At Midnight and Other Stories

Ada Cambridge

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AT MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER I

They sat in their American buggy at the turn of an English road an Australian bride and bridegroom, on their wedding tour. It was a bit of the "old country" that had not been syndicated and modernized since the bridegroom had seen it last when he was a young fellow at Cambridge, paying visits to the houses of his university chums because his own home was inaccessible. Tall hedges embraced the ripening wheat−fields still; brambly ditches yawned beneath them. There were dense woods hereabouts that made green tunnels of the road, and there were thickets of fern and wild vines and bushes acres of unprofitable beauty under the useless trees. The spot was a joy to the sentimental wayfarer, and Mrs. Wingate's gaze meant rapture not expressible in words.

"This," she sighed, "is England, Billy."

She meant that this was the England of her romantic dreams England as described to her by exiled parents and in scores of delightful books.

"And this," said Billy, "is the place I told you of."

He pointed with his whip.

Just below and before them rose an ancient gateway, iron and stone, with much heraldic ornament. An ivy−mantled lodge with curly chimney−stacks stood immediately within; and beyond, sloping gently upward for a mile or more, a straight, grassed drive between thick woods a beautiful green vista, three times as wide as an ordinary park avenue was closed, on an elevated horizon, by the indistinct but imposing mass of a great grey house, one of those "stately homes of England" which are our pride and boast. It was a lovely picture, and a lovely atmosphere through which to view it tinted with the hues of approaching sunset on a late summer day. A few head of deer were browsing quietly on the shadow−patterned sward; thrushes were calling to each other from wood to wood; partridges flying homeward to their nests in the corn, disturbed by the sound of the horses' hoofs.

"There it is," said the bridegroom, his eyes kindling, his voice full of feeling, evoked by thronging memories of the splendid days of youth. "And you should see it when the pink may is out and those woods full of rhododendron in flower! Look at that grass ride the deer like to come out there to feed, though they hide in the fern to rest and what a stretch for a gallop! There wasn't the shooting in my time that there is now, but many a jolly day have I had with Walter Desailly in those fields over there, walking up our birds with one old dog through the turnips and stubble. You see that water shining through the trees? There was duck there; we shot them with a rook rifle by moonlight out of a bedroom window, and scared the maids with the row we made; once we caught a forty−two pound pike on a night−line; Walter had been fishing for it all his life, and found three sets of his tackle rusted in its jaws. The old squire had it stuffed for a curiosity. I wonder if Walter has it still, and whether he ever thinks of those old days?"

The speaker sighed inaudibly. He was a fine man, in his prime, inclining to stoutness, and with a suspicion of frost upon his short brown beard. "Those old days" were nearly twenty years ago.

"You ought to call upon him," said Mrs. Wingate, "and remind him of them. I'm sure he would be delighted, if you were such friends as that. Then you could show me over. Probably he would invite us to stay with him. At any rate, he might be able to advise us about a place for ourselves."

This pair, it must be explained, were wealthy, as was the case with many Australians at that date a period now indicated in the conversation of their countrymen is "the good times" he a lucky Queensland pastoralist, she an heiress of the Silver Boom, both rather new to prosperity of this kind, but too naturally nice to be vulgarized by it. Neither had any of the gross ambitions common to persons in their case, but both desired keenly to enjoy their money. They had just concluded a most successful London season, without having been presented at Court or made notorious in society papers; and they were now touring the country behind their own horses, mainly for rest and independence, and to see what was to be seen, but also in search of a good house in a sporting neighbourhood, where they might make a home and entertain their friends during the shooting and hunting seasons. Mrs. Wingate's dream of luxury was to live in a medieval castle, with history around her in the atmosphere of refined, aristocratic, old−England life, as she had romantically imagined it. Mr. Wingate craved for gun and rod and a straight run after a stout fox the joys of his early manhood, which memory had idealized but was mainly bent at present upon pleasing his wife. They gazed together at the most attractive "place" they had yet seen, with thoughts of proprietorship that they felt were absurd and vain. Windsor Castle seemed as likely to be to let as the old mansion of the Desaillys, which had not wanted a master of the name for at least four hundred years.

"Why don't you call on him?" urged the bride. "To have been college friends surely is introduction enough?"

"We parted on bad terms," replied Wingate, with an air of reserve.

"What does that matter, after all these hundreds of years? You are not Corsican vendetta people. English gentlemen quarrel and have done with it; they don't bear malice for a lifetime. I am sure he has forgotten the whole thing long ago. Unless," she added, with a glance at her husband's face, "unless it was something very desperate indeed. Was it? Oh, I believe it was! A woman, of course. If you don't want to tell me, Billy, you need not."

Billy's left arm curled round the bride's slim waist.

"You are such a dear, kind little soul, Nettie, that I really don't mind telling you," he said, after a pause. "You'll believe me, I know, when I declare on my honour that it wasn't my fault. And, besides, it was before your time, sweetheart; almost before you were born, indeed."

"Yes, Billy; I know I am not the first, by thousands!"

