perceptions. People who are thus hampered are so ready to perceive the faintest sign that a newcomer is not at once attracted by their personalities, that they unwittingly congeal this lack of attraction into a distinctly unfavourable impression, by playing the part which they imagine that the stranger has allotted to them. They are too conscious of the impression that they are making to be able to counteract it before it is completed.

But Roland was not like that. He never thought about what other people were thinking of him, because he did not in the least care. Like most members of large families, he took it for granted that he was among friends: and the quality of the supposed surrounding friendliness he did not take the trouble to analyse.

He attracted Gwynneth from the first, for the reasons which she described in her letters to Nicholas: Mrs. Frisby approved of him because he was a man and marriageable: and the Colonel liked him because he thought that his wife did—not a bad working hypothesis for the regulation of a husband's affections.

"By the way, my cousin Nicholas Ingoldby is coming to stay with me," Roland remarked, not long after the establishment of this friendly, footing with the Frisby household.

Gwynneth smiled. How ready Nicholas was, she said to herself, always to do her bidding! There was some thing very satisfactory and soothing in such chivalrous and unselfish friendship.

"I am very pleased to hear it," said Mrs. Frisby, who was not off with the old love, before she was on with the new, as far as her adopted daughter was concerned. She had by no means left off wishing that Nicholas should fall in love with Gwynneth, because she had set her heart on Roland's doing so. "The more the merrier," was the worthy Caroline's doctrine when lovers were in question. "It isn't my fault that he didn't come here years ago," she continued with much duplicity: "I think it would have done him good; the air is so beautiful off The Chase. And I never believe that bachelors look after their health properly. Oh! but I forgot—he lives with his mother, and so his clothes are bound to be thoroughly aired and his food properly cooked: but all the same I can't believe that the air near London is as bracing as it is here, let alone the smoke and the fogs."

"It mayn't be as bracing, but it is a good deal warmer," replied the literal Roland: "and there are no more fogs at Eldhurst than there are here."

"That may be," persisted Mrs. Frisby, whose desire for Nicholas to come to Meadowford was not really climatic in its origin: "I still think it would have done that young man good to come here years ago: but my opinion was overruled."

"He is coming now, however, dear auntie," suggested Gwynneth, always ready to smooth things over and to make for peace and contentment.

"So I hear, my dear: but now isn't three years ago!" This statement was incontrovertible, so Gwynneth wisely did not attempt to refute it.

"I suppose you mean after his great trouble," remarked Roland, whose mind, though it worked slowly, was fairly acute. "I didn't know you knew him then."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"We met him not long after," Mrs. Frisby hastened to say, fearful lest Gwynneth should drop some word which might disclose the secret of her identity—a secret which the girl herself was not more anxious than Mrs. Frisby to keep inviolate. "I heard something about his great sorrow from a mutual friend, and I thought it might ease his mind and help him to get over it a bit if he came here."

Roland looked at Gwynneth's beauty, and (in his ignorance) thought so too. "I wonder he didn't," he said: "I should, if I'd been in his place. But Nick is always a queer sort of a fellow. He is one of those odd people who seem to think it is their duty to get all the flavour they can out of trouble and sorrow and disagreeable things, and who roll misfortune over their tongues as if it were old port. He always reminds me of those weird Johnnies in the Middle Ages who used to go for pilgrimages with peas in their shoes."

"I never approved of them," said Mrs. Frisby shortly. "I always think they must have given their wives so much unnecessary trouble in darning their socks afterwards."

"Oh! I don't think they wore socks, Aunt Caroline," Gwynneth remonstrated.

"Perhaps not: but the principle was the same. If ever men get fussy about overdoing their duty, the burden invariably falls on their wives. Take your uncle, for instance. He will persist in having a cold dinner on Sunday evenings for the sake of the servants' souls. It always upsets him, and the trouble of that falls upon me. It may be good for the cook's temper, but it is extremely bad for mine: and if she has a pleasant Sunday evening, I have anything but a pleasant Monday morning."

"But I thought you were very strict about Sundays yourself, Mrs. Frisby?"

"So I am, when it doesn't affect William's health—very strict indeed: but I'm not going to save the maids' souls at the expense of William's body, and so I tell you: and I'm fast coming round to the belief that there's nothing for it but a hot chop and a boiled potato, even if the housemaid has to cook them. But, as you say, Mr. Ketteringham, I am very particular about keeping the Sabbath day holy myself, and about what I read on it, and all that sort of thing."

Gwynneth smiled to herself: for Mrs. Frisby's idea of keeping Sunday afternoon holy was to sit down on an easy-chair by the fire immediately after luncheon, with her spectacles upon her nose and a book of sermons upon her knee, and then to talk cheerfully and uninterruptedly till tea-time. She called it "having a quiet read."

"Nevertheless I rather admire the pilgrims with peas in their shoes," Gwynneth remarked: "that sort of thing always appeals to me, just as it would appeal to Nicholas."

"Yes: Nicholas is built on those lines," added Roland; "and therefore I think he has made up his mind to be as miserable as he can for the rest of his days just because of that early trouble of his. He thinks it is loyal, don't you know? It was a knockdown blow, I admit: but that's no reason why he should let it spoil the whole of his life for him."

"Certainly not," agreed Mrs. Frisby with much decision. But Gwynneth still demurred. "I think it is beautiful of him to be so true to his early love; and, having loved once, never to love again. It is so fine and ideal of him; so exactly like himself!" (She did not know how near Nicholas was to foregoing his high ideal and deciding to make the best of his life with a second-best love.)

"Well, my dear, I don't at all agree with you. To my mind, life is too short for those love—once—and—for—ever businesses. They take too much time. And I see no point in only falling in love once; it seems to me rather narrow-minded."

## The Wisdom of Folly

Roland laughed outright, but Gwynneth looked reproachful. "Oh! Aunt Caroline, how can you say such things? I'm sure you never were in love with anybody but Uncle William!"

"Oh! but I was, though—with lots of other people. It used to amuse me to fall in love when I was a girl—and especially when it was with a clergyman. I always think it is very nice for girls to fall in love with clergymen: it seems to give a sort of sanctified flavour to the whole thing, like reading a love-story in a religious periodical. I'm sure I thoroughly enjoy reading the serial tales that come out in religious magazines on a Sunday, while nothing would induce me to look at such things if they were published in one volume with a Mudie label upon it, until Monday morning."

"I wish that poor old Nick would fall in love again with some nice girl, and marry and live happily ever after," remarked Roland.

"No, no," cried Gwynneth, "that would spoil everything! I think it is beautiful of him that he doesn't."

"Oh! my dear, what nonsense you are talking! I'm older than you are, and I like to see people get over their disappointments as quickly as they can, and fall in love with somebody else. In fact I like them to marry again after a proper interval. I don't even object to their marrying their deceased wife's sister if they want to—and particularly if she wasn't their wife after all, but only an unrequited love affair," said Mrs. Frisby, with a knowing look at Gwynneth, which Roland, having no notion of the girl's real name and history, naturally failed to interpret.

"Aunt Caroline, you really are too shocking for anything! If people are married to each other they are no longer two persons, but one; and so they feel the same towards their husband or wife's brothers and sisters as they do towards their own. They couldn't possibly fall in love with them, don't you see?"

Mrs. Frisby threw a look at the daughter of her adoption which spoke volumes; but all she said was: "My dear, the person who told you that husbands and wives feel the same towards each other's relations as they do towards their own, was unmarried. You may take my word for that!"

And then the conversation drifted away from Nicholas and his affairs, and no more was said about him for the time being.

He had not been long in availing himself of Gwynneth's permission to come and see her at last.

He decided to stay at his cousin's, as that seemed to be the obvious and natural arrangement; but he wrote to Adah—whom he now intended to think of as Gwynneth, and to regard as a new friend altogether instead of an old one—telling her the day and hour of his arrival, and adding that he should call upon her as soon afterwards as he conveniently could. He did not like to take her unawares, for he knew what an effort to her this first meeting would be.

It was on the afternoon of a bright May day that Nicholas arrived at Merchester station, and was met there by Roland Ketteringham; and drove with his cousin along the straight, wide road that leads from Merchester to Meadowford. The fair Mercian landscape was looking wonderfully beautiful just then, under its soft white veil of blossom, but poor Nicholas could not see much of it; but he heard the whisper of the wind in the trees, and smelt the scent of the growing grass, and felt in his blood that thrill of joy which comes to all true Nature-lovers in the springtime: that throb of strange and impersonal delight, which proves our kinship, on the one side, with the grass of the field and with the trees of the wood and with Mother Earth herself; and, on the other, with that Divine Father, Who looked at His handiwork on the evening and the morning of the third day, and saw that it was good.

As they drove through the village of Meadowford, Roland pointed out the pretty Gothic church with its high-pointed spire, and the picturesque red-roofed cottages, and the high brick wall which enclosed the old house

## The Wisdom of Folly

and garden where the Frisbys and Gwynneth lived; and these were all so near to the roadside that even Nicholas could dimly perceive them through his dark spectacles, and could gather some idea of the quaint beauty of the little Mercian village. And so they came to the pretty cottage, almost opposite the church, where Ketteringham lived, and which had been adapted and enlarged from a real labourer's cottage into a house fit for gentle habitation. The old kitchen, with its red-tiled floor, wide chimney-corner, and high oak dresser, made an ideal dining-room; and the quaint parlour, with its panelled walls and lattice windows, made an equally charming sitting-room; while the requirements of modern and more luxurious life were met by a new kitchen and offices built out of sight at the back. An ideal house for a bachelor or a newly-married couple, according to the respective ideas of Roland Ketteringham and of Mrs. Frisby.

But Nicholas could not stay to peer into the beauties of his cousin's abode: he was off, within a few minutes of his arrival, up the village street to the square red house inside the high red walls, to see the woman whom he intended to ask to be his wife.

He was shown into an old-fashioned drawing-room leading into a conservatory at one end, which conservatory was full of bright-coloured and sweet-scented flowers; and to the end of his life Nicholas could never smell the scent of hothouse flowers without recalling the moment when—as Gwynneth Morgan—the girl whom he had first met and known under another name, came into the room, awakening, by the sight of her, his stunned soul to fresh hope and happiness, and causing the blighted desert of his life to rejoice and blossom as the rose.

She came towards him with outstretched hands and trembling lips; and for a moment Nicholas held her hands in silence, both he and she being too much overcome to speak, while the memory of all that lay behind them flooded their souls. Womanlike, she was the first to recover herself.

"My poor Nicholas, I am so grieved about your eyes; but it is good to see you again"

"And it is good to see you again, my dear; Heaven only knows how good!"

"Now sit down and tell me all about yourself," said Gwynneth, seating herself upon a chintz-covered sofa, and motioning to Nicholas to sit beside her. "Are your eyes really better, do you think; or did you only say they were in your last letter in order to save me from worrying about them?"

"They really are a little better than they were; but they are not up to much as yet."

"And can you see at all with them?" asked Gwynneth, looking pitifully at the dark spectacles.

"Oh! yes. I get a sort of general idea of things; but I can't yet see through a stone wall as well as most people."

"Can you see me, Nicholas?"

"Not very distinctly; but I can hear your voice, which brings the past back to me with fond memories of the happy days at Llanferdovey long ago. I feel young again when I hear you speak."

"But why didn't you tell me about your eyes months ago, Nicholas—when first they began to be bad? It was very naughty of you to leave me to find it out from your cousin."

"I didn't want to bother you, for one thing; and, for another, I didn't want to make you say I might come to see you by trading upon your sympathy. I thought—and events proved I was right—that the minute you heard I was suffering, you would be so sorry for me that you would let me do anything that I wished, quite regardless of yourself and your feelings: and I didn't want you to sacrifice yourself and your own feelings to me."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"It was just like you, Nicholas; you always were far too unselfish. And it really was horrid of me not to let you come before!"

"I quite understood how you felt about it. I should have felt just the same as you did in your place."

"Still, it was very silly of me. I see it now. I thought it would be dreadful somehow to meet you again after all that happened the last time we met: but really it isn't dreadful at all!"

Nicholas smiled. "Didn't you know me well enough to feel sure that I wouldn't let anything be dreadful for you if I could help it?"

"I ought to have known: but I was so shattered and frightened by all that had happened, that I shrank from doing anything or seeing anybody."

"My poor girl, I understand it all!"

"You see the past was so dreadful that I want to get away from it and to forget it if I can."

"And so you shall, as far as I am concerned. Do not think of me as connected with the old days; pretend that I am a new friend, and try to like me for my own sake and not for the sake of old associations. We have much in common besides the painful past, you and I: we should be friends, even if there had been no Llanferdovey to draw us together. Then let us care for each other because of what is now, and not because of anything that has been. Let us begin again quite fresh."

"You mean that you are now going to like me for my own sake, and not because I am Zillah's sister?"

"Exactly. I will be perfectly candid with you," replied Nicholas; "during the last three years I have thought of you solely as Zillah's sister: that was my only reason for wishing to keep up my friendship with you—my only reason for maintaining a correspondence with you. It was for her dear sake that I did it all, as I believed that my heart lay buried in her grave, and that no woman could ever interest or attract me again."

"Yes, yes. I was perfectly conscious of that. You must have loved Zillah very much!"

"I worshipped her; she was my first love; and however much later loves may exceed the first in depth and durability, there is a glory and a wonder about one's first love that is unique. It is useless to deny that. People who are happy enough to marry their first loves may keep this glamour to the end: it will last as long as they do: but they will never feel it again for any second love. Once felt, it may be retained for ever: but it can never be repeated."

The girl's face grew very tender. "Yes, I think you are right. There is some magic about the first of anything which never comes again in quite the same way. Amy is the first child that I have ever had charge of—the first child that I have ever cared for. And however many children I may have to deal with in later life, none will ever be quite as dear to me as Amy. She was revealed childhood to me, just as one's first love reveals love."

"That is just it. The first of anything is a revelation; its successors are but instances. Therefore my love for Zillah will always stand alone as Heaven's revelation to me of what love really is. No other woman can ever teach me that: I have already learnt it."

"And you thought of me only as Zillah's sister?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I thought of you only as Zillah's sister—for the first year or so of our correspondence, that is to say. But for the last year or two—as I read more of your letters, and grew to know more of your inmost mind and thoughts—I ceased to think of you as anybody's sister, and began to regard you as yourself. You were no longer Adah Treherne, the sister of the woman whom I had so passionately loved: you were Gwynneth Morgan, a new interest which had come into my life to redeem it from destruction and to save it from stagnation."

"And henceforth you will always let me be Gwynneth to you?"

"Henceforth you shall always be Gwynneth to me. I shall never think of you as Adah again."

The girl heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Nicholas: that is just as I would have it. I want to think of Adah Treherne as dead and buried, and all her sorrow and sufferings done away with. Even before the awful trouble came, it wasn't a happy life at Llanferdovey. My father was hard and stern; and we were very poor, and Zillah and I had no friends except each other. It was a lonely, cheerless existence for two young girls, and it left its mark upon our characters. Gwynneth Morgan, the adopted daughter of the dear Frisbys, has been surrounded by nothing but care and affection and sunshine ever since she came to Meadowford, and has flourished accordingly: and I want to think of her as my real self, and to bury my old self out of sight for ever. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly; and I will do all in my power to help you. You and I will never speak of the past again, but will here and now begin a new life and a new friendship."

He was going to add, "and a new love, also," but at that moment Mrs. Frisby came into the room and thus stopped the *tête-à-tête*.

"How do you do, Mr. Ingoldby?" said the lady of the house, holding out her hand in warm welcome. "I am delighted to see you at Meadowford at last."

"And I am delighted to be seen," replied Nicholas.

"You'd have been seen long ago if I'd had my way: but it was Gwynneth's affair to settle when you were to come, and I've learnt to mind my own business. It has taken me over fifty years to learn this, but I think I've mastered the lesson at last."

"Cheap at the price and short at the time!" said Nicholas with a smile. "I know no more valuable accomplishment."

Mrs. Frisby nodded her head in acquiescence. "I've seen such dreadful trouble caused by people who interfere with other people for the other people's good, that I've made up my mind never to try to influence anybody in matters that don't immediately concern myself."

"It is very difficult to draw the line between influence and interference, I find," said Nicholas.

"Oh! I can easily do that for you, Mr. Ingoldby: when you speak to other people for their good, it is influence; and when other people speak to you for your good, it is interference. That's where the line is drawn."

Just then the pattering of little feet was heard, and a lovely, curly-haired child rushed into the drawing-room. The sight of a stranger stopped the rush, owing to a sudden fit of shyness; and the little girl straightway sought the protection of Gwynneth's outstretched arms.

And as Nicholas looked at Gwynneth and saw her fondling and crooning over the child, a pang of jealousy went through his heart. There are some women who will always love children better than they love men: and Gwynneth

## The Wisdom of Folly

was one of them. She could love much and love deeply; she had a perfect genius for loving; but—as is the case with many of her kind—the key to the inmost sanctuary of her heart lay in the hand of a little child.

"This is my Amy," she said, looking up at Nicholas as she hugged the little form closer; "isn't she a darling?"

"Judging from the limited view she allows of her countenance, she appears to be a charming child," replied Nicholas somewhat dryly. Like many men, and especially many bachelors, he failed to see what there was in children to make women lavish such passionate devotion upon them.

"Darling, won't you speak to this nice kind gentleman?" Gwynneth pleaded.

Thus adjured, the little girl replied in a voice muffled by Gwynneth's skirts, "I'm shy."

"But it is silly to be shy, sweetheart."

"I can't help it, auntie; I'm very shy," the muffled voice replied.

"Then never mind, my own; you shan't speak to the gentleman if you don't want to."

"Good gracious, Gwynneth, how you do spoil that child!" exclaimed Mrs. Frisby. "But it is no business of mine, so I won't interfere or even try to influence you: she is your own niece to spoil if you like."

"I'm sure you spoil her too, Mrs. Frisby," remarked Nicholas.

"So she does, Nicholas. Aunt Caroline is a dreadfully spoiling person. She spoils every one she is brought into contact with, from Uncle William down to the kitten, including all the servants and Amy and me."

The victim of the attack did not attempt to defend herself. "Well, and what if I do? I believe that spoiling is good for people: that is to say, as long as it doesn't make them poorly. I'm sure I let William have everything he wants, except things that disagree with him; and then I am as adamant. You see, I have a sister who prides herself upon not spoiling people; and a relative of that kind makes one wonderfully indulgent when one's own turn comes. When I see how my poor brother-in-law is treated, I almost feel inclined even to allow William to eat muffins, though I know that neither he nor I will get a wink of sleep all the night after, if he does!"

"You are an ideal wife, Mrs. Frisby!" said Nicholas. "As far as my vicarious experience and personal observation go, most wives spend all their time in trying to make their husbands do things that the husbands particularly don't want to do. That appears to be the whole duty of wedded womanhood as far as the majority of the sex is concerned."

"Aunt Caroline isn't a bit like that," said Gwynneth: "she never wants Uncle William to do anything that he doesn't like doing: and she wants him to do everything that he does like doing unless she thinks it will make him ill."

At this juncture Amy—finding herself stranded in a conversational backwater—emerged from the shelter of Gwynneth's skirts, remarking, "Auntie, the shyness is passing off."

"You darling!" exclaimed Gwynneth, covering her with kisses. "Then speak to the gentleman. His name is Nicholas."

Amy permitted Nicholas to give her a kiss, and exhibit his watch, and employ such ordinary means as men are wont to use in order to engage the interest of children. Then she said reflectively—

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Nicholas isn't as pretty as Roland, auntie; he hasn't got such nice soft fur on his mouth; but I fink he's kinder."

Gwynneth stroked the round pink cheek with her finger. She loved Amy so passionately that she could not keep her hands away from the child. "Oh, darling, how cruel of you! I am sure Roland is very kind."

"Not as kind as Nicholas," persisted Amy, with the unerring penetration of childhood. But many months had to pass before Gwynneth could echo this opinion, or learn the wisdom which is hidden from the prudent and revealed unto babes.

"You'll stay and have some tea, won't you, Mr. Ingoldby?" said Mrs. Frisby, with whom hospitality was an instinct rather than a virtue. "We always have it in the dining-room because of Amy. I think that tea in the drawing-room is wretched for children, and uncomfortable for everybody, as it is generally taken standing about and with one's outdoor things on, like the Passover."

So Nicholas stayed for tea, and spent the happiest afternoon he had spent since the fatal day when he went to Llanferdovey and met Adah Treherne walking on the road.

And when tea was over and he went back to the cottage, his head was still in a whirl of joy. It was too wonderful to be true, he felt, that the gates of happiness had once more opened to him when he believed them closed for ever. He had come down to Meadowford to offer Adah Treherne a brotherly regard and esteem, and to ask her if he and she might link their shattered fates together, and make the best of their spoiled lives, with such tepid affection as two people, who had suffered so much in common, might feel for one another; but the possibility of ever again experiencing the joy and the rapture of ardent passion had never entered his head. He might find calm contentment, he thought; but intense bliss was over for ever for him. He had tasted it once, and could never taste it again. But the moment that the drawing-room door was opened, and Nicholas once again touched the hand and heard the voice of the girl from whom he had parted three long years ago, all his ideas of a calm and semi-fraternal affection were dispersed like the morning cloud and the early dew; and he knew that no tepid and half-dead affection, but a living and passionate love, had once more come into his dull and dreary existence, to lighten its darkness and to make, by its alchemy, all things new.

Once more the sound of a woman's voice thrilled him as it had thrilled him at Llanferdovey; once more the touch of a woman's hand turned the world into fairyland for him. The impossible had happened: the unthinkable had come to pass; and Nicholas Ingoldby could have shouted aloud in his incredible joy at the marvel and the wonder of it all.

He had been so tired of life: so heartsick at the thought of the long years that in all probability awaited him, before the time came for him to cross the borderland and to meet Zillah again. But now all was changed. Life once more gleamed hazy through a golden mist, and the future years did not seem half long enough for all the happiness that he and Gwynneth were going to enjoy together. Poor girl! She had suffered, as she said, in her dreary youth and in the awful tragedy which suddenly ended it. But he would make her so happy now, that all thoughts of the painful past should be blotted out of her remembrance for ever. The Frisbys had made her happy; but he would make her a thousand times happier. He would devote the rest of his life to bringing gladness into hers, so that her former misery should never more be remembered, neither should it come into mind. For he loved her, not with the passive attachment which he had experienced when he regarded her merely as the writer of her charming letters, but with the passionate intensity which a young man feels for the woman of his choice. He was but a boy when he fell in love with Zillah Treherne; but now he was a full-grown man, and he loved accordingly. The dreariness of the last three years seemed to throw into brighter radiance the glory of this thing that had happened to him: had he suffered less then, he would have rejoiced less now. It was spring after winter, morning after night.

For the next two or three days Nicholas lived in a rosy dream. He did not formally propose to Gwynneth, because his bliss was so great that he shrank from disturbing it yet, even to make room for a greater happiness. It was

## The Wisdom of Folly

enough for him just to sit still and bask in the sunshine which had so suddenly and so unexpectedly flooded the world for him.

That Gwynneth would consent to marry him, he had not the shadow of a doubt. Was she not his, by right of their old friendship and all they had suffered together, and also by right of that long and intimate correspondence wherein they had exposed their inmost thoughts to each other, and so had grappled their souls together by hoops of steel?

So the sweet spring days passed by, and Nicholas Ingoldby—for the second time in his life—put his lips to the cup of human ecstasy. He had tasted perfect happiness once in the far-off time at Llanferdovey: and he tasted it again in those glorious May days at Meadowford.

Roland happened to be particularly busy with his work just then; so Nicholas and Gwynneth—always with Amy as their companion—were left very much to each other's society; and they roved the fields and trod the lanes together in the delightful intimacy which was the inevitable outcome of their long correspondence.

The jealousy which Nicholas had at first felt for Amy was quickly merged in love for the child herself. She was so pretty and so intelligent—so wonderfully like her mother and her aunt, with her curly brown hair and soft brown eyes—that Nicholas could not help but love the little thing for her own sake as well as for theirs. It was his nature to accept things as they were, without trying to alter them by kicking against the pricks: so instead of fighting against Gwynneth's ever-mastering love for Zillah's little daughter, Nicholas put himself, so to speak, alongside of it; and loved Gwynneth the more for loving Amy so intensely, and Amy the more because of Gwynneth's adoration of her. He had learnt the great lesson that it is only by bringing themselves into harmony with their environment that men and women guide their feet unto the way of peace.

The idea of separating Amy from her aunt never once occurred to him. In the air-castle which he had built for himself and Gwynneth, Amy always had an abiding dwelling-place.

It was not until he had been five happy days at Meadowford that Nicholas spoke the word which he had come there on purpose to speak. He and Gwynneth were standing on the wooden bridge that spanned the river at the bottom of the field, and Amy was at some distance from them, gathering daisies in the grass. They had both been watching the running water for a time in silence—that delightful silence which is only possible between persons who thoroughly know and understand one another. Then Nicholas suddenly broke it.

"My dearest," he said, "I have something to say to you. I need not tell you that I love you with every fibre of my being; for you, who know me so well, must surely know, without my telling, that for me there is nothing and nobody in the world but you. A fact as patent as this does not need putting into words. But the thing I want to say to you is that, as you are my all and always will be, I want to know how soon you will be my wife?"

The girl started and looked up at him with puzzled eyes. "But I thought your feeling for me was friendship. The deepest, kindest friendship, it is true, but still only friendship: at first for Zillah's sake, and afterwards for my own. That is what I thought."

"Did you?" She quailed a little before the passion in his voice and in his face, and looked down again at the running water. "Do you think it now?" he asked.

"Your letters were the letters of a friend," she persisted.

"They were. That is true enough. I believed I was only your friend when I wrote those letters. But didn't you ever guess that my friendship might cease to be a friendship when I met you again face to face? Friendship may subsist comfortably enough on such meagre fare as paper and ink; but love needs something more vital—the spoken



## The Wisdom of Folly

word and the personal touch—to awaken him into life. Did it ever occur to you that your actual presence might work this miracle for me, my dear, dear love?"

"I believed that your love had died with Zillah, and had been buried in her grave."

"And I believed it too, ignorant fool that I was! But the moment that you came into the room five days ago, and I heard your voice and touched your hand, I knew that I had been wrong. My love was not buried in Zillah's grave, as I had falsely imagined: it was not dead at all, but only sleeping. At your coming you awakened it to life again as the spring awakens the sleeping earth: and now it is alive and awake for evermore."

"And you do not feel guilty of any unfaithfulness to Zillah in speaking to me like this?"

"None at all. I feel sure that Zillah knows and understands that it was because I loved her so dearly then, that I love you so dearly now. The one is the outcome of the other. You are only bringing to full perfection the flowers which she sowed. Darling, say when you will marry me and comfort me for all that I have suffered in the past, and restore me a hundredfold the years that the locust hath eaten?"

Then Gwynneth raised her eyes once more, and they were full of tears. "My poor Nicholas, once again you have come too late! I love your cousin, Roland Ketteringham."

## Chapter 15. GWYNNETH'S QUESTION

For a few moments there was complete silence, broken only by the babbling of the brook, while Nicholas drained for the second time in his life the bitter dregs of the cup of disappointment, and Gwynneth wept tears of unavailing remorse at the agony she had unwittingly caused.

She was the first to speak. "Oh! Nicholas, can you ever forgive me? I didn't mean to hurt you, indeed I didn't. I thought that love had died for you for ever with the murder of Owen and the death of Zillah. I never dreamed that you could love like this again."

But Nicholas was silent, his arms crossed on the wooden rail of the bridge, and his face hidden in his arms.

"I would have died sooner than hurt you like this, if I had only known," the girl went on: "I wanted to comfort you for all that you had suffered in the past: and now I have made things ten times worse for you than they were before. I wish I had never been born! Oh! Nicholas, Nicholas, can you ever forgive me?"

It was impossible for Nicholas to leave a claim upon his mercy disregarded: so with a supreme effort he put his own overwhelming misery on one side in order to try to comfort the woman who had roused his dormant passion too late. But the agony on his face as he lifted it was more than Gwynneth could bear to see. "There is nothing for me to forgive, my dear," he said hoarsely, "it was all my own fault for not coming to see you before, and for taking it for granted that love was no longer possible for me."

But the woman repudiated such ultra-generosity. "No, no: it was my fault that you did not come sooner—not yours. You always wanted to come, but I kept you back, in my selfish desire to bury the past, and in my cowardly fear of anything that might cause its resurrection. It was all my hideous and foolish selfishness."

"You could never be selfish, my own: never foolish. What you did and felt was perfectly natural. It was I who was the fool—as it always is. For the second time in my life I have lost the woman I loved through my own arrant folly!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"But it was rather a fine sort of folly, Nicholas: the folly of caring more for the woman than you did for yourself, and putting her wishes before your own."

Nicholas groaned, and once more buried his face in his arms so that Gwynneth should not see how his lips trembled.

"Nevertheless folly; and folly of the first water! That most hopeless folly of all, which defies Fate by refusing Fate's gifts, and which fails to seize happiness when happiness is within its grasp."

Gwynneth laid a tender hand upon the young man's shoulder. "Still it is a sort of folly that I admire more than wisdom. I think it is the sort of folly with which the angels are charged."

"Dear, there is a saying that the immortal gods themselves are powerless against stupidity; and the stupidity, which paralyses Heaven itself, appears to be mine in abundant measure."

"My poor old Nicholas!" murmured the girl softly, as she gently patted the bent shoulder: "I would have given anything in the world to have spared you this."

"It isn't you who haven't spared me: it is I who have been too great a fool to spare myself. It is all my own doing—the result of my own overpowering stupidity which failed to learn wisdom even by experience. Can you deny that if I had told Zillah of my love before I first left Llanferdovey, she would never have married Owen Griffith?" asked Nicholas, once more raising his head and looking Gwynneth in the face.

She shook her head pitifully. "No, I am afraid I cannot deny that. She did not love you any more than she loved him: she had never learnt what love meant: but she liked you much the best, and would far sooner have married you than him, when she felt she was obliged to marry somebody."

In the midst of his agony Nicholas could hardly repress a smile at this instance of the terrible Treherne habit of speaking the unvarnished truth. Any other woman would have wrapped things up a little, in order to soften them: but the Treherne girls had never been taught to wrap things up, and were endowed with no natural gift that way. "Perhaps I could have taught her to love me," he said.

"I don't know about that: perhaps, as she had never learnt to love anybody else, you might: but I don't much believe in teaching people to love, any more than in teaching them to be strong and happy and beautiful. Those genuine, natural things come of themselves, or not at all."

"Well, at any rate, she would have married me, and that was all I asked. I had love enough in my heart for the two of us."

"You couldn't have had enough love in your heart for the two," argued Gwynneth, "however much you had. Being loved isn't the same thing as loving. It is loving—not merely being loved—that redeems a woman's soul, so a man must let that alone for ever. He cannot make agreement to God for her. She must work out her own salvation by the strength of the love she gives, and not by the strength of the love she receives; and it is only to those women who love much that much is forgiven. So perhaps it was best after all for Zillah that you did not marry her, seeing that she did not love you as you deserve to be loved."

"It would have saved her from the awful tragedy of her life."

"Yes; but it might have landed her in a worse tragedy; though most people wouldn't think there could be a worse one. I don't know if you will understand what I mean, and it is very difficult to put it into words," added Gwynneth, gazing thoughtfully across the fields to the hazy blue of the far distance beyond; "but I believe that the

## The Wisdom of Folly

worst sin of all—the sin for which there is no forgiveness either in this world or in the world to come—is not the sin of impetuously slaying the human, but of deliberately murdering the divine. It was bad enough of Zillah to kill Owen's body, Heaven knows! But it would have been infinitely worse of her to kill your soul; to take the spark of divine fire which is in you, and which manifests itself in your almost Godlike power of loving another human being, and to stamp it out by her unconscious ignorance and indifference. That is what I believe would have happened if Zillah had married you without loving you: and I thank God that from this crowning sin she was spared by that saving wisdom of yours which you misname folly!"

"Perhaps you are right; Heaven only knows! But anyway you cannot deny that if I hadn't played the fool this second time, but had found out that I loved you and had asked you to be my wife, you would have married me at once. You cannot deny this?"

"Yes, I can. I am older than Zillah was when you fell in love with her—older in years, and far, far older in experience—and I know myself and my heart too well to think that love received, instead of love given, could ever have made me happy. It may seem cruel to say this to you, my poor Nicholas, just now when you are so miserable; but I think the kindest thing in the long run is to tell you the truth. It may hurt more at the time, but it will heal the sooner."

"Yes, dear, tell me the truth. It will be best for us both; and besides—being a Treherne—it would be difficult for you to tell me anything else," said Nicholas very tenderly.

"Well, then, though I liked and admired and revered you in the old days at Llanferdovey, and in the awful time of our mutual sorrow, and during the years of our regular and intimate correspondence—though I really loved you in a friendly and sisterly fashion—I was never what people call 'in love' with you. You were to me as a very dear and kind brother or cousin, to whom I could always come in time of need. But my affection for you, though deep and sincere, was not the falling-in-love kind of love in the very least. And your letters were so calm and so brotherly so insistent on the fact that love and the power of loving were utterly dead within you, slain for ever by the double tragedy of Owen's murder and Zillah's death, that I believed your feeling for me was the same as mine for you, and that this deep and fraternal friendship would be enough for us both."

"And I believed it too. I was not deceiving you. I never dreamed that love would rise from the grave and live again, till that afternoon when you and I met once more face to face in the Frisbys' drawing-room."

Unheeding his interruption, the girl went on: "But I knew that it was in me to feel something far fiercer and stronger than what I felt for you: I recognised that I was one of the women to whom love is everything, and who cannot exist without a passionate and absorbing attachment. By the intense love I felt for Amy, I realised how I could adore the right man when I found him—how I could pour out my very soul at his feet. But you were not the right man, Nicholas; the deep and real affection that I felt for you was not the intense and passionate devotion that I knew I should feel some day; and until I felt it I was only half alive and half awake."

"Yes, yes, I understand. I know only too well what it is to love like that."

"So you see what you call your folly was after all the truest wisdom," continued Gwynneth. "I could not give you the love which it was in me to give—the love which you so amply deserve! and without it I was not fit to be your wife."

"You were more than fit to be my wife if you had only allowed me to kiss the dust off your shoes; but let that pass. And now tell me, where does Roland come in?"

"I am going to tell you; I am going to tell you everything. Then Roland came. And almost as soon as I met him—before I knew where I was—I realised that he was the man for whom I had been waiting all my life—the

## The Wisdom of Folly

man who was ordained by Fate, or Nature, or what you will, to be the complement of my soul, the other half of myself. So I fell in love with him, and could not help it: and I love him more than I love life itself. I knew that I had the power to love intensely: but I never knew how intensely until Roland came."

As the girl spoke of her love for Ketteringham her cheek flushed and her eyes blazed; and Ingoldby, looking at her, realised that all she said was true. This new and unsuspected phase of her character was a revelation—a revelation that startled and stung him. Here was neither the sweet and tender girl of the Llanferdovey days, nor yet the sympathetic and intelligent young woman of the Meadowford correspondence; but an incarnation of passionate and primæval womanhood, calling to her mate with all the music of her newly-awakened nature.

Have we not all experienced some such surprise as this in our lives; the shock of finding a complete stranger in one who was near and dear to us, and who we thought we knew with an exhaustive knowledge? Then something unexpected happened, which brought into play a hitherto unexpected phase of the character which we believed we understood so well; and the familiar friend suddenly looked at us with alien eyes, and spoke to us in a foreign tongue. Then it was as if mists, which had surrounded us from infancy were swiftly dispersed, and the well-known landscape transformed. Beyond seas, which we had once believed to be boundless, gleamed the sapphire mountains and the emerald fields and the pearl-white cities of the farther shore; while above our heads towered snow-clad peaks, which dwarfed into insignificance the hills of our youth.

There is only one thing more surprising than the unexpected discovery of the stranger which is hidden in each of our friends: and that is the awful moment when for the first time we come face to face with the alien who is secretly lurking in ourselves.

With a flash of comprehension Nicholas realised how utterly futile had been his manner of wooing with a woman such as this new Gwynneth whom he had never seen before. His intricacies of thought and subtleties of expression had left her as profoundly unmoved as they found her. In spite of his perfect understanding of her mental capacity, he felt that he had totally misread the depths and distances of character which lay below and beyond her intellectual personality. Her subconscious self he had never touched. Outwardly she was a fair and sweet and gracious girl, with an amiable disposition and a pleasing wit; but underneath all this she was a tempestuous and primitive woman, who had more in common with the fierce and lawless lovemaking of the early world, than with the dainty and decorous dalliance of the end of the nineteenth century. Her affection for him had been untouched by romance and untinged by passion: and what a fool he must have been to imagine that a tasteless draught of such small beer as this could quench the thirst of a young and ardent soul who was longing to drain the cup of life to the dregs! Once again Nicholas Ingoldby, in reviewing his own conduct, wrote himself down an ass.

He was perfectly aware that Roland Ketteringham was not only unworthy of receiving, but also incapable of understanding such superb devotion as this: yet he was also aware that the highest love is not dispensed according to merit nor awarded according to deserts; but is lavishly poured out with Divine Injustice upon those who apparently deserve it least—upon the sheep that strayed from the fold and was lost, and upon the wanderer who wasted his substance in a far country.

"Does Roland know that you love him?" he asked at length.

Gwynneth brought her eyes back from the blue distances, and Nicholas bowed his head in reverence before the unashamed love in them. "Yes; he knew almost at once. How could I help letting him see what was the light of my soul and the pride of my life? But we have decided to say nothing about it until he is in a position to marry: and that cannot be until he gets a better appointment."

Nicholas's lip curled with scorn. How like the wise and prudent Roland, to postpone accepting a star from Heaven until he had built a fireplace to contain it, and to refuse the offer of a fairy palace until it was arranged in

## The Wisdom of Folly

accordance with the regulations of the local authorities. But all he said was, "I see: Roland always does what people call the sensible thing. You need never be afraid of his leading you into any extravagance or folly."

Gwynneth was too much in love to catch the flavour of irony in his tone.

"I know that: that is why I trust him so completely. It is so peaceful to rest upon his wisdom and counsel, and to feel that he will always guide me aright."

Nicholas was staggered at the insoluble problem which strikes us all sooner or later; the inexplicable mystery of love's arbitrary selection, whereby, of two persons who seem absolutely equal, the one is taken and the other left. "Why do you love him so?" he could not forbear asking, though he knew that his question was foolish in the extreme.

"I love him because he is so wise and calm and just—so healthy-minded and normal and practical and cheerful—so opposed to all that is morbid and tragical, and so in harmony with what is fresh and natural and out-of-doors. And I also love him because he is so beautiful to look upon; I am not one of those who are superior to mere outward attractions. But above all I love him because he is himself; because there is something deep down in the hidden depths of his inmost personality which responds to something in the hidden depths of mine. To me he is the only man in all the world—the fairy prince who has awakened my sleeping soul to happiness and love."

Nicholas turned away. The love-light in the beautiful eyes was more than he could bear to see, even through his darkened glasses. "I understand; and I hope you will be very happy, Gwynneth. But remember that whatever happens I am always your friend; and you can always look to me for unflinching help and comfort and sympathy in trouble or in joy. And now I will go; as I think I have had as much as I can stand." And before she could answer him he had stepped down from the little wooden bridge, and was striding across the fields in the direction of the cottage.

Nicholas went home to Eldhurst that afternoon without seeing Gwynneth again; and on his return he told the whole story to his mother, omitting only the one fact that there was any connection between Gwynneth Morgan and his first love Zillah Treherne. He knew that if Lady Ingoldby ever heard that Gwynneth was Zillah's sister, it would prejudice her against the girl for ever; so he never meant her to know; and, moreover, the secret was Gwynneth's, not his, and he had no right to disclose it.

Lady Ingoldby gave her son all the loving sympathy which his soul needed; for Nicholas was one of the people who cannot live without sympathy. And her sorrow was not merely sympathetic; for it was real grief to her to learn that her hopes of having a daughter-in-law to take care of and look after her delicate son, were doomed to disappointment.

Nicholas stayed quietly at home for a little, and let the peace of Eldhurst gradually slide into his soul. Once more he lived in the history of the past, with its great and simple issues, and its single and straightforward means; and tried to forget for a time all the complications and subtleties of modern life.

Once more he stood by the deep pool in the fields, and realised his kinship with those ancient and mysterious things which lie behind and beyond the limits of human knowledge; and once more he felt the thrill of the growing grass and of the wind in the trees, and caught faint murmurings of the secrets which they whisper. And these things brought peace to his soul. But what brought the deepest peace of all was to sit in the beautiful church, where he had sat as a boy, and to dream the dreams that he used to dream there about the jewelled figures in the great east window. In the four side-lights stood the four Evangelists, S. Matthew and S. Mark with their pens, S. Luke with his scroll, and S. John holding the sacred Chalice. As a boy Nicholas had always liked S. John the best, with his glorious visions of divine armaments and heavenly cities, and his reiterated insistence upon love as the

## The Wisdom of Folly

fulfilling of the law: and as a man Nicholas still let his mind rest itself upon the sayings of the Beloved Apostle, and drew spiritual life from this inspiration. In the middle of the sacred group stood out the central light of the great window, with its representation of Divine Divinity, thereby setting forth the eternal truth that the figure of the crucified Christ is the central Figure of the whole universe, towards whom all other facts and fancies and forms of knowledge converge, and in which they finally meet. And as Nicholas Ingoldby gazed at this representation of the Great Paradox—this symbol of Godhead taking upon Itself the form of a servant, in order that humanity should inherit the earth—of Omnipotence allowing Itself to be vanquished, in order that weakness should go forth conquering and to conquer—of Immortality permitting Itself to be slain, in order that mortality should attain to the life eternal—he seemed faintly to understand and enter into the sacred mystery of pain, and to learn how the Captain of our Salvation, as well as the humblest of His followers, was made perfect through suffering.

Nicholas had been several months at Eldhurst, drinking in the peace-giving spirit of the place and finding rest and refreshment in its old-world atmosphere, when he received the following letter from the woman he loved:

"My Dear Nicholas,—You promised that if I ever were in any trouble or perplexity and needed you, you would come to my help; and I am going to claim the fulfilment of your promise and beg you to come up to Meadowford at once; for I am sorely troubled and perplexed. As you know, I have every confidence in my Roland's sagacity and wisdom; but this is a matter in which I cannot appeal to him. My heart pulls me one way and my conscience another, and Aunt Caroline and Uncle William takes sides with my heart. But I have a terrible suspicion that they are all three in the wrong, and that my conscience, in its minority of one, is right. You must come and decide between them—I will abide by your judgment whatever it is, and will be guided by that characteristic of yours which you call folly and I call wisdom, and which is perhaps most correctly described as the wisdom of folly, which you used to maintain is the highest wisdom of all.—Your grateful and affectionate

"Gwynneth Morgan."

It did not take Nicholas long to pack up his things and start for Meadowford. With the inborn romanticism of his nature, he considered himself the pledged knight-errant of Gwynneth Morgan, ever ready to take up the gauntlet on her behalf and boldly to champion her cause; so he held himself prepared to do his lady's bidding whenever she should summon him to her help.

Once again they met in the old-fashioned drawing-room of Meadowford House, as they had met less than a year ago: but it seemed to Nicholas as if centuries had rolled over his head since the day when he came down to Meadowford to offer to Adah Treherne the stone of a calm and brotherly esteem and respect, and found it suddenly transformed in his hands into the life-giving bread of a warm and passionate love.

"Oh, Nicholas, how good of you to come to me at once!" the girl cried, as she greeted him with outstretched hands.

"As long as I live I shall come when you call me: and even after my life is over, I believe that my spirit will bridge the great gulf fixed between the dead and the living, in order to fly to your rescue in time of need. Whether you want me or not, I am yours for life and for eternity."

Womanlike, she could not resist the temptation to try his love and to prove it, even though she herself loved another man: "And Zillah, what about her?" she asked.

"Zillah will understand. I have no fear of that. In my own mind I feel certain she knows now that my love for you is no disloyalty to my love for her, but the completion and fulfilment of it, since love itself is immortal and can never die. I love you the more because I first loved her; and I love her the more because I now love you; since the more we give our love, the more we increase the store of our love that we have to give. It is truer of the power of

## The Wisdom of Folly

loving than it is of anything else, that to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that he hath."

"Yes, you are right there, Nicholas. Roland is jealous of my love for Amy, but he needn't be. He does not understand that my love for Amy intensifies my love for him; and that my love for him deepens and expands my Love for Amy."

"And now tell me why you have sent for me, and what I can do for you," said Nicholas, sitting down beside Gwynneth on the chintz-covered sofa and looking at her with a tenderness that even his hideous dark spectacles could only partially conceal. "What is the trouble?"

"First I must tell you—if he has not already done so—that Roland is shortly going to Australia to live. His uncle has written to ask him to go, and has offered him a very good opening out there; and Roland has decided to accept this offer."

"I did not know that his uncle had actually written: but I knew that Roland expected him to offer him an opening out there, and that he intended to accept the offer when it came," replied Nicholas, endeavouring—and endeavouring successfully—to hide the sharp stab of agony that went through his heart at the thought of Gwynneth's going into a far country.

"And so," she went on, "he wants me to marry him, and to go out with him."

"And you have doubts as to whether you will go so far from home?"

"No, no, a thousand times no! I would follow Roland to the ends of the earth, and he knows it. Wherever he is will always be home to me."

"Then what do you want to consult me about?" asked Nicholas, wondering if he had been called upon to suffer all the pain of a reopened wound for nothing.

"I want to know whether, before I marry him, I ought to tell Roland that I am Adah Treherne."

Nicholas drew in his breath sharply: "Ah!"

"You see," Gwynneth went on, a pleading expression in her beautiful eyes, "if he knows I am the sister of a murderess—"

Nicholas interrupted her. "Stop! I will allow no one in my presence to apply that epithet to Zillah—not even you."

"Well, then, if he knows that I am the sister of a woman who killed her husband, he may refuse to make me his wife."

"I would kill him with my own hands if he dared to say a word against Zillah."

"But without saying a word against her, he might not be willing to marry her sister."

"Why not?" cried Nicholas fiercely. "I was willing to marry her sister, and why should my fine cousin be so much more fastidious than I?"

Gwynneth tried to comfort him. "Because you are a better man than he. I believe you are the best man in the whole world, Nicholas."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Not better than your beloved Roland—not better than the man who is too good for my Zillah's sister?"

Nicholas failed to keep out of his voice the bitterness that was in his heart.

"Yes, much, much better. I love Roland as I cannot love you, but I never for a moment believed him to be anything like as good. And I am afraid that if I tell him the truth he will throw me over; and it will kill me if he does. Aunt Caroline and Uncle William say that I am not called upon to tell him: that he need never know."

It was hard for Nicholas to resist the pleading of the soft voice and the lovely eyes. "And what if he married you and found it out afterwards?"

"Well, anyway I should have known the bliss of being his wife. And, besides, he never would find it out far away in Australia. Nobody knows but you and the Frisbys and me. They would never tell him, and I don't believe that you would."

"Certainly I never should. You are right there. If you do not tell him, I agree with you that in all human probability he will never know."

"Then ought I to tell him? Answer me that."

"I find it very hard to answer you—I who would give my very life to ensure your happiness, and who would seem to be serving my own ends if I advised you to tell him who you really are."

"You wouldn't seem like that to me, Nicholas; I know you too well. Please tell me what you really think."

After a moment's silence Nicholas replied: "I think that every man has the right to know the whole truth about the woman whom he marries, and that she has no right to keep anything from him."

Gwynneth gave a little cry of pain. "Then do you bid me tell Roland that I am Adah Treherne—the sister of a woman who killed her husband?"

"My dear, I do not presume to bid you do anything: Heaven forbid! I can only lay down broad principles, and I must leave you to act upon them or not as you think best. And the broad principle I lay down is that no woman has the right to deceive the man who is going to be her husband."

Gwynneth hid her face in her hands. "Then I will tell him who I really am, and if he throws me over I shall die."

"My dear child," said Nicholas, tenderly laying his hand on the beautiful bent head, "men and women do not often die from the effects of doing what is right: but if they do, it is the most glorious death in the whole world!"

## Chapter 16. ROLAND'S REPLY

On a gloomy winter's afternoon Gwynneth was sitting alone in the drawing-room at Meadowford House awaiting a momentous interview with Roland Ketteringham. Outside, the landscape looked chill and dreary. A slight sprinkling of snow covered the fields and the distant Chase, while the meadows which bordered the river were under water and slightly frosted over, for—as was usual at Meadowford at that time of the year—the river was in flood.

There is something specially depressing in the sight of any landscape when the floods are out. The trees and hedges, sadly lifting their heads above the face of the waters, give the impression of things that have been



## The Wisdom of Folly

overcome and worsted in the struggle for existence: they have met something which has been too strong for them, and have been overwhelmed by it. They are types and symbols of failure and defeat. So, too, are all the gates and stiles, which pretend to fulfil their duty of standing as guards and sentries between the various meadows, when in reality those meadows are merged in one huge watery waste; and the cattle, whom the gates and stiles were formed to protect, are all either drowned or else folded safe in the farms at the top of the hill. And the most melancholy things of all are the bridges, which stand, grotesquely futile, in the middle of the element which it was once their proud office to conquer and obviate, and which now has conquered and obviated them.

Such was the landscape upon which Gwynneth looked as she stood at the window that wintry afternoon, and waited for her lover. The inside of the room was cheerful enough, with its huge Mercian fire, and its faded rose-coloured carpet, and its bright rose-covered chintz: but the spirit of its occupant was more in tune with the dreary melancholy out-of-doors than with the domestic comfort within.

Nicholas had only stayed one night at Meadowford. It hurt him even more than he had expected to meet Gwynneth as the affianced bride of his cousin, and to hear her talk in joyful anticipation of the home she was going to share with the latter on the other side of the world. And it hurt him also more than he had conceived possible to watch the struggle going on in the girl's soul as to whether she should do the right thing, and risk her newly-found happiness by telling Roland the truth; or whether she should leave undone this thing that ought to be done, and take such goods as the gods provided, without troubling herself as to what was right or wrong at all.

There are few more painful experiences than to see one whom we love standing at the parting of the higher and the lower roads, hesitating which path to take: and if the higher path is hard and stony and difficult, our pain is increased tenfold. We yearn to save the dear feet from the sorrow and the suffering of the steep and thorny way; but we yearn, even more intensely, to spare the beloved soul from the darkness of the shadowy valley which lies at the far end of the easy and flower-strewn track.

This pain poor Nicholas experienced in full measure: and as he saw that no good would be gained nor any end served by prolonging his own agony, he cut it short by returning to the rest and repose of Eldhurst. The very fact that he himself might eventually gain by Gwynneth's telling Roland the truth, and so possibly terminating the engagement, made it impossible for Nicholas to urge her to take this course: so all he could do was, as he had said, to lay down a general principle, and leave her to follow it or not as she thought best.

As she stood alone in the fading light waiting for her lover, a fever of suspense and anxiety possessed Gwynneth's soul. She had sent for Roland in order that she might follow Nicholas's advice and tell the man who was to be her husband the truth about herself, revealing to him the secret of her identity: but now that the dreaded moment of her confession drew near, she doubted if she should have the strength and the courage to fulfil her intention.

Why should she tell him, after all? she said to herself: was not the past dead and buried, and hidden out of sight for ever? Her future should be his, and his entirely; it should be devoted to him and to his interests, and should be occupied solely in loving and honouring and serving her chosen lord and master. But need she bring the dreadful past to life again in order that this also should be laid at her lover's feet? Surely the present and the future were enough for him, and the past she had the right to keep to herself.

Even Nicholas had said that if she did not voluntarily tell Roland the truth, there was no human likelihood of his ever finding it out for himself—especially as they were going to live in another hemisphere, as far removed as possible from the scene of the tragedy, and from everybody connected with it. She was safe from everything except her own conscience. The Frisbys would never tell him anything, as they particularly did not want him to know more about Gwynneth than he knew at present: Nicholas she could trust to the death; and there was no one else who knew that Gwynneth Morgan, the Frisbys' adopted daughter, had ever been in any way connected with the murder at Llanferdovey. As a matter of fact, the murder was already forgotten, save by those who had any connection with it personally; for there had never been any trial of the guilty person, and so there had been little to

## The Wisdom of Folly

fasten the incident upon the minds and memories of the public. Of course it was still remembered, with a shuddering interest and horror, in the neighbourhood of Llanferdovey itself, and Gwynneth would have been recognised at once had she shewn her face there; but this she had no intention of doing—especially after she had put half the globe between herself and the place, according to her present dreams and desires.

Gwynneth could not see that Roland would ever be one penny the worse for not knowing the truth about his wife. What business was it of his how she had spent her life before he entered into it? And, on the other hand, it might be much the worse for him—and infinitely the worse for her—if the gratuitous revelation of the truth turned him against her, and broke off their projected marriage. Gwynneth knew that she was the right wife for Roland—that she could love him and look after him in his new rough life as no other woman could—and therefore, she reasoned, it might be her duty, for his sake, as well as her own, to keep the truth from him at all costs. While as for herself, life would be over for her if anything came between her and the man whom she worshipped with her whole heart and soul.

Yet Nicholas had said that no woman had a right to marry a man without telling him the whole truth about herself: and Nicholas was her final court of appeal.

The poor girl was thus racked and torn by conflicting emotions when her lover was shown into the room. It was characteristic of him that he perceived nothing of this but took it for granted that Gwynneth had sent for him in order to discuss some detail in the arrangements of their projected marriage and subsequent voyage.

"Hello! old girl, what's up now?" he asked in his cheery voice, as he took her in his arms and kissed her. "By Jove, how well you are looking, and how handsome!" he added, putting her away at arm's length, and then drawing her to his breast again with renewed endearments. "I don't believe there's another girl in England as beautiful as you!"

Gwynneth gave herself up to the ecstasy of his embrace. Her whole being thrilled at his touch. "Tell me how much you love me," she murmured.

"I can't *tell* you that, I'm such a poor chap at stringing words together. If you want fine language, Nicholas is your man—not me. But I'll *show* you how much I love you in the years that we intend to spend together; just you see if I don't!"

"Darling!" whispered Gwynneth, putting her arms round his neck, and drawing down his head till his lips again touched hers. "I worship the very ground you walk on."

"So do I. At least," with a laugh, "I worship the very ground you walk on; and that comes to pretty much the same thing in the long run, considering that we always mean to walk hand-in-hand."

"Roland," said the girl, after another close embrace, "I have something to tell you; something very dreadful."

"Well, what's the fuss now? Have the old Frisbys cut up rough about your going to Australia, and declined to go on adopting you in consequence, and engaged an understudy in your place to whom they will leave all their money? Is that the difficulty? Because, if it is, I dare say I can manage to put by enough for the two of us to retire upon in our old age."

"Oh! no, no: nothing of that kind."

"Then what on earth is it? Get it out and have done with it, there's a good girl," said Roland, kissing her again. He felt no anxiety as to the news which she was about to communicate; for Ketteringham was one of those fortunate people who are utterly devoid of imagination. Such persons are much to be envied; for to them life—and even death—are robbed of half their terrors. It is not so much the things we suffer as the things we fear, that make

## The Wisdom of Folly

existence sometimes so unbearable to us: and to unimaginative people sorrow is reduced to its minimum by being shorn of all those awful accretions which make it loom so overwhelmingly gigantic in the eye of fancy. To the unimaginative man a cloud is a cloud, which either may blow over, or else may result in a downpour of rain; that is the beginning and the end of it. But to the imaginative man it is the herald and forerunner of a horror of thick darkness, which may turn the sun into sackcloth and the moon into blood, and blot out the stars for ever and ever.

Of all the so-called good fairies who are invited to a baby's christening there is perhaps none whose company can so well be dispensed with as the bestower of the magic gift of Imagination.

Roland Ketteringham—having never been sponsored by that particular fairy—neither perceived the anxiety underlying Gwynneth's impassioned manner, nor invented terrible explanations of it. He simply enquired what was the matter, and waited until he was told, thus saving himself and everybody connected with him much unnecessary wear and tear. The people who never see what isn't there are saved much unpleasantness.

Gwynneth drew herself out of his arms, and went and stood by the fireplace. She knew she should never have the courage to tell him anything that might hurt him as long as she felt the thrill of his arms about her. She also knew she should never have the courage to tell him at all if she permitted herself any longer to bask in the warm sunlight of his love. So she made a stupendous effort, and plunged into the subject at once without any preamble. "Roland, do you remember that dreadful affair at Llanferdovey in which Nicholas was mixed up?"

"Of course I do; but whatever made you think of that just now? I remember there was a girl whom Nicholas was tremendously in love with—awfully pretty she was too, he said—and there was some misunderstanding between them, and she went and married another fellow who turned out to be a horrible brute. And he (the brute) tried to throw her baby behind the fire, or some horrid trick of that kind; and she killed him with the carving-knife, like the lady in *Three Blind Mice*."

"Yes; and what then?" asked Gwynneth in a muffled voice; but she loved Roland more than ever for describing the awful nightmare of her life in this nonchalant and airy fashion. When he talked of it in this way it seemed robbed of half its horror. And it was his power of thus treating dreadful things as if they were not dreadful at all—his habit of fringing the gruesome and the horrible into the realms of the ordinary and commonplace—that constituted half his attraction for her.

"Oh! then," he went on in happy unconsciousness of the suspense and excitement of the woman standing so near to him, "the lady of the carving-knife ran away with the roasted baby, and an unmarried sister ran away with them too, and I fancy that Master Nicholas had a finger in their escape. And fortunately, before the police could catch the poor girl to hang her, she died of herself; and that was the end of the whole affair, except that it completely knocked the wind out of poor old Nicholas. I remember the girls were called Trelyon or Trelawny, or something of that sort, and their Christian names were awfully quaint, Adah and Zillah."

"Roland, I want to know if you would have married either of those girls after what had happened?"

Gwynneth held her breath as she waited for the reply on which her whole future hung; but the unperceptive Roland was still unconscious of her anxiety.

"If I had been Nicholas, you mean? Oh! I don't know about that. Of course I shouldn't have minded marrying the unmarried sister if I'd fancied her, as she was in no way responsible for the carving-knife business; but unfortunately Nicholas wasn't in love with her, but with the married one: and I doubt if even dear, unpractical old Nick would go as far as actually to marry a woman who'd had her carving-knife into Number One."

The listening girl gave a great sigh of relief. It seemed as if her way was being made plain before her after all. "Then you wouldn't have objected to marrying Adah?" she repeated.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Good gracious, no, if I'd wanted to! Why should I? Sisters aren't responsible for one another. A man would be a brute who punished a girl for what her sister had done." If Nicholas had been present it would have struck him as humorous that Roland regarded his own decision not to marry a girl in the light of a "punishment" to her; but Nicholas was not present; and Gwynneth was far too much in love to have any sense of humour where the object of her affections was concerned.

Suddenly Gwynneth turned from the fireplace and fell upon her knees at her lover's feet. "Thank you, thank you, a thousand times for saying that," she cried: "for it makes it easier for me to tell you the truth, and to implore you to forgive me for having kept it from you so long. *I am Adah Treherne, the sister of the woman who killed her husband!*"

For a moment even the unimpressionable Roland was stunned into silent amazement, while the woman who knelt at his feet searched his face with loving eyes to discover the effect of this astounding revelation. "*You are Adah Treherne,*" he said at last; "*you!* By Jove, this beats everything I ever heard of!"

"You said it would make no difference to you," she wailed; "you said that if you had loved Adah Treherne you would have married her all the same."

But Roland was too much astonished at her information to give heed to her entreaties. "You are Adah Treherne!" he mechanically repeated. "It's the most astonishing thing I ever heard of in the whole course of my life! I should never have suspected it for a moment, never!"

The woman crouched lower on the floor, and buried her face in her hands; her abnegation of her accustomed dignity was complete. "Oh! my darling, won't you go on loving me just the same?" she moaned. "You said I wasn't responsible for what my sister did!"

But Roland was too much absorbed in her revelation to pay attention as yet to her feelings. "It's the queerest business I ever came across in my life: the very queerest! I wonder what old Nicholas thinks about it, as he must have recognised you."

"He has known about it all the time—since first I came to Meadowford."

"The deuce, he has! And he never gave me a hint!"

"He couldn't: the secret was mine."

"Do the Frisbys know, too?"

"Yes; but nobody else; and they would never tell."

Roland thought for a minute. "I see: then if you hadn't told me yourself, nobody would."

"No."

"And I should have married and lived happy ever after, and all that sort of thing, without ever having the ghost of an idea who my wife really was?"

These words fell ominously on the anxious listener's ear. "Yes. But oh! Roland, for pity's sake don't let it make any difference. You said it needn't: and it will kill me if it does."

## The Wisdom of Folly

But even yet the healthy-minded young egoist could only look at this extraordinary thing as it affected himself. He got up from the chintz-covered sofa and began walking about the room in his excitement. "To think that I should have fallen in love with Adah Treherne; the sister of the girl whom Nicholas was so taken with and who came such a cropper at Llanferdovey! I simply can't believe it!"

"Nevertheless it is true—only too true," moaned the woman, who still crouched in her humiliation on the floor. "You have no idea how horribly ashamed I am of it all, and how I would give anything to blot the terrible past out of my life for ever!"

Another thought struck Roland. "And Amy, who is she? Is she the child of the poor thing who—who—who was married to the man who was killed?"

Gwynneth knew what he was going to say when he suddenly recollected to whom he was speaking and changed the construction of his sentence. But the word he was about to use and did not, seemed branded on her heart in letters of fire. "Yes; Amy is Zillah's child."

"Where do the Frisbys come in: I don't seem able to get the right hang of the thing yet?" asked Roland, still striding up and down the room.

"They were staying in the lodging-house where Zillah died; and they were so sorry for Amy and me, that they adopted us then and there."

"By Jove, it was awfully decent of them!"

"I should just think it was," groaned Gwynneth, feeling that she would give all she had to ensure her lover's being equally "decent."

There was a pause, while Roland laboriously endeavoured to adjust himself to the new point of view. His mind did not move as quickly as did his cousin's. Then at last—

"And you are that poor girl's sister," he said.

By that time he was standing in front of the fire; and the crouching figure crept nearer to him, and laid clinging bands around his knees. "I am: but for pity's sake don't let it make any difference, Roland!—You are everything in the world to me!—The fact that my sister did this dreadful thing cannot make me less fit to be your wife. And even if it does, surely my devoted love for you counts for something on the other side. Oh! my love, my love, have pity on me, and forgive me for having a sister who committed such an awful sin. If you knew what she suffered in her married life, you'd have found some excuse for her. But for pity's sake don't drive me from you because of this, for I love you so, my darling—I love you so!"

Then at last Roland turned his attention from himself to the woman kneeling at his feet and supplicating for his mercy. "I say, old girl, don't take on like this," he said kindly, putting his hand on her arm, and vainly trying to raise her. "You'll make yourself ill if you do."

"I don't care—I don't care if I die—nothing matters to me except your love!"

"But, my dear Gwynneth, I care, and care very considerably. It will upset all our plans if you make yourself ill. I am naturally a good deal shocked and surprised to find that you are the sister of a—of that poor young thing: any fellow would be: but I don't see that it's a thing to make such a deuce of a fuss about; I don't indeed."

Gwynneth raised her streaming eyes to his. She could hardly believe her own ears.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"There is no doubt it's a nuisance," Roland went on, gently patting her shoulder; "but I never see any sense in making things out worse than they really are. Naturally, I'd rather you hadn't had a sister who killed her husband: any man would: but if you had, you had, and there's an end of it. As I always say, it's no use crying over spilt milk. It wasn't your fault, my poor girl! And I shall never be such a cur as to throw in my wife's teeth the doings of her relations, as some fellows do. Of course we'll keep this little matter to ourselves, Gwynneth; I don't want any of the people out there to know anything about it; they might make it unpleasant for you."

Half-stunned with the sudden relief of an almost unendurable tension, Gwynneth answered mechanically: "No one shall ever know except ourselves and the Frisbys and Nicholas. That I swear."

"Then we'll put the thing on one side, and not talk any more about it. Talking about unpleasant things does nobody any good, as far as I can see, and I make it a rule never to do it. But before we drop the subject for good and all, I must say that I think it was very decent of you to tell me the truth, as I should probably never have found it out if you hadn't."

"It was Nicholas's influence that made me: I should never have done it of myself," explained Gwynneth.

"Then it was very decent of old Nick; and very decent of you, too, to follow his advice, as he couldn't have made you tell if you had refused to do so. So cheer up, my pet! Things will all come right; and we'll have the jolliest time possible in Australia: see if we don't!" said Roland, endeavouring to set Gwynneth on her feet, and things generally on their usual footing again. He had an intense horror of anything that partook of the nature of a scene: and he found his only happiness and pleasure in the normal and the commonplace.

But the girl still clung to his knees, looking up into his handsome and perplexed face in a perfect passion of gratitude, and almost worshipping him for having received her momentous confession in so generous and tolerant a spirit.

## Chapter 17. GWYNNETH'S RESOLVE

For the next few weeks, life went merrily as a marriage-bell for Roland and Gwynneth. He was thoroughly in love with her in his sensible and downright fashion, cherishing an intense appreciation and admiration of her gifts of mind and person: and she worshipped him with the rapturous adoration which a romantic and passionate woman is bound to feel for the first man with whom she falls in love. In this case the adoration was further increased by an overpowering gratitude for the calm way in which Roland had disposed of the terrible information that his lady-love was the sister of poor Zillah Griffith.

The kind heart of Mrs. Frisby was torn in two. On the one side it was filled with delight that her matrimonial trap had been baited with such success; and on the other, it was pierced with pain at the idea of the approaching parting from the well-beloved child of her adoption. In this matter her one comfort was the thought of little Amy, who was as dear to her as Gwynneth was, and who, she hoped, would in time grow up completely to fill Gwynneth's place: but it must be admitted that it takes some years for a child of four adequately to play the part of a woman of five-and-twenty.

Preparations for the marriage of Roland and Gwynneth and their subsequent exodus to Australia were almost completed, when Gwynneth happened to ask her lover, *a propos* of some detail in the arrangements of their future home: "Is your uncle fond of children?"

"I don't know whether he is or isn't. All I know is that he never had any."

"I mean, do you think he would object to having a child living in the same house? Some old gentlemen do."

## The Wisdom of Folly

Roland stared at her in amazement. "What on earth are you driving at? Whoever wants him to have a child living in the same house?"

"Why, we do, of course. Do you think he will object to Amy?"

"Object to Amy? How can he object to her? Whatever will he have to do with her? I can't for the life of me see where Amy comes in!"

It was now Gwynneth's turn to look puzzled. "Darling, how stupid you are! Amy comes in because she will be with us."

"With us? Amy? I can't imagine what idea you have got into your head! Surely you don't suppose that I am going to take Amy out to Australia?"

Gwynneth turned pale. "But I do. I have always taken it for granted that she would go with us. The possibility of leaving her behind never once occurred to me."

"Then, my dear girl, the sooner that it does occur to you the better! I never dreamt of such a thing as taking Amy with us."

"And I never dreamt of such a thing as going without her."

"Then you'd better begin dreaming of it at once. That's all I can say." Roland spoke roughly. He had never liked the child—had always been jealous of Gwynneth's affection for her—and this utterly unexpected suggestion of Gwynneth's irritated him to excess. He was the type of man who would always be more or less jealous even of his own children; much more so of other people's, if these bid fair to rival him in any way.

Gwynneth gently pleaded with him. "Oh, my darling, do let me take her with us! I have never been parted from her in all my life, and I never will be. I am all that she has left, poor child!"

"No, you aren't. She has got the Frisbys."

"No, dearest, the Frisbys are not her own kith and kin. And, besides, I don't expect they would care to be troubled with a small child without me to look after her."

"There you are quite mistaken. Mrs. Frisby is looking forward to having the sole charge of the child: she told me so herself."

Gwynneth was more astonished than ever. "Aunt Caroline told you that? Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that I am standing here."

"Aunt Caroline imagined that I was going to leave Amy? I don't believe it! How could she?"

"She took it for granted, as everybody else did. Nobody ever supposed anything else. When a man marries a girl, he doesn't marry all her nephews and nieces."

Gwynneth's beautiful eyes filled with tears. "But Amy," she pleaded: "Amy is different."

Her persistence only served to irritate Roland still more. "Not a bit of it! You are her aunt, and she is your niece; and in marrying you I never proposed to take upon my shoulders the burden of that child."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"But she was Zillah's child: all that is left to me of my sister. I must keep her always with me for Zillah's sake."

"I don't see that at all," replied Roland sharply: "that is frankly absurd!" He felt that he had borne enough for Zillah's sake already, in being willing to marry the sister who to some extent was blighted with the shadow of her crime, without having to support her child as well. Though he had really behaved generously to Gwynneth in allowing her revelations as to her kinship with a criminal to make no difference in his relations towards her, he was perfectly conscious of his own generosity; and considered that Gwynneth showed herself somewhat lacking in her appreciation of past favours, by making such unconscionable demands for future ones.

"Oh! my dearest, don't deny me this one thing. Only let me take out Amy with us to Australia, and I will faithfully promise that she shall never be any burden or trouble to you. I will do everything for her myself, and she shall never be a nuisance to anybody. She is such a good child, and so quiet and well-behaved, that I'm sure your uncle won't mind having her in his house until we are in a position to build a house of our own."

"Then I'm not sure of anything of the kind. It would be monstrous to ask an old gentleman to take in an orphan girl, who is no kith or kin of either himself or me; and I'm not going to do it, and so I tell you once and for all!"

"But, Roland," wailed Gwynneth, "I cannot bear to be parted from her. Remember that she is all the world to me."

At this tactless remark the man's smouldering jealousy burst into flames. "All the world to you, is she? Then she's a good deal more to you than I am. But that's a woman all over! The moment a wretched little brat comes on the scene, all the men in Christendom must go to the wall. And I call it most confoundedly unfair!"

"Oh, my darling, my darling, don't misunderstand me so! You are more than all the world to me, and you know it."

"I only know one thing; namely, that I'm not more to you than that little beggar is!" replied Roland doggedly.

"Not more, perhaps, but quite as much," argued the hopelessly truthful Gwynneth. "Don't you understand, darling, that the two feelings are as utterly different that they could never clash? I don't love you better than Amy, nor Amy better than you; but I adore you both with all my heart and soul, and the more I love the one the more I love the other."

"That's nonsense," cried Roland, really angry by this time; "absolute nonsense! And if you think I am going to go share-and-share-alike with a bit of a chit like that, you're woefully mistaken. You will have to choose between us: that's what it comes to: and the sooner you make your choice the better."

Gwynneth burst into tears. Though a very intelligent woman, she was not a wise one, and she had no smattering of the art of managing a man. Mrs. Frisby, old as she was, could have given her points on this score, and still have won in the competition; for the excellent Caroline had never been handsome enough to rise superior to feminine wiles. Gwynneth, on the contrary, was so good looking, that as a rule she did not require to manage men at all: a glance from her lovely eyes was generally enough to bring into immediate submission the most unruly of them. But in cases such as the present one, when her beauty was not enough to win the battle unaided, she had no reserve force of worldly wisdom to call to the front.

"Oh! Roland, I cannot choose between you," she sobbed. "I love you both more than life itself!"

"You can't love me very much," retorted Roland, nursing his grievance, "if you put me second to your sister's child."

"But it is my duty to Amy never to desert her; and I must do my duty at all costs."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"And have you no duty to me?" cried Roland with some justice: "to the man who is going to be your husband?"

"Not yet: not till you actually are my husband," answered Gwynneth through her sobs. "Then I shall be bound to obey you, according to my marriage vow: but I have no right to take this vow—even though the happiness of my whole life depends upon it—if by doing so I sacrifice a duty which is already there. No one is justified in undertaking new duties which involve the neglect of old ones—I am sure they are not. Oh, my dear one, don't make it too hard for me to do what I know is right!"

In vain Gwynneth alternately wept and pleaded, and in vain Roland alternately stormed and sulked. Neither would budge an inch. And it was hardly to be expected that either would; since the man was spurred to his decision by the prick of jealousy, while the woman was bound to hers by the chain of duty. His argument was, "If you really loved me, you would give up Amy for my sake:" and hers was, "If, you really loved me, you would not ask me to do what is wrong to please you:" two utterly irreconcilable promises. They talked and argued and stormed and wept, until at last Roland bounced out of the room and out of the house, leaving Gwynneth bathed in floods of tears, but also immovable in her intention never to allow herself to be parted from Zillah's child.

Mrs. Frisby came into the room and found her thus.

"My darling Gwynneth, whatever is the matter?" she cried. "Don't tell me that Roland's chest has turned delicate, or that his uncle is ruined, or anything dreadful of that kind!"

Gwynneth raised her tear-stained face. "No, Aunt Caroline, it isn't anything of that sort that is breaking my heart."

"Then what on earth is it? Tell me at once, as it upsets me fearfully to see you like this and not to know what is the reason."

"Roland won't let Amy go to Australia with us," sobbed Gwynneth.

"Good gracious! child, is that all? Whoever expected that he would?"

"I did. If I hadn't, I should never have promised to marry him."

"But, my dear, that is rubbish," said Mrs. Frisby, sitting down on the sofa beside Gwynneth. "It would have been wrong to let the child stand in your light in that way."

"I took it for granted that Roland's suggestion that I should go out to Australia included Amy," wailed Gwynneth.

"Then, my love, I can only say it was very foolish and very inexperienced of you. Such an idea never entered my head. I, on the contrary, took it for granted that you would leave Amy to William and me, and I based all my arrangements upon that assumption."

"You believed that I should leave Amy? Oh! Aunt Caroline, how could you?"

"I could quite easily: it seemed to me the natural thing to do. If married people are expected to leave their fathers and mothers in order to cleave to each other, they are certainly expected to leave their nephews and nieces. I never heard an opinion to the contrary."

"I will never be parted from Amy—never—I would give up Roland sooner!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

Mrs. Frisby took the girl's limp hand in her soft, warm one; and began stroking it tenderly. "There, my dear, don't excite yourself; but try to look at the matter in a reasonable light."

"I won't look at it in any light that will separate me from Amy."

"My love, you are talking very foolishly."

Gwynneth broke into a fresh passion of sobs. "So you are against me too—even you! It is cruel of you to turn against me like this—dreadfully cruel!"

"My dear, it is nothing of the kind. You are overdone and excited and do not know what you are saying."

"I know that I will never allow—anybody—to come between me—and my sister's child."

Mrs. Frisby soothed and petted the girl until the violent sobbing subsided: and then patiently approached the subject again.

"Now, my love, do try to be reasonable, and to look at the matter from Roland's point of view. It seems to me you are being a bit hard on him. No man would stand his wife's caring more for her niece than she does for her husband, and it isn't to be expected that he should."

"Roland ought not to play upon my love for him to induce me to do what I know would be wrong."

"But, my dear Gwynneth, I see no wrong in it. When all's said and done, a woman's chief duty is to her husband and not to her niece. I'm sure it would have upset William terribly if ever I'd have put any of poor Maria's children before him; but I'd too much sense ever to do anything so foolish!"

"Oh! Aunt Caroline, can't you understand? I feel that my chief duty is to my poor little motherless niece, to whom I had devoted my whole life before ever I met or heard of Roland. Amy and I are not like an ordinary aunt and niece; we are bound more closely together by the awful tragedy which darkened both our lives."

"Now, my dear, there is no greater mistake than for people to suppose that their particular case isn't an ordinary one. It's what everybody does suppose; and it is as absurd as saying that everybody's height is above the average. When you've lived as long as I have, and received as many confidences, you'll find that nobody has ever suffered as much as everybody, and that nobody has ever fallen in love without falling deeper than anybody else ever fell before. You will also discover that the world is entirely peopled with extraordinary individuals, and that every rule is entirely composed of exceptions. Therefore, my love, don't flatter yourself with thinking that there is anything exceptional in the relations between Amy and yourself; for there isn't. There isn't really anything exceptional in the relations of anybody to anybody."

"You don't understand, you don't understand," moaned Gwynneth.

"Yes, my dear, I do; I understand perfectly. I've been young myself in my time; and have loved as nobody else ever loved, and suffered as nobody else ever suffered, like the rest of the world. I'm no exception, thank goodness! I've been just as exceptional as anybody else, but I got over it before I was your age, Gwynneth; and I think that it's time for you to get over it too. So my dear, do try to be reasonable."

But Mrs. Frisby did not sufficiently allow for the fact that Gwynneth had Welsh blood in her veins when she hoped by force of argument to alter the girl's decision.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Roland is not my husband yet, and Amy is my sister's child: and I will never undertake any new duties which interfere with the old ones. I love Roland as I love my soul: and it is because I love him so much, that I cannot do what I think is wrong in order to please him."

Mrs. Frisby sighed. "My dear, you are as bad as a man in being so obstinate about doing your duty! I never knew William worse than this, even in his most conscientious moods."

"Whatever it costs me, I will always do my duty to Amy."

"You see it isn't as if in leaving Amy behind you were really neglecting her in any way," argued Mrs. Frisby. "If you were leaving her with strangers, I admit it would be different. But William and I shall take as much care of her as you could do, and it will be much better for her here—with proper English food and the doctor only two miles away—than picnicking in the Australian bush, which I always think of as an enormous shrubbery, with kangaroos hopping about among the trees."

Gwynneth rocked herself to and fro in her agony of mind. "I know all that, but I couldn't bear to be parted from her! It would kill me to be separated from Amy!"

"My dear, that is all nonsense! It doesn't kill women to be separated from their own children—let alone their sister's—and it isn't as if it meant a permanent separation. When Amy is too old to be troublesome and too big to be eaten by kangaroos, and when William and I are safe in Heaven, she can come out to you and be a comfort to you and to your own children, of whom I hope there'll be lots by that time!"

"I don't want a lot of other children; I want Amy!"

"And there's another thing," Mrs. Frisby went on: "even if you lose Roland by this obstinate folly—as I think is very likely—you may say that there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and that a girl as handsome as you are will have no difficulty in finding another husband. But I'm not so sure of that. There are few men who would care to be burdened with their wife's orphan niece. And so you might be an old maid after all. I couldn't bear to see you an old maid, Gwynneth, I love you far too much. It always seems to me such a dreadfully empty life, stuffed with made-up duties and imaginary interests, as dolls are stuffed with sawdust. I don't pretend that marriage is a sort of glorified fairy-tale: I'm far too sensible a woman for that. But why I urge all girls to secure a husband when they can, is not because I think married life so delightful, but because I think single life so dull."

Gwynneth did not attempt to reply to this, it was all so hopelessly beside the mark. How could any one look at the sacrament and mystery of marriage in this ludicrously unromantic way, she wondered? She was staggered by suddenly coming face to face with the stranger hidden in Mrs. Frisby, as Nicholas had once been staggered by suddenly coming face to face with the alien concealed in herself. So she held her peace while her adopted mother heaped argument upon argument and reason upon reason.

But it was all in vain for Mrs. Frisby to argue and advise and plead. Gwynneth's mind was made up, and nothing would move her.

Roland also turned out to be as obstinate as she. Each regarded the question as a test of the other's affection; and neither believed in the sincerity of a devotion which refused to give way upon a matter of this kind. So the lovers were at a deadlock.

For the first day or two after the quarrel, Roland continued to dispute and to entreat: but, finding these methods useless, he turned sulky, and his passion for Gwynneth began to cool.

## The Wisdom of Folly

There was no doubt that he was sincerely attached to her: but there was likewise no doubt that he was sincerely attached to himself: and just then these two sincere attachments were in violent opposition to one another.

Roland did not attempt to disguise from himself that he had behaved very well to Gwynneth with regard to her confession as to her identity. Though not given to analyse his actions and dissect his motives, as Nicholas was, he was nevertheless always ready to appreciate his own virtues and applaud his own good deeds: and he felt that in this instance Gwynneth was sadly lacking in admiration and gratitude for her lover's nobleness of purpose and singleness of heart. After such magnificent condescension on his part, he felt she should have asked no further favour from him for some time to come: she should have been content to rest and be thankful. But it was just the way of the world, he said bitterly to himself: the more you did for people the more they expected you to do! Not content with expecting him to marry a murderess's sister, Gwynneth now requested him to adopt a murderess's child (so in his self-pity he put the case to himself); and this he felt was the last straw. It was more than he could or would, or ought to do, and she had no right to demand it.

Roland hugged his grievance until it assumed very large proportions indeed: so large, that for a time it completely blotted out his mental view of Gwynneth's charms and Gwynneth's virtues; until, in short, he began to think that he was well out of the matter, and that it would be far better for him to go out to Australia alone.

To do Roland justice, after the first shock of hearing that Gwynneth was Adah Treherne, he had resolutely put the matter away from him, and had struggled hard and successfully not to let it in any way interfere with his regard and respect for her. But now that he was offended with her on another account, the former grievance woke up and raised its ugly head, as old grievances have a way of doing when roused out of their slumber by new ones; and he began to wonder whether, after all, it would be wise to link his lot with a woman in whose blood there might lurk the possibility of crime. In his better moments he still maintained that one sister should never be held responsible for another's misdeeds; but in his darker ones he allowed his mind to be haunted with suspicions as to how far the criminal taint runs in families, and whether he was justified in choosing as his wife and as the mother of his children a woman whose sister had committed homicide.

What Gwynneth suffered during those few weeks no one ever knew. The Frisbys and Roland were unable to understand her state of mind at all; and Nicholas—the only person capable of entering into her agony—was not on the spot, but was far away at Eldhurst. So she suffered in solitude and in silence, and the iron entered into her soul.

Roland doggedly continued to make his preparations until the day of his departure dawned. Gwynneth had seen nothing of him for the last few weeks; he had strenuously avoided her and carefully nursed his grievance: but on the last day of all he came to Meadowford House to say good-bye to the Frisbys; and Mrs. Frisby—with her wonted guile—arranged for him to be shown into the room where not she but Gwynneth was sitting.

The poor girl started up on seeing who it was, but said never a word. Her misery was past speech. But she noted the sulky expression of the handsome face, and knew that the lines engraven on it spelt neither mercy nor compassion for her.

Roland swore under his breath at finding himself thus trapped; and then added ungraciously, "Where's Mrs. Frisby? I've come to say good-bye to her."

Gwynneth's heart was too full to answer. She held out both her hands to him in silence. But the acute misery expressed in her wan face and drooping figure, added to the irresistible charm of her personal beauty, so wrought upon the obdurate heart of her quondam lover, that he suddenly softened towards her.

"I say, old girl," he cried boyishly, "let's make it up again and let bygones be bygones! I'm ready to forgive and forget, if you are." Before he could say more Gwynneth was in his arms, and they were kissing each other

## The Wisdom of Folly

passionately.

"Oh! my darling, my darling," she murmured, as she clung about his neck. "I do so love you!"

"And I you, my dearest child. So that's all right. And you'll come with me to Australia, after all?"

"Of course I will, dear heart. And you'll let me bring Amy?"

Roland's arms suddenly relaxed their hold, and his brow darkened. He felt as if he were almost entrapped into giving way; and—like all rather stupid people—he bitterly resisted the idea of being taken in. "No, I won't; I've told you so scores of times, and what I say I stick to!"

"Then I can't go," she groaned, her hands still clinging to his arms: "I will never leave Amy."

Irritated by his own recent lapse into what he considered undeserved tenderness, Roland said roughly, "Once for all, you must choose between Amy and me. I'll give you one more chance, and I shall not ask you again!"

"I have no choice. I must do what is my duty." The poor girl's lips trembled so that they could hardly frame the words.

"You mean that you will stick to Amy and give me up?"

"I will never give you up, and I will never leave Amy." In a perfect frenzy of disappointment Roland shook off the clinging hands, "Then go your own way!" he cried in his fury: "you are an ungrateful girl, and you shall never see my face again!" And with that he dashed out of the room and out of the house.

Mrs. Frisby, hearing the front-door slam, ran downstairs to see the result of her diplomacy, and found Gwynneth lying unconscious upon the drawing-room floor.

## Book 3

### Chapter 18. MIDDLE AGE

"Uncle nick, do you know where Auntie Gwynneth is?"

"I cannot say that I do, most charming of adopted nieces. I should imagine that she must be with my mother, as she is not with you or me, since she is not a person who enjoys the pleasures of solitude or the delights of her own society."

"I thought she was here in the orchard with you."

"In the spirit, possibly; but certainly not in the flesh." The speakers were a girl of eighteen and a man of about forty, the former being exceptionally beautiful and the latter exceptionally the reverse: and the scene was the picturesque old orchard at Eldhurst. The man was lying in a hammock slung between two large apple-trees; he was lazily smoking, and looking with dreamy admiration at the young goddess standing in the sun. And there was no doubt that she was worth looking at, as she stood there in her fresh young beauty against the background of green leaves and pink-and-white blossoms, appearing as an incarnation of the spirit of the springtime, which was breathing and hovering around her. Her mother and her mother's sister had likewise been endowed with unusual loveliness of face and form, which the girl had inherited in abundant measure; grafting on to this loveliness the taller stature and the finer physique of a later and more athletic generation.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I wonder where she is," repeated the girl. "I must go and find her, to give her this letter that has come by this afternoon post." But she seemed in no hurry to continue the quest. It was not the custom of Amy Evans to trouble herself over-much about other people's affairs or interests; at present she was too young—and far too lovely—to realise that the world contained anybody of real importance except herself.

"You are looking very nice this afternoon, Amy; that frock suits you to perfection, and makes you appear like the fairy of the apple-blossom, who has paid a visit to my orchard on her way through the land." Nicholas Ingoldby had not altered a great deal since his first visit to Meadowford House, fifteen years ago. He had looked so old for his age then that he did not look very much older now, except that his hair was considerably thinner than it used to be and was beginning to be shot with grey. His eyes had grown so much better that he was no longer obliged to wear the disfiguring spectacles; and, though they would never be really strong, he was once more able to take his part in enjoying and worshipping the beauty of the world. Just now his delight in the picture before him was intense; and he showed it.

The girl took his admiration as a matter of course. The adulation which turns the head of mere prettiness is accepted by real beauty as its rightful homage. "It is a pretty dress, Uncle Nicholas, and it was quite cheap, too; it is only made of pink linen. Think of being able to wear a pink dress in April! It shows what a warm spring we are having. Last year at this time I was wearing a dark blue serge, if you remember, and I wasn't a bit too hot."

Nicholas smiled. He was always amused at the contrast between Amy's appearance and Amy's conversation. To adapt the well-known criticism on Oliver Goldsmith, she *looked* like an angel and talked like poor Poll. "What have you been doing since lunch?" he asked. "It is now fully two hours since our post-prandial parting, and I have enjoyed the orchard in solitude all that time."

"I've been reading a novel in my room. At least I began to read it, but I soon fell asleep," replied Amy, who had inherited the Treherne accuracy in addition to the Treherne beauty. "I'm sorry I fell asleep, for it is a most interesting story. I'm so extremely fond of reading, and yet I never get the opportunity of enjoying a book properly, as the minute I open it I fall asleep. Isn't it annoying for me, Uncle Nicholas?"

"It must be a terrible privation, if you really are as fond of reading as you say." Amy failed to perceive the twinkle in Nicholas's eye. She was utterly devoid of the faintest sense of humour.

"Oh! I am. I am most tremendously fond of it," she replied in all good faith. "And what have you been doing since lunch? Have you been asleep, too?"

"I shouldn't put it as coarsely as that. I should say that all my mighty heart has been lying still, as London's was when Wordsworth went round with the milk. Anyway, my afternoon has been such stuff as dreams are made of, and I have been giving myself up to the historical spirit which haunts this old tilting-yard, and living over again some of the grand doings here in the olden time. I have breathed the atmosphere of the days of chivalry, with their great ends and their simple means; and I have forgotten for a while the subtleties and complexities of this over-educated, super-cultured, water-on-the-brainy twentieth century of ours."

"It must have been awfully nice to have been the Queen of Beauty at a tournament," remarked Amy, sitting down on the grass beside the hammock.

"It must: far nicer than being either a popular authoress or a suffragette."

"Do you think more about historical things when you are here than you do at other places, Uncle Nicholas? You always seem to talk much more about tournaments and court fools, and things like that, when you are at Eldhurst than when you are at Meadowford."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Of course I do; because the atmosphere of Eldhurst is an historical atmosphere, and the atmosphere of Meadowford is not. As I have remarked before, I believe that the people who live in a place can so permeate it with their own mental atmosphere that a portion of their spirit will fall upon succeeding generations who live in that place after them."

Amy's face, round which the golden-brown curls fluttered so charmingly, was puckered in perplexity. "I don't quite see what you mean, Uncle Nick. Do you think that their ghosts haunt it, and drag chains and knock at doors, and do stupid, frightening things of that kind?" she asked as her mother had asked twenty years ago.

"Oh dear no! I mean something far more indefinable and spiritual. I don't mean that in an old house you will necessarily hear anything with the eye of flesh, as the Irishman said with regard to supernatural noises. Some people doubtless have this faculty, but very few. What I believe is that, in some strange and inexplicable manner, mental and spiritual moods and feelings so saturate and imbue the material and tangible objects surrounding them that those material objects can produce the same spiritual moods and feelings in other people at other times."

"Oh! I see. Just as books and furniture can carry scarlet fever from one person to another."

"In a way, yes: but that is rather an uninteresting way of putting an extremely interesting theory. As all physical things are symbols and sacraments of spiritual things, the principle is the same, but with this notable exception: by all physical and material things evil is conveyed far more easily than good. Why this is so I haven't a notion. All I do know is, that for a healthy person to touch something that a sick person has touched may make the healthy person ill; but I never heard of a case—since the days of the apostles—when a sick person was made well by touching something that had been touched by a healthy person. At present the first incident would come under the head of medical statistics; the second under that of miracles. But the ancient custom of touching for the king's evil shows that in bygone days the two were not as widely differentiated as they are now."

The golden-brown head nodded sagely. "If we stayed in lodgings where the last lodgers had been dirty people it would make all our things horrid; but if they stayed after us it would not make their things clean."

"Just so," replied Nicholas, who as he grew older became even a greater talker than he had been in his youth. "As physical things are at present constructed, that is what happens. But in spiritual things the good is as strong as the evil—in fact, stronger. I believe if we lived in a house where very wicked people had lived before us we might catch some of their wickedness; but, on the other hand, it is just as likely that if we inhabited a house where saints had once dwelt the mantle of their holiness would fall upon our shoulders."

"What do you feel you are catching when you are at Eldhurst?"

"The spirit of mediævalism: that mixture of cheerful courage and unquestioning submission—of romantic chivalry and religious mysticism—that conglomeration of Crusaders and cloisters and courts of love—which is the hall-mark of the Middle Ages. But we have changed all that. Nowadays we dedicate our young men to the counting-house rather than to the cloister, and our maidens to the college rather than to the convent; we no longer go to war to retain the Holy Sepulchre, but to open the way of trade: we defy and scoff at the Holy Catholic Church, but we slavishly submit to the local authority. That, my dear Amy, is the spirit of the twentieth century as opposed to the spirit of the Middle Ages."

"Then would everybody feel middle-aged—I mean mediæval—who lived at Eldhurst?" asked Amy.

"Not necessarily; but they would have had their chance as they never could have had it in a brand new suburb haunted by nothing more ancient than last year's fashion-plates or yesterday's newspaper. A man who can go whenever he likes and stand under Edward the Fourth's grand old ceiling of chestnut wood, or on his beautiful four-arched bridge, has been within earshot of the battle-song of England, and of the pomp and circumstance of

## The Wisdom of Folly

her march through the centuries, even though he may not have ears to hear nor the heart to understand."

"How nice! And do you think Eldhurst will always keep this atmosphere, Uncle Nicholas?"

"It will keep it as long as the ruling Borough Council permits, and no longer; and Heaven (or is it Heaven? I wonder) only knows how long that will be! But a body of citizens, banded together for the common weal, will commit atrocities at which each separate individual in it would shudder. Witness the French Revolution, or the execution of Charles the First. And that same enthusiastic public spirit which slew the Lord's Anointed, and made the streets of Paris run with blood, will to-day cut down glorious trees which it has taken two or three centuries to bring to full perfection, in order to add half-a-yard to the width of a thoroughfare; and will pull down ancient and beautiful buildings, which ought to be the joy of the whole earth, in order to erect modern shops, with plate-glass windows, where the inhabitants of the place may purchase tape and buttons at their own sweet will. For my part, I am always expecting to hear that the civil powers that be have ordained that Westminster Abbey shall be pulled down in order to lengthen Tothill Street; or that Stonehenge has been hewn to pieces to mend the surrounding roads for the convenience of motorists."

"It all sounds very queer and interesting," remarked Amy, trying to catch some of the pink-and-white blossom which fell in a shower all around her, and unheeding Ingoldby's irony. "Do you feel the influence of any particular mediæval person, or only the general atmosphere of the time?"

"I flatter myself that I feel both; which proves that I am a very sensitive and superior article."

"Then who is the particular person who influences you, Uncle Nicholas?"

Nicholas answered her as he had answered her mother long ago: "One Mandolet by name, the court fool of King Edward the Fourth."

"Oh, no! I don't see how that can be," the girl demurred politely; "for you aren't at all a foolish person. I should have called you just the opposite—quite clever, in fact."

Nicholas laughed to himself at the calm air of patronage. "Fair lady, you flatter me! But perhaps you don't know that the court fool was generally the cleverest man at the court; so my theory is not as humble as it appears."

"I don't see how a fool can be clever: he wouldn't be a fool if he were."

"Wouldn't he?"

"Of course not," replied the unruffled young beauty. "Then are old houses the only houses that have spiritual atmospheres, as you call them?" she asked, after a pause.

"Oh, dear no! but I think they are the strongest in old houses, because they have been going on the longest. Still, some people have such strong personalities that they very quickly impregnate the spiritual atmosphere. Dear old Mrs. Frisby, for instance, has a very strong personality; and I don't think that a person sensitive to such things could be inside Meadowford House for five minutes without realising that the atmosphere of that house is the atmosphere of comfort and common-sense."

Amy laughed her rare laugh. She was generally a very serious young lady, though never a sad one. As a rule, it is the merry people who are sad and the serious ones who thoroughly enjoy themselves. "I know exactly what you mean. All the furniture at Meadowford has grown just like Aunt Caroline. That big, chintz-covered sofa in the drawing-room for instance, is as cheerful and fat and comfortable as she is; and so are the dining-room side-board and the wardrobes upstairs."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"They are, they are! I delight in them all for that reason. Mrs. Frisby's character is solid Victorian mahogany, covered with bright-coloured chintz. At least I should more correctly say that solid Victorian mahogany and bright-coloured chintz are the inanimate signs and symbols of the Carolinian excellences."

"What is Aunt Gwynneth's atmosphere, I wonder?"

The answer came sharp and short: "Love."

Amy shook her head. "I don't quite see that."

"Then you ought; for her love has shielded and sheltered and enwrapped you ever since you were born." There was distinct reproof in Nicholas's voice.

Amy's puckered brow cleared again. "Oh! that sort of love," she cried half-contemptuously. "Now I see what you mean. I thought you meant falling-in-love kind of love, and I knew she was much too old for that."

For a moment Nicholas almost hated the arrogant youth of the girl. "Too old? What nonsense?"

"It isn't nonsense; she is quite old—really she is," was the calm rejoinder; "she is nearly forty."

Nicholas made no reply. He was always angry when Amy criticised Gwynneth, a thing which, he noticed, she was increasingly fond of doing.

It never occurred to Amy, however, that anybody could be by any possibility angry with her, so she serenely continued: "Now, for my part, I should call Aunt Gwynneth's atmosphere an atmosphere of sadness. She always seems to me a dreadfully depressing person."

"She has had enough to depress her," was the stern answer.

Amy shrugged her shoulders. "Oh! I know all about that old love-story; Aunt Caroline has told me scores of times. Of course she thinks it was very splendid and noble and unselfish of Aunt Gwynneth to throw over her lover for my sake: but I can't help thinking that Auntie Gwynneth couldn't really have cared for him very much, or else she wouldn't have thrown him over for anybody. I'm sure if I was really in love I wouldn't give the man up for all the nephews and nieces in the world!"

Again Nicholas's spirit rose up in hot revolt against the callousness and selfishness of youth: this, then, was Gwynneth's reward for having laid down her life at Amy's feet! But he answered quietly enough: "You know nothing about love at all as yet, my dear: to you it is an undiscovered country, and your aunt knows pretty well all that there is to be known. It always sounds rather absurd for an amateur to criticise a specialist, though I admit that doesn't prevent many of them from doing so."

"It sounds still more absurd to call an old maid a specialist in love! What can an old maid know about the matter?" scoffed Amy, with the contempt of the common-place, conventional young girl for the single, middle-aged woman.

"Far more than you or your Aunt Caroline will ever know, or are capable of knowing!"

Like many rather stupid people, Amy was almost invariably good-tempered; so she replied quite pleasantly:

"I'm not so sure about that. Aunt Caroline is cleverer than you give her credit for, and she is most awfully fond of Uncle William."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"But she really is an old woman," replied Nicholas impatiently.

"So is Aunt Gwynneth, when you come to that. For my part, I don't see much to choose between forty and sixty; and Aunt Caroline isn't so many years over sixty. Besides, she is so jolly and full of fun that she seems much younger than she is; while Auntie Gwyn is always so sad, and so quiet, that she seems as if all the youth had been washed out of her. Of course I'm fond of Aunt Gwynneth," added Amy, seeing the displeasure in Nicholas's brow; "but you can't deny that she isn't a very cheerful person to live with, especially when she is in one of her depressed moods."

"I do deny it most emphatically! And I only wish I had the chance of trying it, to prove that I am right."

Amy raised her delicately-pencilled eyebrows in the indulgent surprise which most young people feel regarding the love-affairs of their elders. "Good gracious, Uncle Nick! Do you mean to say you would like to marry Aunt Gwynneth?"

"It is the dearest wish of my heart."

"How awfully funny!" And the girl laughed her low, musical laugh. "I hope you won't mind my laughing, but it does seem such a queer idea!"

She was so lovely and so good-tempered that even Gwynneth's devoted champion could not feel angry with her for long. Righteous indignation is so apt to languish in the presence of beauty.

"You are a very impertinent little girl!" was his only rebuke to this ill-timed merriment.

"Look, there is auntie herself beckoning to us to come to tea!" cried the girl, hoisting herself up from the grass with all the ease and grace of a young athlete. "Come quickly, Uncle Nicholas, I'm so dreadfully hungry!" But Nicholas did not recover his equilibrium as swiftly and gracefully as she had done, so she added good-naturedly:

"Let me give you a hand. Some people find it rather difficult to get out of hammocks."

"Thank you, I happen to be one of those people," replied Ingoldby, availing himself of her offer, and feeling all a weakling's morbid admiration and envy of such superb health and strength.

The two strolled through the orchard side by side, and passed through the wooden door in the old wall, which led into a garden as beautiful in its way as was the orchard. Underneath a magnificent plane-tree—one of those glorious plane-trees for which Kent is justly famous, and which reach such perfection in no other English county—the tea-table was spread; and at it sat two ladies, the one at the beginning and the other at the ending of middle age.

Her friends said of Lady Ingoldby that she had "worn well." With the exception that now her hair was white and was dressed over a high cushion, and that she wore a *pince-nez*, she had altered very little during the past fourteen years.

That is one of the charms of living at Eldhurst; people do not grow old quickly there. Whether this is due to the historical atmosphere that Nicholas talked so much about, which makes everything seem young that does not date from the fourteenth century, and which holds the old-world village fast in the calm and stately repose of a place with a great Past, as distinguished from the feverish hurry and bustle of a place with a great Future; or whether it is due to that "soft and salubrious air," which the ancient chroniclers extol when they tell how the court moved ever and anon to Eldhurst for the benefit of the royal health; or whether, again, it is due to the marked contrast between the towers of London in the distance and the shady lanes and green meadows close at hand—a contrast

## The Wisdom of Folly

inseparable from that profound and exquisite peace which belongs to a sudden silence after great noise or an immediate stillness after violent movement—it is impossible to say; but the delightful fact remains that the shadow on the dial moves but slowly in the Eldhurst sunshine, and Father Time, as he passes by, halts and lingers on his way.

But if people said that Lady Ingoldby "wore well," they could not say the same of her visitor, who was sitting opposite to her at the tea-table; for the last fourteen years had dealt very hardly indeed with the woman who had now been known so long as Gwynneth Morgan, that she had almost forgotten she had ever answered to any other name. Amy was right when she said that all the youth had been washed out of Gwynneth, and it had been washed out by tears. Her delicate complexion was lined with innumerable little wrinkles, and her luxuriant hair was freely streaked with grey. Her eyes, though still beautiful in colour and fine in shape, were so sombre in expression as to have lost much of their former charm. She was a woman who had lived and suffered much, and she showed it: those very intense, highly-strung natures do not make for perpetual youth. Had she possessed a less passionately loving heart she would have got over her lover's defection: had she possessed a less urgent sense of duty she would have sacrificed her duty to her love for him. But the two were in constant and strenuous opposition. If she had loved Roland less she might have forgotten him: if she had loved Amy less, she might have forsaken her. As it was, she could do neither the one nor the other, and the very changefulness of purpose and feeling which had prevented her from leaving Amy likewise prevented her from caring less for Roland now than she cared on the day when he left her, fourteen years ago.

And then what wounded her most deeply of all was Amy's impatient intolerance of and comparative indifference towards her. She absolutely worshipped the girl—loved her more than she loved anything on earth, perhaps not even excepting Roland: and yet, as the years rolled on and Amy grew from a child into a girl, and from a girl into a woman, Gwynneth was miserably conscious that, instead of narrowing, the gulf between them widened, and that the longer they lived together the more she irritated Zillah's beautiful daughter. Gwynneth in no way blamed Amy for this. She comprehended so fully, that she freely forgave all that might be amiss in the girl's dealings with her. Gwynneth knew Amy through and through, and realised that the latter was inherently incapable of feeling intense affection for anybody. She was Owen's daughter as well as Zillah's, and in her dual nature the Griffith strain had taken the form of coldness and callousness rather than of cruelty. But it was there all the same, and had to be reckoned with.

Gwynneth was also aware—though this was a minor consideration—that Mrs. Frisby did not love her as much as she used to do: unconsciously and quite unintentionally Amy had taken Gwynneth's place in the old lady's affections. Amy was much more cheerful than Gwynneth—much more easy-going and amiable. Moreover, she was a happy person, which Gwynneth undoubtedly was not; and the old like to warm themselves in the atmosphere of happiness, even though the happiness be none of their own: also, as a rule, they very much prefer the society of young people to the society of middle-aged ones.

Personal beauty blinds the world to the defects of its fortunate possessors; but as the beauty melts away the defects gradually appear, as do the various objects in a landscape when the thaw begins after a fall of snow. Therefore as long as Gwynneth kept her exceptional loveliness people did not notice that she was obstinate and tactless and neurotic; or, if they did, they only called it being firm and transparent and highly-strung; but as her beauty waned—which it did unusually early—her friends clearly perceived these defects, and called them by their ugliest names. At least everybody did except Nicholas Ingoldby: to him she was still the loveliest and most charming woman in the whole world. As she was hopelessly true to Roland, so Nicholas was hopelessly true to her; and herein lay the tragedy of the whole story. It has been promised that with whatsoever measure we mete, it shall be measured to us again; but no rider is added that the receivers of our abundant generosity shall be identical with those who in their turn give full measure, pressed down and running over, into our bosoms.

When tea was over Nicholas asked Gwynneth to come for a walk with him; so they two crossed the lawn and went through the gates of Courtyard House into the fine avenue of limes, many centuries old, which led straight to

## The Wisdom of Folly

the bridge, and so on to the palace, being flanked on the one side by the high wall of the tilting-yard, and on the other by the picturesque wooden houses known as the Chancellor's Lodgings. Instead of crossing the bridge, they turned to the right into the lovely little Bridle Lane, from which could be seen the distant domes and towers of London, transfigured in the golden and rosy glow of a glorious sunset, until they looked like the battlements of that Celestial City which Christian and Hopeful saw from the peaks of the Delectable Mountains.

For a time there was silence between the two friends—that peaceful silence which betokens perfect mutual affection and understanding—while the tender heart of Nicholas Ingoldby ached with pity for the lonely and unhappy woman at his side. Then he suddenly said:

"I have brought you here, Gwynneth, to say something which I have kept on saying for the last fourteen years: namely, to ask you—as it seems to me I am always asking you, my dear—if you will be my wife."

The sad brown eyes filled with tears. "It is no use, my poor faithful Nicholas. I can only say again what I have said to you scores of times—that I do not love you, because I am in love with another man."

"And I can only say again, as I have said hundreds of times, that I do not ask you to love me; I only ask you to marry me."

"You are far too good a man, Nicholas, to be palmed off with the second-best. I feel that it wouldn't be right to marry you unless I loved you as you love me: but I know it would be positively wicked to marry you as long as I love Roland."

Nicholas sighed deeply: it all seemed so useless, so hopeless. His devotion to Gwynneth and hers to Roland appeared alike to be as water poured upon the ground. "Do you mean to say that you still love my cousin like that?" he asked.

"I love him as I love my own soul. It may be undignified and unwomanly to care so much for a man who is now apparently utterly indifferent to me, but I can't help that. All I know is that if Roland would only come back to me I would fall down and kiss his feet in an ecstasy of joy. I care as much for him to-day as on the day he left me, and the anguish of his absence hurts me as much now as it did then."

Nicholas was very tender with her: the sight of her misery cut him to the quick. "My dear, you have wasted fourteen years of your life upon a shadow. Don't waste any more. Let me take the remainder of it into my hands, and I promise you that it shall be happier than it has ever been before."

"No, Nicholas, I cannot."

"Think of the lonely years that lie before you. The Frisbys will die, and Amy will marry, and you will be left alone."

"Not more alone than I am now," was the sorrowful answer. "Both Amy and the Frisbys have ceased really to care for me. I am sad and old, and everybody is tired of me."

"I am not tired of you, my dear, and I never shall be—not through the whole length of eternity."

Gwynneth laid a gentle hand upon his arm: "You are always true to me, Nicholas."

"Then let me prove my loyalty to the world: give me the right to cherish and comfort you. Roland will never come back to you now." Nicholas spoke as a man of a man. Even men who are exceptions themselves know the ways of the ordinary male being.

Gwynneth lifted her head, a gleam of light filled her beautiful eyes. "Yes, he will; there you are wrong, Such love as mine cannot entirely be wasted and I know that at last it will bring him back to me from the other side of the world. I have waited a long time, and I may have to wait still longer: but I am as certain as I am that I am standing here that in the end Roland will come back!"

## Chapter 19. JOY AT LAST

"Does my cousin ever write to you?" asked Nicholas as he and Gwynneth walked home together along the Bridle Lane.

"Never. The only news I ever have about him is what I hear from you and your mother."

"He does not often favour us with a letter now: he seems to have cut himself off almost entirely from the old world, and to have taken a deep and abiding root in the new. I suppose you heard that his uncle died last year?"

"Yes; Lady Ingoldby told me. It must be very lonely for him now." Gwynneth's soft voice trembled with pity for the lover whom she had not seen for fourteen years. But Nicholas naturally was not so sympathetic. "If it is, he has nobody but himself to thank for it,"

"And me. You must remember that his going out alone was not entirely his own fault, Nicholas."

Nicholas was surprised. Was Gwynneth actually going to give way at last, he wondered—now that it was so many years too late? "You only did what you thought was right," he said loyally, prepared to defend her even against herself.

"I thought I was right at the time and for a good many years afterwards: but latterly I've not been quite so sure."

"Haven't you? Oh, my poor Gwynneth!" The man's heart ached in a very agony of pity at this revelation of her feelings. The noble army of orthodox martyrs know well what suffering means; but their pain is as nothing compared with the pain of those who learn too late that their so-called martyrdom was only a sacrifice of fools, offered up to a false god upon a forsaken altar.

"I see now," Gwynneth went on, with a pathetic quiver in her voice, "that Roland could not understand that my love for Amy in no way interfered with my love for him; and so I seemed cold and indifferent to him and unmindful of his comfort and happiness. And it really was hard for him to have to go out to that new, rough life all alone, without a wife to take care of him!"

"He could have had a wife if he would have taken Amy, too. It was his own doing."

"He was jealous of Amy, and that made him a bit hard and bitter. I see it all now, and it all proved the depth of his love for me. The more he loved me the more jealous he grew of Amy; and the more jealous he grew of her the less likely he was to give way."

"Then why hasn't he given way since? He has had time enough to come to his senses, and the post-office has always been open to him." Nicholas was by no means inclined to find excuses for his recalcitrant cousin.

"Because his jealousy and his pride were both intensified by his love."

Nicholas smiled rather ruefully. "I must say you are very charitable in your constructions."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Am I? Well, charity is only another name for love."

"Precisely so."

"And Roland has always been true to me, Nicholas: he has never married." A woman's idea of a man's always loving her, is that he shall never love another woman. But that he may end by not loving any woman at all—neither herself nor another—is a possibility that never occurs to her.

"But the dreadful thing," Gwynneth continued, "is that of late a horrible suspicion has come to me that I sacrificed Roland's life and my own to a mistake. What I did I did entirely for Amy's sake; but I am not sure that it was really the best thing for her. I believe that Aunt Caroline would have brought her up better than I have done, if the child had been left entirely to her."

"Now, Gwynneth, you are talking nonsense," said Nicholas; but at the bottom of his heart he knew she was right.

"I was not really a suitable woman to bring up a child," the mournful voice went on; "I loved her too passionately, and was too anxious about her; and I wasn't cheerful or light-hearted enough to make her really fond of me. It is no good disguising the fact: I have hardly any influence over Amy, in spite of my almost idolatrous love for her. She loves me, in a way, for the sake of old association; but at the back of her mind she despises me as a sentimental and melancholy old maid. Girls admire only successful women."

It was all so true that Nicholas did not know what to say. He could not contradict her; but he was so sorry that she had found it out. So he walked sorrowfully by her side until they reached home, silently surrounding her by the tenderness of his unchangeable devotion.

That night as Gwynneth was putting away Amy's clothes as usual—for she generally fulfilled the role of maid as well as that of aunt to the spoilt and petted girl—and was emptying the pocket (as was also her custom, since Amy generally forgot to empty it for herself) she found, intermingled with pence and pencil and pocket handkerchief and the like, an unopened foreign letter addressed to herself, and forwarded on to her from her home at Meadowford. She saw at once what had happened; it had frequently happened before; the thoughtless Amy had brought out the letter to her in the garden, and, not finding her at once, had pocketed it, and straightway forgotten all about it. But as Gwynneth saw and recognised the superscription, her heart began to beat so fast that it almost suffocated her; for the handwriting was that of Roland Ketteringham.

Passionately she kissed the neat, well-formed characters (Roland always wrote a clerkly hand), and then with trembling fingers broke the seal.

The letter ran as follows:—

"My Dearest Gwynneth,—You will be surprised to get this letter from me, as it is the first I have written to you since I came out to Western Australia. But I have something very particular to say.

"I have been very lonely out here since my uncle died, and I am getting to the age when a man needs a wife to look after him and take care of him a bit: so I have at last decided to marry. I have never cared a rap for any woman since I parted from you; that's the simple truth: and so I could not bear to marry anybody else. Nobody ever suited me as well as you, Gwynneth, and I don't believe anybody ever will: and so I want you to let bygones be bygones, and consent after all these years to become my wife.

"I dare say we both made a mistake in being so obstinate fourteen years ago. I know I was a jealous young ass to object to your bringing out your little niece; and perhaps you were a bit hard on me, and did not make sufficient allowance for my objection to having anybody else's child always coming between us. But that's neither here nor

## The Wisdom of Folly

there. We are older now, and a good deal wiser, and can adapt ourselves to each other and to circumstances as we couldn't when we were young. And if you will forgive and forget what a silly fool I made of myself over Amy fourteen years ago, I will make amends by letting her come out here and live with us until she gets a home of her own; which won't be for long, I dare wager, if she is a quarter as good-looking as her aunt

"Let me have a line by return, saying Yes or No: and if it is Yes, as I hope it will be, I will come to England by the next boat, marry you out-of-hand, and bring you back with me at once, as I must get back to my farm before our summer begins.

"I may add (though I know you are not the sort that such a thing will affect) that my uncle left me all he had, and so I can offer you a very comfortable home, and plenty of the wherewithal to keep it up.

"If your answer is Yes, expect me at Meadowford about the middle of August—Your always affectionate,

"Roland Ketteringham."

It was hardly a love-letter in Nicholas's sense of the word: he would have poured scorn upon it for even pretending to be one, with its unimpassioned phrasing and its unimpeachable common-sense: but to Gwynneth it came as a message from Heaven—as a very gospel of good tidings. For a few moments she was dazed by her excess of happiness: it seemed too good to be true. It was almost impossible to believe that the long, long years of waiting and disappointment and hope deferred were over; and that she—even she, to whom the gates of Eden had seemed permanently closed and barred—was going to enter into Woman's Paradise at last. Yet she had no alternative but to believe it, with Roland's letter clasped firmly in her hand and pressed fondly to her lips.

How splendid of him, she said to herself, to have remained true to her through all these years! Not many men would have been so faithful. Certainly Nicholas had been: but Nicholas was an exception to all known rules. She seemed to have the gift—the rare and blessed gift—of never losing a man's love after once she had won it. And for this she gave heartfelt thanks. Women grew tired of her, as she knew to her bitter sorrow; witness her adopted mother and her adored Amy; but mercifully men were more kind to her than her own sex, and did not so readily take back from her what they had once given.

And she was to marry and be happy after all! Even yet she could hardly grasp the stupendously blissful thought. She had made up her mind for so long that happiness was not for her—that she was one of the women dedicated by Fate to a sad and solitary life—that it was incredible to imagine her name actually enrolled upon the scroll of loved and loving wives.

How she loved Roland when she thought of all that he was going to give to her; of how he was about to make the wilderness and the solitary place glad for her, and the desert of her life to rejoice and blossom as the rose! But she almost worshipped him when she recalled what he had written about Amy. Although, as she had told Nicholas, she was ready—should Roland come back to her demanding it—to give up even Amy rather than lose him again, the idea of parting from the girl was very bitter to her. Little as the cold and self-contained Amy might care for her, her love for Amy had lost none of its devoted intensity, but had grown with the child's growth and strengthened with her strength. But Amy had now apparently no need of her; and Gwynneth's craving for affection was so intense that she was prepared even to leave Zillah's child, if by doing so the hunger of her own heart could be appeased; but, all the same, she knew that this would be to her as the cutting off of her right hand, or the plucking out of her right eye.

Now—thanks to her lover's generous behaviour—she could enjoy the one supreme delight without giving up the other: she could cherish, serve, and obey Roland, and still continue her beloved if thankless office of tending and watching over and waiting upon Amy. Could any really womanly woman imagine a more perfect lot than to be able to sacrifice herself to two people at once, without the one immolation in any way interfering with the other?

## The Wisdom of Folly

Certainly Gwynneth Morgan could not. Neither could she imagine what she had done to deserve such unexampled and undreamed-of happiness.

All that night she could not sleep for pure joy. The long years of patient misery made this taste of unexpected bliss the more exquisite. Had she not sowed in such bitter tears, she would not have reaped so joyful a harvest, her sheaves of renewed hope and requited love were all the dearer to her because she had gone forth weeping, bearing the precious seed; and she lay awake all night in the moonlight, revelling in delight at this wonderful thing that had happened.

Nicholas was down first as usual next morning, and was patiently waiting for the others to put in an appearance, when Gwynneth entered the room, looking happier than she had done for fourteen long years. In an instant he knew what had happened: there was only one thing which could make Gwynneth look like that.

"Nicholas, I have such a wonderful piece of news for you! What do you think it is?" she cried, and her voice had the lilt of youth in it again.

"My dear, I know: Roland is coming back to marry you." Although it was the death-knell of all his hopes, Nicholas could not feel sad when he saw the look on Gwynneth's face: it was the look of one who had been dead and was alive again, and had been lost and was found.

"Yes, yes, that is it. How clever of you to guess!"

"I always seem to know by instinct everything that concerns you."

"He is coming back to marry me at once, and he says I may take Amy back with me to live with us out there. Oh! Nicholas, isn't it wonderful that such a glorious thing should happen to me, and that I am going to be happy at last?" And she seized both his hands in the exuberance of her joy. Then a sudden compunction seized her: Gwynneth could not be selfish for long. "Dear old Nick, you don't mind very much, do you?" she added softly, still with that girlish thrill in her voice.

"My dear, I mind nothing that brings you joy: the only thing I desire in the whole world is your happiness." And he stooped and gently kissed her on the forehead.

## Chapter 20. ROLAND'S AFFAIR

It was a hot afternoon in the following August; and a cheerful little group were surrounding a well-furnished tea-table that stood on the lawn of Meadowford House.

"Amy, you look charming in that pink frock; absolutely charming! You should never wear anything but pink; it is your colour. In my opinion every woman has a colour of her own, and should stick to it as far as possible. I don't like to see the same woman in one colour at one time and in another at another: it upsets my mental picture of her," remarked Nicholas Ingoldby, who was sitting on the lawn at Meadowford House as he gave utterance to this sentiment, being one of the units that composed the cheerful little group.

"I don't agree with you," said Mrs. Frisby, who had altered not at all during the last fourteen years, save perhaps to put on a little extra and not unbecoming weight: I like a little variety in clothes myself."

"So do I," retorted Nicholas: "but the variety should be expressed by various people. Have as many different coloured dresses as you like; but let them be worn by different women."



## The Wisdom of Folly

"Well, I think it is very dull always to wear the same colour; very dull indeed," persisted the hostess.

"What a mercy that Nature does not see eye to eye with you! Think how dreadful it would be if the daffodil thought it dull always to wear yellow, and so appeared one spring in red for a change, and the next in mauve; or if the rose wore blue one summer and purple the next; or if the violet, for the sake of variety, resorted to a scarlet or an orange costume. Nay, dear Mrs. Frisby, a wise woman dresses according to Nature; one woman one colour, like one man one vote."

"I don't like the expression 'dresses according to Nature,'" said Mrs. Frisby, looking reproachfully at Nicholas, "it sounds like having no clothes on at all, and I don't think it is very proper."

"Certainly not," agreed Nicholas with a laugh, "if it conveys that impression; but I assure you it was an unintentional one."

The others laughed too, especially the old Colonel, who still admired his Caroline's wit and wisdom as profoundly as ever. Age had not withered nor custom staled her infinite variety in the eyes of her William.

"Nevertheless, my love," the latter added, "I must admit there is a great deal—a very great deal—in what Mr. Ingoldby says. I can fully understand—and I may add fully sympathise with—his admirable sentiment that every woman should always be associated, in the minds of those who love and admire her, with one particular colour. For my part, I always associate with you, dear Caroline, the colour puce. You were wearing a puce dress and a white bonnet the first time I met you; and I have thought ever since that a puce dress and a white bonnet were the most becoming things that any young woman could wear. In fact I cannot imagine why the young women of to-day no longer adorn themselves with such elegant and effective attire; if they did, I can assure them—positively assure them—that the number of old maids would be considerably diminished all the world over at the next census."

"Oh, William, how prosy you are! As if these young folks were interested in a long rigmarole of what I wore five-and-forty years ago. And, besides, it wasn't a puce dress at all: it was a white dress with a puce sprig on it, and a deep puce flounce round the bottom of the skirt."

But the old man was not to be balked of his delightful reminiscence. "Nay, Caroline, I think—I may say I am sure—that you are mistaken. The impression left on my mind is that the entire dress was puce."

"I can't help what the impression on your mind is, William; all I know is that the flounce was puce, and the dress itself white with a puce sprig on it. As if a woman could forget her own clothes!"

"It must have been a very pretty dress, dear Aunt Caroline," said Gwynneth with her usual graciousness. Her lover had not arrived as yet; but she was daily expecting him; and her happiness deepened as the time for his arrival approached.

"Oh! I don't think so," demurred Amy, who invariably took a different view from Gwynneth's, "it must have looked awfully queer to see a young girl with a puce flounce to her dress! And I suppose you were quite young then, Aunt Caroline?"

"Eighteen and two months. I dare say it sounds queer to you, but it was a most fashionable dress at the time. Very stylish, and a wee bit tight under the arms."

"And the bonnet, don't forget the bonnet, Caroline," continued the garrulous Colonel. "Very different from the ugly—I think I may say the hideous—concoctions which the young women of the present day see fit to pile upon their heads! A white straw bonnet with white ribbon strings, and a wreath of mauve pansies inside the brim. I

## The Wisdom of Folly

remember it as if it were yesterday: and, 'pon my life, I've never seen anything in the way of bonnets half so pretty since!"

"Oh, William, how you talk! But it was a pretty bonnet all the same. I think, however, that you're mistaken about the strings. I believe they were lace."

"No, Caroline; ribbon—broad white ribbon—very stiff ribbon, too. I particularly remember the stiffness." And the Colonel's eye twinkled.

"Oh, William, you couldn't possibly remember the stiffness; not the very first time you saw it, that is to say!"

"My dear, I never said I remembered the stiffness the first time; I do not wish to create any false impressions: it was not until I had had the pleasure of meeting that bonnet about a dozen times that I experienced the stiffness of the strings. But they were stiff; 'pon my soul they were! They positively scratched one."

Nicholas threw back his head and shouted with laughter, and Gwynneth laughed too; but Amy saw nothing to laugh at, and never pretended that she did. It was not her way to assume a virtue if she had it not. "Then do you like Aunt Caroline always to wear puce, Uncle William?" she asked.

"I do, my dear, I do. She appears to me to be more herself—if I may say so—in puce than in any other colour; more herself, and so more mine," he added gallantly.

"Then is pink my colour, as puce is Aunt Caroline's?" asked Amy, turning to Nicholas with the persistent egotism of youth.

"I think so. It seems to express your character better than any other colour. It is pretty and cheerful and striking and youthful, and is associated with everything that is fair and young and clean and healthy and—if you will excuse my saying so—commonplace. It lacks altogether the spirituality of blue, the mystery of green, the passion of red, the subtlety of yellow, the regality of purple, or the comfortableness of puce."

"Then what is Aunt Gwynneth's colour?" asked Amy.

"Green. Your aunt never looks so well in anything as in green."

The girl's attention was fairly caught. "How queer and interesting!" she said.

"You always have strange theories as to colour, Nicholas," remarked Gwynneth.

"I have. I don't think as yet we understand all that colour means and teaches and embodies and implies."

"Tell me some more of your theories as to colour, Uncle Nicholas," said the imperious Amy; and Nicholas, never loth to hear the sound of his own voice, complied.

"To my mind every colour has its own special and innate character: and it possesses the power of awaking certain emotions, in accordance with that character, in the minds of those people who are sensitive to the influence of colour. For instance, there is an atmosphere of joyfulness associated with rose-colour: when we talk 'looking at things through rose-coloured spectacles,' we are being more literal than we suppose. Don't you know the feeling of gladness that comes to you, without apparent why or wherefore, when the sky is suddenly suffused with rose-colour at sunset? The very colour makes you glad as you look at it—glad in a strange and ineffable way."

"And does pink make you glad, too?" asked Amy.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Yes; as colours themselves resemble each other, so the emotions that they arouse resemble each other. But pink has none of the depth of rose-colour, and so renders you cheerful rather than glad, and merry rather than joyful. Scarlet likewise makes for rejoicing; but it is the fierce joy of battle and of tumult and of red-hot passion."

"What is the influence of green?" asked Gwynneth: "as it is my colour, I must know what it means."

"Green is full of glamour and wonder and mystery; but it is the glamour and wonder and mystery of earth, and not of Heaven!"

"Not very polite to Gwynneth, I think," remarked Mrs. Frisby, "to suggest that she belongs more to earth than to Heaven!"

"Well, she does," laughed Nicholas, and Gwynneth laughed too: "there is glamour and mystery about her, but it is the glamour of a sea-maid rather than of a saint—of an Undine rather than of an Ursula. She has more in common with the fairies than with the angels; and when she is sad she resembles a mermaid who is weeping because she never had a soul, rather than a martyr who is dying to save one. Therefore green is her colour; for green is the colour of Nature, and is tinted with the shades of far-off primæval things. The fairies and the pixies were always 'dressed' in green; and so were the outlaws in the merry greenwood. Therefore green fills us with the glory and the wonder of the earth, and brings us into touch with the great heart of Nature; but there is no spirituality in the colour green."

"Dear me, very interesting, very interesting—and, I may add, very instructive!" murmured the Colonel, "And now, pray, what is the influence of yellow?"

"Yellow," replied Nicholas, "is the colour of intellectual subtlety and brilliant intelligence and worldly success. There is a hard and shallow glitter about yellow that brings all these things to minds"

"You say there is no religion in the colour green," said Mrs. Frisby; "then what is the religious colour? I should like to know, so that I can get my next winter dress of it. I'm a great stickler for religion at all times and seasons, and as I get older I don't care to visit with people who haven't got the grace of God in their hearts and who play cards for money, and do wicked things of that kind. Of course I never have been intimate with people of that sort, or had them to stay in the house: but now I don't care for even a bowing acquaintance with them."

"All colours are the colours of religion," replied Nicholas, "because there is religion in everything."

"But you said there was no religion in green," persisted Mrs. Frisby; "which has quite set me against our green stair-carpet."

"I said there was no spirituality in green—which is quite a different thing; that it is the colour of earth and Nature, rather than of grace and Heaven. To my mind the most spiritual colour is the colour of infinity—blue—the colour of the limitless sky and of the unfathomable ocean and of the pavement of sapphire beneath the Eternal Throne. There is a mystery about blue as there is about green; but it is not the mystery and the magic of primæval natural forces, but the unsearchable wisdom of eternal truth."

By this time Amy was tired of the conversation—it was becoming too subtle for her—and so she rose from the tea-table and wandered off by herself through the garden and across the fields which sloped down to the river. And then she stood for a time upon the little wooden bridge and watched the river flowing slowly and silently beneath her, and felt bound by the spell which the sight of running water always casts upon those who behold it.

At the very hour when the party in the garden at Meadowford House were sitting at tea, Roland Ketteringham arrived at Merchester Station, and started forthwith for Meadowford; but, as he approached the village, the fancy

## The Wisdom of Folly

seized him to get out of the cab and walk the rest of the way across the fields by the path which Gwynneth and he had so often trodden together. It was an act inspired by pure sentiment, and Roland was very rarely sentimental; but the sight of the familiar scenes, coupled with the thought of his speedy, meeting with the woman he loved, had aroused all the romance dormant in his nature; and so he yielded to the unusual impulse, and started on the short cut across the meadows, sending his luggage on in the cab.

And as he walked along the field-path, where he and she had so often walked together, Roland's heart was filled with an intense tenderness towards his promised wife. He thought of how beautiful she was, and how unselfish and loving; and he blamed himself bitterly for his harshness and obstinacy in forbidding her to bring her little niece out to Australia with her all those years ago. He had never looked at another woman since he parted from her; all others seemed so plain and ordinary compared with Gwynneth; and thus fourteen of the best years of his life and hers had been wasted. But he was going to make it up to her now for what she had suffered in the past, and to restore to her the years that the locust had eaten. And, after all, they were still comparatively young, he said to himself: they were both of them well under forty, and he was the younger of the two. So, humanly speaking, they had even yet a long life of happiness before them: and if Gwynneth had worn as well as he had, he added complacently, they would not look—any more than they would feel—a middle-aged couple. He himself was wonderfully young looking; and he knew it. Time had increased instead of impairing his extraordinary good looks; and he was a handsomer man now than he had been at five-and-twenty. He wondered very much whether Gwynneth would be much altered: on the whole he decided that she would not, as those slight, fragile women do not, as a rule, age quickly; and he derived much pleasure from this thought. It would distress him dreadfully, he felt, to find Gwynneth's marvellous beauty in any way impaired by the lapse of time: and, there was really no reason why it should be: a woman in her thirties is in her prime, and frequently much handsomer than she was in her twenties. He did not allow for the fact that a broken heart is by no means a preserver of beauty.

As he was thus meditating, Roland lifted up his eyes (which had hitherto been bent upon the ground, so lost was he in thoughts of Gwynneth) to the little wooden bridge where he and she had so often stood together, in order to register their vows—according to ancient custom—over running water: and behold!—there she stood waiting for him in the evening light, ten times more beautiful than when they parted, and looking younger instead of older than she did then. He remembered her as very lovely; but he did not remember her as quite as exquisite as this: her beauty, as she stood in the rosy sunset glow, was enough to fire the imagination of the least impressionable of men; and Roland was by no means that.

She was gazing so intently at the running water that she did not notice his approach across the soft springy turf; nor did she raise her lovely eyes to his face until he cleared the steps of the bridge at one bound, and stood beside her, exclaiming: "Gwynneth, my darling, I have come back to you at last!"

Then she drew back with a little start of surprise, which swiftly gave way to a smile of recognition. "You are Roland Ketteringham," she said; "I remember you quite well, though I was only a little girl of four when you went away; you have hardly altered a bit. But you don't remember me; you have mistaken me for Aunt Gwynneth."

## Chapter 21. TO BE TRANSFERRED

Amy and Rowland walked together across the fields to Meadowford House, the latter feeling like a man in a dream. Even yet he could hardly believe that the lovely young creature by his side was not the girl whom he had left fourteen years ago: the only difference was that she was infinitely more beautiful than his memory had depicted her. When he came upon her at the bridge, he was strung up to the highest pitch of excitement of which his nature was capable; and in this receptive attitude of mind he was met by the most exquisite vision of beauty that his eyes had ever seen. Was it then to be wondered at that his heart responded at once to the entrancing sight which greeted him at the very moment when he was most susceptible to its influence?

## The Wisdom of Folly

As for Amy, she also, in her crude, girlish way, was impressed with her companion's good looks. She thought Roland (as probably he was) the handsomest man she had ever seen, and she admired him accordingly, for—as is often the case with very good-looking people—beauty was the one quality which strongly appealed to her, and by which she set great store. Moreover, she was just at the age which finds the masculine thirties much more attractive and interesting than the masculine twenties: therefore Ketteringham appealed to her fancy as a younger man would not have done. And below this sudden admiration for Gwynneth's lover there ran through Amy's shallow little soul an undercurrent of irritation against Gwynneth herself, for having dared to annex so undeserved and desirable a possession. Like all very young people, Amy had no patience with the love-making of the middle-aged. She did not resent the fact that Nicholas was in love with Gwynneth, though it afforded her a good deal of innocent and girlish amusement. In her eyes it appeared a fitting, if somewhat grotesque, state of affairs that two such old fogies should pair off together. And when she heard that, instead of Nicholas, Roland Ketteringham was coming back to marry her aunt, she regarded this as a similar piece of senile folly.

But now that she saw Roland for herself, and realised that—as compared with Nicholas and Gwynneth—he appeared still a young man, and an extraordinarily handsome one, the whole aspect of affairs changed. It had been a joke for old Uncle Nicholas to fall in love with Aunt Gwynneth, she considered; but it was more than a joke for this eminently attractive and desirable person to be caught in the same old-fashioned snare. And as they walked across the fields together, and she realised more and more what a very handsome man this would-be uncle of hers was (her regard for his beauty being no whit diminished by his obvious admiration for hers), she became increasingly irritated against the middle-aged woman who had arrogated to herself so glorious a prerogative of youth as the love of this demi-god.

Gwynneth, unfortunately for herself, was one of those women who are so meek in their dealings towards their own sex that they unwittingly arouse the scorn and contempt of their fellows. It never does for a woman to be too subservient to other women, however well such submission may answer with regard to men. There is a certain innate chivalry in the normal masculine nature which prevents it, as a rule, from taking undue advantage of the submissiveness of a woman. But there is no chivalry of women for women: in the very nature of things there could not be: we cannot inspire chivalry in ourselves for ourselves, as the essence of chivalry is difference. The helplessness of a woman is a source of strength in her dealings with men, but a source of weakness in her dealings with her fellow-women. Women are on the side of the women who can help themselves: men are on the side of the women who cannot. This being so, it always seems to be a strange argument in favour of giving political power to women, that by so doing we shall help the cause of their weaker sisters. Women will always support the strong and successful members of their own sex: there is no doubt on that score; but to those of their own sex who are neither strong nor successful they will be harder than the nether millstone.

Men will have patience with a man who is a failure, and women will have infinite pity (and often something warmer than pity for him): men will also have infinite pity for a woman who is a failure; but such a woman will get neither pity nor patience from her sister women, and it is no use expecting that she will.

Roland and Amy walked together across the meadows, knowing each other better and admiring each other more at every step they took, until they reached the gate of Meadowford House, and entered the garden. As they opened the gate Gwynneth heard and saw them, and with a cry of joy rushed forwards to meet the lover who had come across half the world in order to make her his wife. But Roland felt constrained and awkward. This sad-faced, middle-aged woman was far less like his early love, and therefore much more of a stranger to him, than was the girl he had met upon the bridge. He would hardly have recognised Gwynneth had he seen her elsewhere, so changed was she from the woman he had forsaken fourteen years ago. Moreover, he had had his moment of exaltation, and it had passed, and no power on earth could recall it—not even the consciousness that she who had inspired it and whose rightful inheritance it was, was not at hand, when the psychological moment came, to enter into her kingdom. There is no man so cold, for the time being, as he who has just righted himself after an emotional storm: and for the life of him Roland could not be anything but stiff and conventional just then, though he tried hard to be otherwise. He was not generally an imaginative man; but the sentimental crisis through which

## The Wisdom of Folly

he had passed had sharpened his imagination: and as he greeted Gwynneth and saw the love-light in her eyes, he remembered the old story of one who was forestalled by a supplanter, and who—having lost the blessing and the birthright—cried with an exceeding bitter cry.

But Gwynneth's cup of happiness was full.

Having nothing of the egoist about her, she only saw that Roland was handsomer than ever, and forgot that she herself was aged and altered. Also—not having seen the moment of exaltation on the bridge—she felt that this awkwardness and stiffness were characteristic of her sensible and practical lover, and she expected nothing more.

From the Frisbys Roland received a warm welcome. Anybody who was what Mrs. Frisby called "on the marry," was sure of her support and sympathy; and the Colonel usually followed in his Caroline's wake. Nicholas, likewise, was as genial as could be expected in the circumstances; and so there was a peaceful lull before the coming storm.

"I think you are very wise to have settled in Australia, Mr. Ketteringham," remarked Mrs. Frisby, as they were all sitting in the drawing-room after dinner; "it must be so nice to have summer when we poor things here are going through the misery of winter. I'm sure there hasn't been a Christmas since you went away that I haven't thought of you with envy."

"But we get our winter all the same, when you are enjoying your summer," replied Roland.

"But winter in the summer doesn't seem quite as bad as winter in the winter. I mean I don't think I should ever feel quite so cold in June as I do in December. It would be more like playing at winter. A winter in June would be like a young girl dressing up as an old woman for fun; but a winter in December is like being really an old woman, which is quite a different thing."

"But, my dear Caroline," expostulated the Colonel, "the fact that winter fell in June instead of in December would not necessarily make it any warmer."

"Yes, William, it would."

"But, my love, it couldn't. Believe me, it couldn't."

"Well, it would for me: and I wish we lived in Australia for that reason. I'm sure I shouldn't catch half as many colds if winter was in June and July as I do now. Do you catch many colds, Mr. Ketteringham?"

"No, I am thankful to say I don't."

"Then that proves my point," cried Mrs. Frisby, turning triumphantly to her husband: "winter being in summer, he doesn't catch anything like as many colds."

"But I didn't catch cold even when winter was in winter, and I lived in England," said Roland.

"That's neither here nor there, I'm not talking about what you caught in England; I'm talking about what you don't catch in Australia; and I can't help thinking that it would be the making of me if we went out to Australia and had our winter in the summer, as they do there."

"But, my dear Caroline, don't you see?—" began the prosy Colonel.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"No, William, I don't, and I never shall. My point is this: if we lived in Australia I shouldn't catch cold in the winter because it would be in June, and I never catch cold in June: and I shouldn't catch cold in the summer because I never do catch cold in the summer anywhere: so that in the end I should get rid of colds altogether."

"Then do you catch many colds, Mrs. Frisby?" asked Roland with perfunctory sympathy.

"Catch many colds? I should just think I do! My winters are quite spoiled by them. I only wish I could keep my chest under my bed, as mariners do, and could go out and enjoy myself without it! But as it is, I get moped in the winter through never being able to go to parties; and wicked, through never being able to go to church."

This was more than the devoted Colonel could bear. "Not wicked, my dear Caroline; certainly not wicked! I cannot endure to hear you apply such an adjective to yourself."

"Yes, William, wicked—positively wicked! I make irreverent jokes, and lose my temper with the servants, and gossip about my neighbours; and all through not being able to go oftener to church. I do wish churches were not such cold-catching places! I can assure you, Mr. Ketteringham, I am always on the look out for a nice warm religion, that will save my soul without destroying my body; but you'll never get that in the Church of England until they extend the Reformation to their ventilators and their heating-apparatuses."

"Dear Mrs. Frisby's doctrines are entirely subservient to the temperature of the fabric," murmured Nicholas.

"So they are," agreed the lady, "and so they must be, as long as my spirit is shut up in a chest, like the lady of the *Mistletoe Bough*. I can't pray properly when I think I'm catching cold, and it is no use pretending that I can. Our Vicar asked me the other day if I objected to altar-lights and vestments and I said if the altar-lights helped to warm the chancel, and the vestments helped to warm the clergy, I hoped they'd have as many as they could; and the more they had, the more I should approve—especially in the winter."

"Aunt Caroline is certainly very broad-minded," remarked Gwynneth.

"Not broad-minded, Gwynneth, so much as cold-bodied," explained Mrs. Frisby.

"Nicholas is broad-minded, too," added Gwynneth, looking affectionately at her old friend. "I always greatly admired his breadth."

"I certainly try to be," said he: "I think I hate narrowness more than anything. I don't quarrel with people for being wrong; I only quarrel with them for being sure that they are right. For my part, I would advise every man to belong to that Church or sect which he feels will bring him by the more direct route to Heaven."

"If he wants a short-cut to Heaven, he'd better attend our parish church," added Mrs. Frisby; "for it will take him there in a week, or ten days at most, *via* bronchitis and pneumonia. It's the coldest place I ever was in. Some folks choose the highest church and some the lowest, but I always go in for the warmest church that I can find. And even then the service is frequently spoiled by some idiot or other not shutting the door after them. There is nobody I hate more than the tiresome creatures who leave doors open: they kill more people in the long-run than war or famine or pestilence."

"Well, Aunt Caroline, when Roland and Amy and I are settled in Australia, you and Uncle William will always have to come out to us for your winter and our summer, and then you will avoid any cold weather at all," said Gwynneth, bent as usual upon making other people happy and comfortable.

"That's easier said than done, Gwynneth, with all those thousand miles between, and your uncle and me getting older and more rheumatic every day," And Mrs. Frisby sighed deeply, as she thought upon the inclemencies of the

## The Wisdom of Folly

weather, and the infirmities of the flesh.

The evening passed pleasantly enough, and so did the next two or three days; but to those who possessed the seeking eye and the hearing ear, the shadow of advancing tragedy and the sound of its approaching footfall made themselves known at Meadowford.

Nicholas had intended to leave as soon as Roland appeared upon the scene, as he felt he could not bear to look upon the happiness of Gwynneth and her lover. But, after seeing the way in which his cousin gazed at Amy, he changed his mind, and decided to stand by Gwynneth to the end. If he could not save her from her allotted fate, he could at any rate share its bitterness; and this he decided to do, to the best of his ability.

Then followed a time of storm and stress for everybody at Meadowford House, with the exception of the kindly old couple at the head of it; and even they felt that there was trouble in the air, and were uneasy and uncomfortable.

Roland was dreadfully unhappy and terribly ashamed; yet, he could not for long disguise from himself that his heart had gone out to Amy that first evening on the bridge, and that he was unable to call it back again. From the depths of his honest, commonplace soul he had meant to be true to Gwynneth: he had been true to her all those long lonely years out in Australia—he had not given a thought to any other woman. But when he saw Amy, she had not seemed to be another woman; she had appeared to be the very girl whom he had originally loved, grown taller and stronger and more beautiful. She was much more like the Gwynneth of the old days than the sad-eyed, grey-haired woman who was called Gwynneth now. Roland, like all very simple and straightforward people, was extremely young for his age: Gwynneth was exceptionally old for hers: and so there was actually far more sympathy of feeling between him and Amy than there was between him and Gwynneth. Argue with himself as he might, he could not help feeling that Amy was the love of his youth and Gwynneth a perfect stranger: and herein lay the core of the tragedy. His very faithfulness and unchangeableness bound him to the girl who bore the outward form and possessed many of the superficial characteristics of the girl he had loved and left fourteen years ago; and estranged him still further from the woman who apparently had so little in common with the Gwynneth Morgan of the past.

Every day he loved Amy more: every day he cared for Gwynneth less. He and Amy found hundreds of things to say to each other, and innumerable interests in common; while he and Gwynneth were never many minutes together without coming to a conversational deadlock. So that not only could the younger woman appeal to his emotional side by the strength of her youth and beauty, but she also supplied the element of friendship and *camaraderie*: while the elder one left his mind and his passions alike untouched.

And he literally could not help himself: he was not actually to blame: that was why it was all so sad. The real pathos of life lies in our limitations rather than in our lapses—in our mistakes rather than in our misdeeds.

Just at first, Gwynneth did not discover what had happened. She saw that Roland had completely lost the lover-like devotion of old times; but she put that down to the fact of advancing years, and thought it but natural that a swain considerably over thirty should woo less vehemently than a suitor in his twenties. Like most people who are old for their years, she made the error of supposing that all those of her own generation were the same age as she was: which is by no means the case in middle-life, whatever it may be in youth and age.

Gwynneth took it for granted that Roland was the same age as herself and Nicholas, though she knew that—as far as mere years count—he was slightly younger than either of them; and here she made a grave mistake. She and Nicholas had loved and suffered so much, that they were older than their years, and had already acquired the habits and characteristics of middle-age. But Roland had done nothing of the kind. He had loved Gwynneth as much as he was capable of loving anybody, and he had felt the parting from her as much as it was in his nature to feel anything; but love and sorrow had not ploughed the same furrows in his soul—and consequently in his



## The Wisdom of Folly

forehead—as they had ploughed in the souls and foreheads of the other two. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, Roland was still a young man—much younger than the other two than the slight difference in their ages accounted for—and a more fitting mate for a bright young girl than for the sorrowful and motherly creature to whom he had plighted his early troth. For Roland the sun had stood still upon Gibeon, so that he might enjoy to the full his victorious fight against circumstances: for Gwynneth it had gone down while it was yet day, and had turned her morning into a night of darkness, and of the shadow of death.

She was so grateful—poor humble soul!—to Roland for having come back to marry her, that she was the least exacting and jealous of lady-loves: all she asked was to be allowed to pour out her own love as a libation at the feet of her lover, demanding nothing but a kindly tolerance in return. She believed that a man of Roland's age was not the one to experience a passionate attachment, nor a woman of hers the one to inspire it: and in this belief she rested content, until one day she surprised a look between Roland and Amy.

The girl had gathered a rose which she was pinning in her dress, when Roland, sitting idly near with Gwynneth, asked for it. Amy handed it to him, half-graciously, half-defiantly; and as he took the flower from her fingers, their glances met.

Then the veil was rudely torn from Gwynneth's tired eyes; she saw and understood!

There was no mistaking the look which suddenly lighted up Roland's eyes and transfigured his face. Gwynneth had seen it too often in the old days to be able to mistake its meaning now. She had never seen it in their later courtship, and had believed that it was one of the extinct fires of youth which time had extinguished for ever. But now—in a flash—she saw that the fire was not really extinct: it was only that she had lost the power to rekindle it.

They were sitting in the garden when Gwynneth surprised this truant look, and neither of the others had any idea that they had betrayed themselves. Nor had they any notion—when, to their mutual relief, Gwynneth rose from her chair and left them together—that the gentle and gracious woman, whose obtuse trustfulness was fast getting upon their nerves and making them cross and irritable, had gone into the house in order to fight with devils and to look down into the darkest abyss of hell.

Then came a terrible time for Gwynneth. Not only was her mirth suddenly turned into mourning, and her marriage—lay into bitter lamentation, but the two ruling passions of her life were at war with one another. Her love for Roland made her long to keep her lover at all costs, and to bind him to her by the bands of his honour and his self-respect, putting her own long-established claim upon his love and consideration, against the new and untried influence of a younger and fairer woman. Gwynneth was quite primitive enough to be ready to fight to the death in order to hold her own against a rival. But on the other hand, her (if possible) still deeper love for Amy filled her fond heart with the desire to sacrifice herself and everything she had, in order to bring happiness to the child whom she worshipped with an almost more than maternal devotion. And these two opposing instincts wrought sad havoc in poor Gwynneth's tortured soul.

Amy, too, in her shallow, girlish way, was very miserable indeed. As far as she was capable of loving anybody, she loved Roland Ketteringham. She was at the age when love at first sight seems the only satisfactory form of the complaint: and she had fallen in love, after her fashion, at her first sight of her uncle-in-law elect. She had expected him to be somewhat of an old fogey after the fashion of Nicholas, and was prepared to extend to him that good-humoured and half-contemptuous tolerance which affable youth frequently condescends to bestow upon amiable middle-age: and her surprise at finding him the very opposite to what she had imagined him to be, was a strong factor in his fascination for her. She was not interested in books, as were Nicholas and Gwynneth: intellectual pursuits had not the slightest attraction for her: but she was keenly alive to the charms of physical prowess and of physical attainment; and so Roland's good looks, and the stories he had to tell of the hardships and adventures of his wild Colonial life, attracted her enormously.

## The Wisdom of Folly

She was still young enough to feel—as we have all felt in our time—that she was the centre figure in the social cosmos, and that older people had been created merely to support and lighten and adorn her existence; just as our forefathers believed that the myriad worlds of the immeasurable constellations had been called into being solely to give light to earthly travellers who happened to be out after nightfall: therefore it seemed to her a piece of inconceivable hardship and injustice that the hero of her life's drama should be snatched away from his rightful place by the side of the prima donna, and appropriated by so insignificant a lady of the chorus as a maiden aunt.

Bitterly did poor little Amy rail against her fate: still more bitterly did she resent Gwynneth's unconscious interference with her happiness: but, miserable as she was, she was still young enough to derive a certain enjoyment from her misery, and to sip the cup of sorrow with luxurious deliberation for fear that one drop of it should be wasted without having yielded its fullest flavour.

As usual, it was Nicholas's hard lot to stand by and look

He knew perhaps better than any one what was happening, and it cut him to the heart to realise the agony which was being silently endured by the woman he loved. But he was powerless to do anything. He felt that a relentless Fate was mercilessly fulfilling itself, and that no human hand could parry its immutable force.

Day by day the situation grew more strained, more intolerable, At first Roland felt so sorry for Gwynneth and so full of compunction for his involuntary unfaithfulness towards her, that he treated her with the utmost kindness and consideration; striving, as is the way of the sons of men, to atone for disloyalty in the spirit by lavish adherence to the letter. But after a time—being a man and a very elemental one—his pain and remorse made him irritable with everybody, and especially with the innocent cause of his present misery. According to the fashion of his first ancestor, he began to make excuses for himself by laying the blame on the woman. After all, it was Gwynneth's own fault, he said to himself: if she had married him as she ought to have done years ago, all this unhappiness would have been averted. Disloyalty to a wife who had stood by him for fourteen years, was a very different thing from faithlessness to a lady—love who had been separated from him for that exact period; and a thing, moreover, of which he knew himself to be incapable. Besides, in that case, he and she would have grown older together, and her faded looks and loss of beauty would not have hit him straight between the eyes, as they did now, with all the shock of a surprise. Probably, too, she would not have aged like this, had she been a happy and contented wife instead of a disappointed and dissatisfied spinster; and she certainly would not have acquired certain little old—maidish tricks of speech and thought which are inseparable from women who lead single and solitary lives.

Thus relations at Meadowford House were strained and stretched to breaking—point, when—as was inevitable—the string snapped and the crush came.

## Chapter 22. RENUNCIATION

"William, I am very uncomfortable about the way in which things are going on; very uncomfortable indeed," remarked Mrs. Frisby to the husband of her choice.

"Are you, my love? I am sorry—very sorry—to hear it. But I hope you will not worry yourself overmuch, as I consider that worry is so bad for—I might almost say so fatal to—a digestion which is not so young as it was."

"You take care of your own digestion, William, and leave me to take care of mine. You'll find your hands full, if you do it properly. And as to my digestion being not so young as it was, it is exactly the same age as the rest of me to a day. I didn't come out in numbers, like a serial magazine."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Certainly not, my love, certainly not. I only want to insinuate that you are still so youthful in some things, that you may be in danger of forgetting that you are not really as young as you were, and so may overtax your strength in others. I am sure, Caroline, that to see you out walking, one might easily mistake you for a woman of thirty-five, you are so extremely—I may say so extraordinarily—brisk and active."

"I still keep the use of my limbs, William; I don't deny that."

"More than that, my love—you still keep your youthful appearance. You are so upright, and your back is still so straight. Walking behind you the other day, I remarked to Gwynneth that it was the back of a woman of five-and-thirty."

"Well, it isn't; it's the same age as my face, and that's a good five-and-sixty. You talk as if I were a church that had been restored, and there was only a portion of the original building left. But never mind my back, William: that will keep. What I want to talk about now is the very unsatisfactory state of affairs here between Gwynneth and that young Ketteringham"

"Are they unsatisfactory, Caroline? Dear me, dear me, I am sorry to hear that! I hadn't perceived it."

"Then, my dear William, where were your eyes? You must have mislaid them with your spectacles. No wonder you take me for thirty-five, if you are as blind as that! Unless I'm very much mistaken—which I'm not given to be—Roland Ketteringham has transferred his affection from the aunt to the niece."

"Dear, dear, that is very distressing—very distressing. I hope you are wrong, Caroline; I do indeed," the Colonel with real concern.

"I'm never wrong, William; I should have thought after all these years that you'd have known me well enough to know that."

"Then it is very disgraceful conduct on the part of Ketteringham—very disgraceful indeed; and it would serve the scoundrel right if I kicked him out of the house!" The Colonel's sorrow had rapidly turned to anger.

"Certainly not, William; it wouldn't serve him right at all, and it would greatly complicate matters all round, so I beg you'll do nothing of the kind. It would be a most foolish and troublesome action on your part, and one that you would seriously regret, or my name's not Caroline! Men can't help being men; and it's ridiculous to blame them for what they can't help, and most unjust too."

But the old soldier was still unappeased. "Men can help not being gentlemen, Caroline; and they'll have to help it as long as they are under my roof!"

"There is no question about not being a gentleman; you are such a one to jump to conclusions."

"But you yourself said that Ketteringham wanted to throw Gwynneth over, or words to that effect."

"I didn't. I said that he would like to throw her over; which is quite a different thing."

The Colonel looked puzzled. "Then you are not afraid that Ketteringham will jilt Gwynneth?"

"Not at all," replied Mrs. Frisby with decision: "he is far too much of a gentleman for that. What I am afraid of is that, out of a masculine and mistaken sense of honour, he'll marry one woman when he is in love with another: and that will be a pretty kettle of fish!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"But he ought not to have fallen in love with one woman as long as he was engaged to another," persisted the Colonel.

"Men can't help being men, William, and it's nothing but old-maidish nonsense to expect them to be otherwise," repeated Mrs. Frisby, with the tolerant wisdom of the long-married woman.

"Still, even a man can be true to the woman of his choice," said her husband with some asperity.

"Certainly, if she is on the spot to be true to. But men aren't like us: they can't keep love alive on a few memories and a packet of old letters, as women can: in their case love wants a rather more nourishing diet. You've been a most devoted husband to me for forty years; but I doubt if you'd have been equally devoted if I'd spent the last forty years on the other side of the world, and never even written to you."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not, my love: anyway, I am thankful—devoutly thankful—that you never tried me thus far."

"I knew better: and Gwynneth ought to have known better, too. It was ridiculous to suppose that a suitor would come back as fresh to a woman of close on forty, as he was when he left a girl of five-and-twenty! I was certain that Gwynneth was laying up misery for herself when she so foolishly sacrificed a husband to a niece fourteen years ago. It was an absurd and unnatural thing to do; and when people do absurd and unnatural things, they are generally punished sooner or later."

"It did seem a pity to give up her marriage rather than be separated from her sister's child," assented the Colonel. "I remember thinking so at the time."

"It was a most idiotic and ridiculous thing to do, and so I told her," replied his wife sternly. "If Gwynneth had taken my advice and married Roland and left Amy with us, Roland would have been an old married man by now, and would have no more have wanted to change his wife than he'd have wanted to turn teetotaller or to give up smoking. He'd have grown used to her: and that's a most important thing where middle-aged men are concerned. Most men are slaves to habit; so it is when a wife becomes a habit that her ascendancy over a man is most secure. If only Gwynneth had taken my advice, she'd have been a confirmed habit with Roland by now; while as it is, she is nothing but a worn-out and half-forgotten pastime. I'm very sorry for her, very sorry: but I can't deny that it is all her own doing."

"Surely you are a little severe on the poor girl, my dear," expostulated the tender-hearted Colonel.

But Mrs. Frisby was hard with the fundamental hardness of the kindly and good-natured matron. "Not at all, William: I only say it is her own fault. As people make their beds, so they must lie on them: and it's no good complaining afterwards that the feathers are not properly shaken or the blankets securely tucked in. They should have thought of all that while the bed was being made."

By which it will be seen that, in accordance with the traditions of her sex, good Mrs. Frisby had but little mercy upon such of her fellow-women as made mistakes.

While the above-recorded conversation was taking place in the Colonel's smoking-room, the object of it was sitting alone in her bedroom torn by conflicting emotions.

First she assured herself that Roland was hers by right of faithful affection and long-established claim, as well as of written word and spoken promise; and she knew—as did Mrs. Frisby—that if she chose to keep him to his contract, he would do his best to fulfil it, and would never go back from his plighted troth. It was she, and she alone, who could break the bonds which held him; and she was called upon to hew down the living tree of hope

## The Wisdom of Folly

fulfilled, and to cut it up into fuel wherewith to feed the sacrificial lamb, just because the two people she loved best on earth had been disloyal to her? Even now she thought that she could make Roland happy, when once his temporary infatuation for Amy's youthful beauty had passed. All women believe that a man's love for themselves is the passion of a lifetime, and his devotion to others but a passing fancy; and herein Gwynneth was no exception to the rule. Though she was the least vain and egotistical of her sex, she now perhaps somewhat overrated her personal charms. It is difficult for a plain woman always to remember that she is plain: it is impossible for a pretty woman ever to forget that she has once been pretty, however remote that by-gone prettiness may have become: therefore poor Gwynneth unconsciously relied, as she had done in the past, upon the power of her own beauty, not realising what a broken reed it was upon which she leaned. Then again, she argued, Amy was still young, with life before her, and the future would bring plenty of suitors to her feet: while this was probably the last opportunity of marrying for love that would ever be granted to Gwynneth herself. She would probably have other chances of settling; she was under forty, and an attractive woman still; but she was of too passionately loving a nature to be happy unless her heart accompanied her hand, and she did not believe she would ever be able to fall in love again.

Then, on the other hand, the maternal instinct, which exists in all true women and which was particularly strong in Gwynneth, urged her to sacrifice herself to the child she loved with almost more than a mother's love. It had been her blessed privilege to comfort all Amy's griefs ever since the latter was a baby: then could she reverse the habit of eighteen years, and withhold a consolation which it was in her power to bestow?

While Gwynneth was thus engaged in a fierce and bitter struggle with herself, the sound of weeping in the next room suddenly arrested her attention. It was the room which Amy had occupied ever since she was old enough to have a room of her own; and many a time had Gwynneth entered it in order to relieve childish sorrows and to dry childish tears. With a force of habit which had almost grown into an instinct, Gwynneth put her own pain on one side as soon as she felt that another had need of her, and went straightway to supply that other's need. As she opened the door which led from her room to Amy's, a sight met her eyes which went straight to her heart. The usually calm and self-contained girl was lying face-downwards on her bed, sobbing as if her heart would break in a very abandonment of grief, her vigorous young body shaken all over with the violence of her anguish.

It was the turning-point of Gwynneth's career; the parting of the ways between two of the strongest instincts of humanity—the instinct of self-preservation, which is common to all men and women alike; and the instinct of maternal love, which is implanted in the bosom of every woman, be she married or single.

As a rule, when we come to the great crises of our lives, upon which hang eternal issues, we are not given time in which to think how we shall act: we have to act almost involuntarily upon the impulse of the moment. Therefore it behoves us so to cultivate our characters that our impulsive and half-involuntary action shall be the one whereof, in quiet and sober moments, our conscience will approve. When the crucial moment arrives, we have no time to think: we can only blindly follow our instincts. But we can so train our instincts beforehand that they will automatically guide us in the way that leads to eternal life; or, on the contrary, we can so neglect them, that they will play us false at the psychological moment, and commit us to a course in which we shall find no place of repentance though we seek it carefully and with tears.

The moment that Gwynneth saw Amy's abandonment of grief, and realised—as she had not done before—how deeply the girl's feelings were involved in this matter, the battle in her own soul came to a sudden end; the one foe was subdued for ever—the victory of the other was complete. The carefully trained instinct of years asserted itself, and triumphed over the claims of self-love and self interest, and even self-preservation. Without waiting to think—without even needing to do so—Gwynneth made her full and free surrender, and flung herself on her knees beside the girl whom she loved with such passionate devotion.

"My darling, my darling, don't cry like that," she said, covering the curly head with kisses; "I can't bear to hear it; indeed I can't!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

"I must cry; my heart is broken," sobbed the weeping girl. "You have no idea how mis—mis—miserable I am!"

"I have, my own; I have indeed: I know all about it."

"No, you don't; nobody does," replied Amy, who was still youthful enough to copyright her grief. When we are young, we are rejoiced to think that nobody has felt what we are feeling; when we grow older, we are relieved to know that everybody has.

"Then tell me all about it, my sweet: tell me all about it, my own little child, my baby," murmured Gwynneth, taking the writhing girl in her arms and crooning over her as if she were an infant.

"I wish I were dead! I do, really!" sobbed Amy.

"No, no, my sweet, don't say that. Tell auntie all about it, and it will all come right."

Amy nestled up closer to Gwynneth, and her sobs began to subside. Surely the comfort which had never failed her in all her childish troubles would not fail her now.

"I can't tell you, auntie; it's all so horrid."

"But I know without being told. You love Roland, my darling, and he loves you. Do you think I haven't seen that for myself?"

"Oh, auntie, how clever of you to have found it out! I thought I had managed to keep it from you. I was so afraid of making you unhappy."

"My own darling!" whispered Gwynneth fondly, entirely forgetting herself and her own misery in her longing to comfort the child.

Amy began to weep afresh. "Oh! what shall I do, what shall I do? I wish I were dead!"

"Don't cry so, my dear one; don't cry. It will all come right. You shall have everything that can make you happy. Do you think that I could marry Roland now I know that you love him? Of course not. Don't you know me better than that, my own little baby?"

Amy half lifted herself out of the encircling arms, and gazed at Gwynneth in dazed wonder. "Do you mean that you will give him up?" she asked.

"How could I do anything else, when I find that my little one's happiness depends on it? Why, I would give up anything and everything to make my darling happy. Don't you know that, my sweet?"

Amy felt as she had felt as a child when Gwynneth mended her broken toy. "Oh, auntie, how good you are!" she whispered, kissing the tired face so close to her own.

"Dearest, do you think I could be happy if I knew that you were miserable?" continued the elder woman. "Of course, I couldn't. But I think I could be happy if I knew that you were happy, even if I had no happiness of my own."

Amy clung to Gwynneth in an ecstasy of relief. Pain and grief seemed unnatural and intolerable to her, as they do to all young creatures; and in the rebound of their removal, her joyous vitality quickly asserted itself again.

"Auntie, do go and tell Roland it's all right. You'll make him so happy if you do. I feel sure he is as wretched as I

## The Wisdom of Folly

am, though he is so splendid and honourable he never told me so. But he *will* be glad when he finds what a brick you are, and how magnificently you've behaved: I know he will! For I am certain he loves me though he has never made love to me for a single instant."

Gwynneth tried hard not to wince at the selfishness of youth; but for an instant human nature was stronger even than her loyalty to Amy. Then she recovered herself, and said, "I will go to him at once, my darling, if you wish it. And you must bathe your eyes and put some eau-de-Cologne on your forehead, or else you'll have a headache. I can't bear my little Amy to suffer any pain, you know. I'd rather bear it all for her if I could."

"Dearest auntie, I shall soon be quite all right again," replied Amy, kissing her effusively. "I don't believe any girl ever had such a dear, good, kind, old auntie! And now, do please go to Roland and tell him it's all right, and that you will give him up, and so he needn't be wretched any more. I know he is feeling dreadfully miserable: I can see it in his face: and it will be so jolly for you to make him quite happy again by saying a single word!"

With the accustomed meekness of her disposition Gwynneth hastened to obey Amy's imperious command. For the time being, her own anguish was lulled. It would break out again later with renewed force; but at present she was only conscious of the relief of decision after doubt, and of peace after warfare.

She found Roland in the garden, as Amy had said; and, with her accustomed straightforwardness, went direct to the matter which was occupying her thoughts.

"Roland, I have something particular to say to you," she began: then she stopped. When she came into the garden her mind was filled with the thought of Amy's sorrow, and consumed by the desire to comfort it at all costs: but the sight of the man whom she had loved so long and so faithfully, and who was still her affianced husband, caught her up sharp, and reminded her of all that she was sacrificing for the sake of Zillah's child. For the fraction of a second she hesitated. Then the habit of years reasserted itself, and she continued her sentence almost before Roland perceived that she had ceased speaking.

"I dare say you think that I haven't noticed that you and Amy are in love with one another: but I have: and it is killing me to see that I am making you both unhappy and spoiling both your lives, when you are the two people that I love best in the whole world."

Roland was utterly dumbfounded, and thoroughly ashamed. "Oh! Gwynneth, you—you—are putting it too strongly," he stammered: "you are—are—are—making—a mistake, I fancy."

But he was cut short by the Treherne capacity of sticking to the direct course. "No, Roland, I'm not making a mistake, and I'm not putting it too strongly. Amy is in love with you, and you are in love with her: anybody can see it: and this being so, I have no option but to give you up, and break off our engagement."

Mingled feelings of shame and relief flooded Roland's soul. "My dear, you are too generous," he began.

But again the Treherne straightforwardness cut him short. "I cannot help myself. Don't you understand? I love you both so much that the greatest possible unhappiness to me is to see you both so unhappy: I cannot bear it."

Tears filled Roland's eyes. "Gwynneth, you are the best and the noblest woman in the world. You are a saint, an angel. But I cannot accept such a sacrifice—indeed I cannot!" And words failed him.

"But you must."

"I cannot, I tell you—I cannot. Do you think I am going to purchase my own happiness at the cost of yours? Badly as I have behaved to you, I am not such a cur as that!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

Gwynneth was as calm and collected as her lover was confused. "You do not understand," she gently explained: "I am not really doing this for you. I tell you candidly, Roland, that if only your happiness were concerned, I believe I should refuse to give you up. I am sure I could still make you happy if we were left to ourselves, and no other woman were at hand to come between us."

Roland hurriedly interrupted her. "Then let us go away somewhere where we can be left to ourselves, with no one to come between us! Marry me at once, Gwynneth, and let us go! And I swear that I will devote the rest of my days to honouring and worshipping you, and you shall never regret that you trusted yourself to me."

But Gwynneth shook her head. "No, Roland, that can never be. You might be happy and might try to make me so; but what about my little Amy? Do you think I could have a happy moment while I thought that things were not going well with the child? If you think that, you do not know me."

"Amy would be all right: she is young, and she would soon get over it," replied Roland, arguing against himself and his own desires in his endeavour to act fairly to the woman whom—though he had loved her more—he had never revered as much as he did now.

"She might, or she might not: I do not know. But what I do know is that I should never get over it if I had brought trouble upon my darling. I love her more than anything or anybody—even more than I love you, Roland, and I love you very, very much—and the thought that I had hurt her would drive me mad. I give you your freedom back in order that you may give it to Amy: and God do so to you and more also if aught but death part her and you."

Roland tried to speak and failed. He had never revered any one as he revered this sweet and sorrowful woman who stood beside him with such calm and dignified self-possession, and with a look in her eyes which he had never seen before save in the eyes of a Madonna painted by the brush of some great master. He bowed his head before such almost divine unselfishness, and felt that he was indeed standing upon holy ground.

Respecting his emotion, Gwynneth turned away and left him alone to recover himself. But she said just one word before she went:

"There is only one favour that I ask of you, Roland; and that is that you will let me come out to Australia with you both, and will give me a little home somewhere near you and Amy. I could not bear to be parted from her. And even now I feel that I shall find happiness and peace if I may sit by and watch her happiness, and the happiness of her children, and her children's children."

Roland raised his head, and his eyes were full of tears, though Gwynneth's were quite dry. "My dear," he said, "I swear to you that our home shall always be your home, and our people your people; and that nothing but your own wish shall ever part you from Amy as long as you both shall live."

## Chapter 23. AMY'S RESPONSE

"But, my dear Roland, you cannot mean seriously that you intend Aunt Gwynneth to come out to Australia and to live with us?"

"I do mean it, Amy; very seriously indeed. I have given her my word that our home shall always be hers, and nothing would induce me to break it."

It was the first quarrel between the two lovers, who had now been engaged to each other for a fortnight, and the date of whose wedding was fast approaching. It was also the first time, in all her eighteen years, that Amy Evans



## The Wisdom of Folly

had met with her master; and she did not find the meeting particularly agreeable.

"It is the most absurd thing I ever heard in my life," she grumbled, "quite the most absurd! Think of a newly-married couple having an old maid always spying upon them. It is simply preposterous!"

Roland's handsome mouth grew grim. "Preposterous or not, it is what will happen. I have made up my mind, so let there be no more talk about it."

Amy tried another line of argument. She sat down on her obstinate lover's knee and wound her arm round his neck. "Now do be a dear, sensible, old thing," she coaxed, nestling up to him, "and give your poor little Amy her own way. I shan't be a bit happy in Australia if auntie is always there: I know I shan't. Of course, I am very fond of her and all that, but she and I have never got on particularly well together."

"Then you'll have to learn to get on well with her: that's all I can say."

Amy pouted, looking adorably lovely as she did so. "I can't get on with her: I never have been able to do so since I grew up."

But her lover was adamant to her blandishments. "Then all I can say is, it must be your own fault. Your aunt is a saint and an angel; and people who can't get on with her must be themselves to blame."

"Nicholas says she isn't a saint or an angel at all, but a fairy or a mermaid, or something of that kind."

"Nicholas is an ass, and knows nothing about it. I say she is a saint, and I know what I'm talking about. But, whatever she is, I am not going back to Australia without her."

"But, dearest," wheedled the girl, "I know you want me to be happy: and I am certain I never shall be, if auntie is always on the spot irritating me and saying the wrong thing. Do, do make me happy, my dear old Roly-poly; and let us go off by our two selves, and leave auntie behind to look after Uncle William and Aunt Caroline!"

Roland, however, was still stern. If he could be obstinate fourteen years ago with Gwynneth, he could be ten times more obstinate now with Amy, as the experience of life had developed that side of his character. He was now as much set upon taking Gwynneth with them to Australia, as fourteen years ago he had been set upon leaving Amy behind.

"I think you are a very ungrateful girl," he said; "considering all that your aunt has sacrificed for us." Manlike, he regarded the sacrifice of himself as a very self-denying ordinance indeed: and—also man-like—he was in the main right. Comfortably conceited people are often nearer the truth than abnormally humble ones.

Amy essayed a third line of argument: she let her rosy lips tremble, and her lovely eyes fill with tears. "I think you are very horrid and very unkind," she said, with a little sob: "I don't believe you love me one little bit."

"Don't I, though?" replied her lover, kissing her: "I love you more than truth and honour and everything else. If I didn't, I should be going to become your uncle instead of your husband this day fortnight."

Amy graciously allowed her tyrant to caress her. "If you really loved me, you would do what I want," she whispered.

"Not I! The more I loved you the more I should want to do the straight thing. Can't you understand that, my sweetheart.? As I say, I've been a cad for your sake but, hang it all, you needn't try to make me even more of a cad than I am!"

## The Wisdom of Folly

Amy, being clever enough to know when she was beaten, desisted in her attempts to cajole her lover into doing what she wished. But she had still another string to her bow; and she lost no time in making use of it.

"Auntie," she said to Gwynneth about an hour later, "you don't really mean to come out to Australia with Roland and me, do you?"

Gwynneth looked at her in surprise that such a question should be asked. "Of course I do, my darling. I should never feel that you were properly looked after and taken care of if I were not there."

"Roland will look after me and take care of me all right."

"But not as I can, my dear one. I have watched over you and cared for you ever since you were a little baby." Poor Gwynneth did not know that it was this unremitting care and attention that had grown to irritate Amy beyond endurance.

"But don't you think it rather selfish of you, Aunt Gwynneth, to leave Uncle William and Aunt Caroline now that they are getting so old?" continued the wily Amy.

A spasm of pain crossed Gwynneth's sensitive face. "I have thought of that, my darling, and it has troubled me a good deal. It is always painful when duties clash. But when all is said and done, your claim upon me is stronger than theirs, and so your interests must come first."

Finding that all her subterfuges were useless, Amy decided to take the bull by the horns. "Look here, Aunt Gwynneth, I don't want to be horrid, but I'd so much rather you didn't go to Australia with Roland and me!"

Gwynneth could hardly believe her ears. "You don't want me to go to Australia with Roland and you?" she repeated mechanically.

"No. I should never feel married if you were there bossing everything. I shouldn't really. I should still feel a little girl as home."

"I shouldn't boss you, darling: I really shouldn't," pleaded Gwynneth, with a sword through her heart.

"Yes, you would; you couldn't help it; and I should never feel properly married if you were there. At any rate, let Roland and me begin our married life by our two selves, even if you come out to us later," coaxed Amy.

Gwynneth still could hardly realise what Amy was saying. Such callous ingratitude was undreamed of in her philosophy.

"It isn't as if you were really my mother, you know," persisted Amy, who all her life had been in the habit of comparing the real Gwynneth with the ideal Zillah, to the former's disadvantage: "of course, a mother is different from anybody else; and if mother had lived, I should have wanted her always to be with me. But however good an aunt is she can never be quite the same as a mother, and one cannot love her in quite the same way."

Then the sword in Gwynneth's heart began to turn itself round in the wound. "Oh! Amy, it is cruel to say that. I am sure no mother could have loved you more than I have done!"

"You have always been very kind to me, but it isn't *quite* the same," replied Amy grudgingly.

"I don't see what a mother could have done that I have left undone," urged Gwynneth.

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Still, it isn't quite the same; you must see that, Aunt Gwynneth."

"I don't think you have ever understood how much I have loved you, Amy."

"If you really love me, you will do what I ask you," replied Amy, arguing on her accustomed lines: "and you will let me begin my married life alone with Roland, even if you come out to us afterwards. Being a spinster, I don't think that you quite understand how much a husband and wife resent having anybody else living with them."

"You are a spinster too, Amy," said Gwynneth: "so I don't see how you can know any more than I do about how husbands and wives feel. I lived with your father and mother after they were married, and my sister and I never had a mis-word with one another till the day of her death."

"But I have heard you say that mother's was not a happy marriage," answered Amy, who had only been given a greatly Bowdlerised version of the story of her parents' married life: "and I dare say the fact that a third person was always there to come between her and father was one of the things that made their marriage unhappy," she added, with crude injustice. Then she reverted to her usual refrain: "But if you really loved me as much as you say, you would do what I want. I am sure that if mother had been alive she would have understood."

"I do not understand, Amy, but I will do what you want," replied Gwynneth, white to the lips; "nothing shall now induce me to go out with you and Roland and spoil your honeymoon. But if, as time goes on, you are ill or unhappy, or want me, my darling, you'll let me come out to you then, won't you?"

"Of course I will; and I dare say I shall be very glad to have you then, after the first excitement of getting married is over, and I have settled down into my new life. And you are a darling dear old auntie to do what I want! I believe you love me more than Roland does after all, because you let me have my own way, and he doesn't."

Thus it came to pass that—in spite of all Roland's entreaties to the contrary—Gwynneth changed her mind, and declined to accompany the newly-wedded pair to the Antipodes. She was as obstinate now as she had been fourteen years ago, and it was as impossible for Roland to move her. But he made up his mind that his future wife wanted a good deal of breaking-in, and that after they were married she should have it: and it was not his custom to reverse his decisions.

## Chapter 24. CONCLUSION

On a warm October evening, about three weeks after Roland and Amy's wedding, Nicholas and Gwynneth were walking together in the Bridle lane at Eldhurst, watching the sun set over London. Gwynneth had plumbed the depths of human distress and disappointment since her momentous interview with Amy five weeks ago. The waters had indeed gone over her head, and the floods had well-nigh overwhelmed her. She had suffered as much pain as she was capable of suffering, and had endured all the anguish that it was possible for her to endure; and now Nature had mercifully come to her rescue, and had brought the inevitable reaction that follows upon all extremities of emotion. After the departure of the bride and bridegroom for Australia, Nicholas had brought Gwynneth straight to his mother's house for complete rest and change; and already the peace of Eldhurst was beginning to slide into her wounded soul, and to still the raging of the storm there. And something else besides peace was slowly filling and healing her wounded heart: at last she saw Nicholas as he really was, and understood something of his wonderful love for her. "We needs must love the highest when we see it:" and as her eyes were opened and she saw clearly the difference between Nicholas and Roland, the sight transformed her whole nature, and left her not altogether disobedient to the heavenly vision of an almost perfect love.

"Nicholas," she suddenly said, after one of those long and restful silences which were so characteristic of the relationship between the two, "do you remember a poem by Mrs. Browning which you used to read aloud to us in

## The Wisdom of Folly

the old Llanferdovey days, about a woman who confessed that, though God had given her many blessings, she had never thanked Him for one of them?

'I have sinned,' she said,  
'And not merited  
The gift He gives by the grace He sees!  
The mine-cave praiseth the jewel, the hillside praiseth the star;  
I am viler than these!'"

"Yes, I remember it," replied Nicholas: "I think I remember everything that happened at Llanferdovey. But I forget exactly how it goes on."

"Her confessor blames her for her ingratitude to God and asks--

'If He, the All-giving and Loving, is served so unduly, what then  
Hast thou done to the weak and the false and the changing, thy fellows of men?'  
'I have loved,' she said  
(Words bowing her head  
As the wind the wet acacia-trees),  
I saw God sitting above me, but I--I sat among men  
And I have loved these.'"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Nicholas: "it all comes back to me as you repeat it. It seems only yesterday that you two were sitting on the rocks, and I was reading that poem aloud to you."

"And then, if you remember," Gwynneth continued, "the woman goes on to tell how much and how deeply she has loved her beloved;

'The least touch of their hands in the morning, I kept it by day and by night:  
Their least step on the stair at the door, still throbs through me if ever so light.  
Their tender I often felt holy, their bitter I sometimes called sweet;  
And whenever their heart has refused me, I fell down straight at their feet.  
I have loved,' she said,--  
'Man is weak, God is dread,  
Yet the weak man dies with his spirit at ease,  
Having poured such an unguent of love but once on the  
Saviour's Feet  
As I lavished on these.'

I have loved like that, Nicholas."

There was such pathos in her voice, and such complete resignation, that the rare tears came into Nicholas' eyes. "Yes, my dear, I believe you have," he replied.

"And the last verse applies to me too," added Gwynneth: "I have constantly said it over to myself during the last few weeks, till now it seems branded on my heart. Do you remember it?"

'Go, thou hast chosen the Human and left the Divine!  
Then at least have the Human shared with thee their wild berry-wine?  
Have they loved back thy love, and when strangers approached thee with blame,  
Have they covered thy fault with their kisses and loved thee the same?'

## The Wisdom of Folly

But she shrunk and said,  
'God over my head.  
Must sweep in the wrath of His judgment—seas,  
If He shall deal with me sinning but only indeed the same  
And no gentler than these!'

I am like that woman, Nicholas; that is how I have loved, and that is how I have been dealt with. I too have chosen the Human and left the Divine, and my love has all been wasted: and now it is too late to change."

Nicholas winced at the despair in her voice. "It is never too late to change," he said: "never. And I don't believe that your love has been wasted, either. I don't agree with Mrs. Browning that the love which is poured upon the Human is taken away from the Divine. I think that the Divine has so identified Himself with the Human that what we give to it we give to Him. I believe that in some subtle way, which we don't at present understand, the love we offer to our fellows is also offered to Him: and that the woman in the poem *had* poured the unguent of love on her Saviour's Feet, although she didn't know it. But *He* did."

"You are very comforting, Nicholas," replied Gwynneth: "it always does me good to talk to you. Nevertheless, I feel that I have sinned in loving Amy too much. I loved her as I ought to have loved God, and this is my punishment. Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins?" she added after a moment's pause.

"Of course I do. But I don't believe in the remission of consequences. And, what is more, we must be prepared to bear the consequences of our mistakes as well as of our misdeeds. For instance, I did not commit a sin in not telling Zillah of my love in time: on the contrary, I kept silence with the best and purest of motives: but I made a mistake, and a mistake the consequences of which will more or less embitter my life until the day of my death: there is no getting away from it. We have both made mistakes, and both committed sins, my Gwynneth, you and I, and we must bear the consequences of them: but I believe that your love for Amy and my love for you will be put down to our credit on the other side of the account."

"Perhaps so. Who knows?" answered Gwynneth and then the two stood still in silence for a time, leaning over a gate, and drinking in the beauty of the pageant of crimson and gold which was unrolling itself over the gleaming towers of London.

Then Nicholas suddenly broke the silence, "My dearest, I am going to ask you the old, old question once again. Will you marry me? I do not ask you to love me; I do not ask even to be allowed to love you, for I shall go on doing that, whether you allow it or not, as I have done for so many years: I only ask to be allowed to take care of you, and to stand between you and the world for the rest of our lives?"

"But, Nicholas, I told you long ago that it would not be fair to you for me to marry you unless I loved you."

"I know you did: but I am the best judge of that. Anyhow, it would be a great deal fairer than letting me go on indefinitely like this. I'll take you at your own terms, and if you cannot give me love, I will be content with affection, and will never bother you for anything warmer."

"No, Nicholas: I will never marry a man unless I love him with all my heart."

"Then, my dearest, you are very cruel. Is all my love for you to count for nothing? Am I to have no reward? Though I came too late for the first and greatest blessing, is there not a second blessing reserved for even me? Esau sold his birthright and was supplanted a second time; yet he was not altogether sent empty away. Is there no alternative except all or nothing?"

## The Wisdom of Folly

Gwynneth looked at Nicholas with eyes full of gratitude. What woman could stand unmoved in the presence of such faithfulness and such unselfish love as this? "No, my dear," she repeated, "there is no alternative: I could never be guilty of marrying you unless I could give you a full measure of love in return for all that you have lavished upon me. But that does not mean that I am going to give you nothing. At last I do love you, Nicholas: I really do. Not only as the dear friend and companion of so many years, but as the man whom a woman chooses out of all the world as her husband."

Ingoldby's ugly face was so transfigured with joy that for a moment it was almost beautiful. "My darling!" was all that he could say, as he took Gwynneth in his arms.

"I don't know that such love as I have to give is worth having," continued the latter rather ruefully: "but such as it is it is all yours—every bit of it. I believe the truth is that I must love somebody; and as there is no one now but you left for me to love, I have fallen in love with you."

Nicholas laughed for sheer gladness of heart. "My own sweetheart, don't be so dreadfully truthful! It is a shocking Treherne habit that you ought to have outgrown by this time. As long as you do love me, I don't care a rap about the why or wherefore." And he took her in his arms again and covered her pale face with rapturous kisses.

"But, my dear one," said Gwynneth, at last drawing herself from his embrace: "there is something that I must tell you before I promise to marry you, although I know when you hear it you will refuse to marry me at all. You once said that a woman should have no secrets from the man who was going to be her husband."

"I did: and I repeat it. And I repeat it most emphatically, when I myself am going to be the husband."

"Then, Nicholas," continued Gwynneth beginning to tremble all over and turning white to the lips, "I must tell you the secret of my life." For a moment her voice failed her, and she waited to recover herself, while Nicholas stood by in silence. Then she pulled herself together, and went on with a stupendous effort that almost took the life out of her: "I must tell you that I am not Adah Treherne at all. I never was. I am her sister, Zillah Griffith—the woman who murdered her husband!"

There was a moment of tense silence—one of those never-to-be-forgotten instants, which are over in a few seconds, and yet which seem to last as long as eternity—while Gwynneth stood before her lover as a criminal before a judge, her knees shaking so that she could hardly stand, but had to hold on to the gate for support. Then she timidly ventured to raise her eyes to his face in order to read there her condemnation.

To her surprise she found Nicholas looking at her with his old, half-tender, half-whimsical smile. "My darling," he said, "is that all? I have known that for the last fourteen years."

"Known it?—known that?" Gwynneth gasped. "Known that I am Zillah?—I don't understand!" She felt that the world was whirling round with her, and she clung more tightly to the gate by which they were standing.

Nicholas saw her excited condition, and put his arm round her to keep her from falling. "I knew it the first time I met you in the Frisbys' drawing-room. My dear, did you think that you could ever make me mistake you for Adah? I knew and loved you far too well."

"But your eyesight—I thought your eyesight would be too bad for you to learn the truth—that was why I let you come. I didn't—dare—to let you come as long as—as—your eyes were all right!"

"Yes, my dearest. The moment I saw you I quite understood your reluctance to let me come to Meadowford."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"Oh, but I wanted you, Nicholas—no one knows how I wanted you! But I was afraid for you to see me till I heard your eyes had grown so bad."

"You foolish child! I don't believe that even yet you understand how much I love you."

Gwynneth was gradually recovering herself under the stimulating effect of her lover's matter-of-fact reception of this astounding information. "Then—then that was what you meant when you said—when you said that I ought to tell the truth—about myself—to Roland?"

"That was what I meant: and that is what I have meant by never letting you imagine that I guessed your secret. I wanted you to confess to me of your own free will, Gwynneth: and that is what you have done, thank God! I couldn't bear to feel that you believed you were deceiving me, and were content in that belief: and that is why I have waited all these years for you to confess it voluntarily; because it is only when we confess our sins, that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

"And you believe in the forgiveness of sins—even of such sins as mine?"

"I do, my dearest: but, as I said before, not in the remission of consequences. Things will never be the same as if you hadn't done this thing, my beloved: and it isn't right that they should be."

"Do you think I ought to make a public confession, and be judicially punished for my crime?" asked Gwynneth. "Because if you do, I will."

Nicholas shook his head. "No, my darling; the thing, as far as the public is concerned, was over and done with nearly twenty years ago; and I cannot see that any good would be done by raking it all up again. In fact, a great deal of harm would be done to Amy and Roland, to say nothing of my unworthy self. It is not as if any one else were suffering the punishment: then you would be bound to confess: but as it is, I think you had far better let things be."

Gwynneth seized Nicholas's hands in her own, and covered them with tears and kisses. "Oh, Nicholas, how good you are to me!"

"I want to make things easy for you now, my own. Heaven knows that you have suffered enough! You have certainly not escaped one iota of the real consequences of your sin, though you may have evaded the legal consequences."

"I have suffered—indeed, I have—though I know that I have deserved it all! I think I tasted the full bitterness of my punishment when Amy said it wasn't as if I were her own mother. Then my punishment was almost greater than I could bear!"

"My poor darling!"

"I deserved it all; but what I don't deserve is your love, Nicholas. That is far too good for such as I!"

"Still it is yours, my darling, for time and for eternity. Love does not go by deserts: it would cease to be love if it did," replied Ingoldby.

The woman clung to him in tearful silence: her gratitude was too deep for words.

After a few minutes he asked: "Tell me how you managed it, Gwynneth. You see, I still call you Gwynneth, and I always shall, for I have loved you far more as Gwynneth than I ever did as Zillah."

## The Wisdom of Folly

"And I really am Gwynneth: it is my second name. I am Zillah Gwynneth, and Adah was Adah Grace."

"And now tell me how you managed it?"

"It was Adah's ideas and she insisted on it till the end. She had a bad cold when we ran away after—after—after I had done that awful thing. And her heart had always been weak, and the shock of my crime was too much for her. And then the night in the rain—in the open boat—killed her. She knew—she knew from the first—that she was dying."

"I see. And then she suggested that you and she should change places?"

"Yes. I didn't want to—but she said I must do it for my baby's sake—and so I did. She kept saying how dreadful it would be for the baby if she were dead, and I was in prison—and that the child would have to go to the workhouse—and I couldn't stand that. So I consented—to do as Adah wanted—on condition that if she recovered—and so was able to look after the child—I would take my own place again. So she made me give her my wedding—ring to wear, and the thing was done."

"It was just like Adah! She was always so unselfish. And that is another reason why you have no right to make a public confession of your sin now: it would be wantonly cancelling the sacrifice which Adah laid down her life to consummate."

"You see—if she had recovered—the deception couldn't possibly have been kept up. We should both—have been recognised at once—if there had been a—a trial. But as it was, the secret was kept."

Nicholas saw that Gwynneth's strength was well-nigh exhausted; so he took her arm and gently led her back to Courtyard House, talking soothingly all the way of the peaceful and happy life they were going to spend together. And there he left her to rest and recover herself, while he went out again to think of the sudden change that had come to his fortunes.

He was to be married at last; and married to the woman he had always loved. He had attained, after many years, his heart's desire, and the dream of his life was to be realised. Yet his heart was filled with that sense of sadness which in some natures is always inseparable from the fruition of earthly hope and the attainment of human desires.

As he wandered somewhat aimlessly on, absorbed in his own thoughts, he found himself close to Eldhurst Church; and he went in—as he had so often done in the past—to seek rest and refreshment for his soul.

It was almost dark now, and the church was filled with the dusk of evening, as Nicholas groped his way to the pew where he had sat and dreamed as a little boy, and fell upon his knees.

And as he knelt there in the dusk, and looked back upon his past life, he felt that it had been altogether a failure. He had fulfilled none of the visions and realised none of the ambitions which he had dreamed as a boy: like Mandolet the Fool, he had written no name upon the page of current history, and carved no niche, however small, in the temple of contemporary fame. At one time he had thought to make a reputation by his literary endeavours; but his defective eyesight had put an end to that; and by the time that his sight had partially recovered, his inspiration had entirely departed. True, after a time of waiting and service which equalled the faithful Jacob he had succeeded in winning the woman of his choice; but not until his youth was over, and she had passed through the searing flames of mortal sin and of agonising repentance. And to a certain extent it had all been his own doing, in making the initial and irremediable mistake of leaving Zillah exposed to the fierce wooing of Owen Griffith twenty years ago.



## The Wisdom of Folly

And yet, though it was his own doing, he could not conscientiously see that it was his own fault. He had erred, but he had not sinned. It was really the unselfishness of his love for Zillah, and his sense of honour, that had sealed his lips from making love to her at Llanferdovey: and yet the consequences of his misguided silence were tragic beyond remedy, and had cast a permanent shadow over both their lives.

All he had done was to love one woman with an absolutely unselfish and unchanging love, and to act strictly and scrupulously in accordance with his own sense of right and wrong: and the result had been failure for himself and tragedy for the woman. For the moment it seemed that life had been too hard for him. And as he knelt alone in the gathering darkness, Nicholas prayed that some sign might be given him to stem the tide of his depression and despair.

Suddenly he felt that the gloom of the church was lightened; and he looked up to see that the full moon had just risen behind the great east window, and was beginning to fill the sacred building with her beams. At present she had only reached the figure of S. John which stood at the extreme left of the window: and her beams were pouring in through the sacred Chalice which the Apostle held in his hand. As the moonlight transfigured it, the sacred Cup shone forth like a great and glorious emerald, set about with all manner of precious stones. Rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and amethysts seemed to sparkle with mystical radiance in the pale moonlight: while the glowing emerald heart of the Cup itself shone with almost unearthly splendour and supernatural effulgence. Nicholas, gazing at it, recalled his theory that green is the colour of earth and of Nature, and of all pagan and primæval things: but now he saw that—in some subtle and mysterious way—the colour of that sacred Chalice became sacramental, in that it transfigured and glorified the colour of earth with the divine light and the eternal radiance of Heaven. And herein Nicholas felt was enshrined a great truth. The essential spark of the fire from on high was not sent down to shrivel and wither and consume the ordinary and commonplace things of earth and Nature; nor was it sent to change the familiar hue of the natural world into the fathomless blue of the spiritual ether, or the fierce white blaze of Divine Perfection. The green was still green: the sacred Cup was the same colour as the trees of the wood and the grass of the field—the same, yet glorified beyond description. It was but another instance of the great Sacramental Principle that runs through everything: not the substitution of the Divine for the human, but the elevation of the human into the Divine: that Principle according to which the greatest Miracle and Mystery of all was enacted—"not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God."

As he gazed at the pale green glory of the east window, a strange and ineffable peace flooded the soul of Nicholas Ingoldby—that peace which is known only to the true mystic, and which the world, can neither give nor take away. Suddenly he realised that success and failure are but transient and temporary terms: that what appears to be a hopeless and inextricable muddle on the seamy side of the great Web of Life, is weaving itself, on the other side, into a symmetrical and glorious pattern of cherubims and palm leaves and open flowers: and that the common and homely vessels which have their allotted part in the furnishing of the great House not made with hands—the vessels which seem made to weakness and dishonour—may each one be transformed into a veritable Sangreal, when the Master of the house takes such a Cup into His Hands, and give thanks, and blesses it.

Then Nicholas bowed his head in praise and thanksgiving for the message which had been vouchsafed to him. The sign for which he had asked had been given—the doubts which had assailed him had been assuaged. For he believed that to him, as to his predecessor Mandolet the Fool, had been granted, after a life which the world called a failure, the spiritual blessing which transcends all others—the Vision of the Holy Grail.