"Oh, not quite so many as that! Just well, never mind there's only you now, pet only you for evermore." He kissed her at this point, for it was a lonely bit of road where they had stopped to look at the view and breathe the horses. And she returned his caress with a laugh, much comforted by the reflection that the particular lady referred to, if still alive, would be forty by this time, if not more.

"She was the daughter of a Cambridge bookseller," confessed Billy. "It don't sound much, but a truer lady never stepped. We called her 'the Princess,' because she treated us all with such crushing dignity. Lots of us were gone on her: really, I think, just because of that; but Walter Desailly cut me out. At any rate, he said something that made me stop going there, so that I mightn't seem to be interfering with him. Of course I imagined it was just a little affair, like others, and never thought he would dream of marrying her, because the Desaillys are such great folks and so proud of their pedigree. But he did. I suppose she is living there now in state as my lady, and forgets that she ever waited in her father's shop. But, no she wouldn't; she hadn't an ounce of that sort of snobbishness in her."

"Go on," said Mrs. Wingate, breaking a meditative pause. "There is no motive for quarrel, so far. I hope I am not strait−laced, Billy dear, and you couldn't make me jealous if you tried; but I do hope you did not elope with her afterwards."

"I did nothing, Nettie, that you would not have approved of, had you been there and known all the circumstances. Walter did not know all the circumstances, and a man won't believe the word of his best friend in these cases, if appearances are against him. Come to that, I don't blame him. I wouldn't myself. It was a chapter of accidents all through. In the first place, I never thought of Lexie Baird again after I left Cambridge. I came home "

"And got engaged to that fat woman who is now Mrs. Ross."

"She was not a fat woman then. Let us keep to the point, if you please. But perhaps you don't care to hear about it?"

"Oh, I do I do! I never was more interested in anything. And I think it is so good and dear of you, Billy, not to mind telling me."

She slipped her hand within his elbow, and laid her fair young cheek upon his very large coat sleeve. She really was a sweet little bride, incapable of a mean thought about her husband, as he well knew.

"I came home, and took to business, and did not return to England for a couple of years and more. I went then because no, not because of any woman, fat or thin, as I see you would insinuate though it was not nice to live in a place where a fascinating widow was employing lawyers to write her letters to you. At any rate well, look here,

Nettie; young men will be young men, just as boys will be boys they can't help it; and you needn't rake up old follies now that I've grown wise. Yes, I'm wise now. You are a witness to it. All those blunders were teaching me your value, don't you see? Perhaps I had better not tell you any more. It was stupid to mention the subject."

She apologized so prettily for having dared to laugh, and urged him with such obvious sincerity not to tell her any more if he would rather not, that he proceeded with his little tale immediately.

"I went to shoot at a place not far from here, and a girl in the house told me that young Desailly had married a low barmaid, and been cut by his family for it. I was quite staggered by the news, because he'd been a fastidious sort of fellow, and I wanted to find him and cheer him up a bit; but no one knew where he was. The girl, Miss Balcombe her father was the rector here she was awfully bitter. It seems Walter had wanted to marry her at one time, and his people wouldn't have it. She was no end of a pretty girl, but there was something about her she reminded me of a silky cat; and the way she talked of poor Lexie I didn't know it was Lexie then was fiendish. A low barmaid, indeed! No wonder I hadn't a notion what was coming. By the way, she honoured me with a particular regard. It's not for me to say it, but if I'd liked however, I didn't."

"Sure?" Mrs. Wingate questioned cautiously.

"Quite sure. She gave me the creeps sometimes when she used to smile. It was a perfectly heavenly smile, if you can understand, but she just put it on and off like a mask, and it was always the same for all purposes. She'd look really like an angel with that smile on, and her fair hair, and complexion like a lily; and all the time you'd have a cold feeling that she was thinking she'd like to strangle you. At least, that's how I felt when I was trying not to make love to her I mean to resist her inducements to I mean but you know what I mean."

"Perfectly, Billy dear."

"Oh, she was a little devil, that girl! I know she was, though she was a parson's daughter. To look at her father, a real old−style rector, fat and red, fond of good living and not too fond of work the commonplace personified you'd really feel doubts as to whether he could be her father. Same with her mother, a meek little goose of a woman, who just fell down before her child and worshipped her. But a dear little soul for all that. We got on capitally together. She invited me to visit them at that old rectory over there" pointing with his whip to a church tower in the landscape "and I got a sprained wrist from a hunting fall first time I went out that season, and she nursed me as if I were a son of her own. What are you smiling at, Nettie?"

"Nothing, dearest. I didn't know I smiled."

"And it was while I was there that everything happened. The very day I arrived they told me that Walter had been forgiven and taken back, because his wife that low barmaid, you know! had had a son, and somebody had reported that it was a fine child, and the old squire, being naturally anxious about the succession, thought it time to set things straight. Nobody had seen them yet, but there was to be a small dinner party that night to meet them, and I had been invited. Well, you can imagine my feelings when I stood with the others round the fire in the hall I wish you could have a sight of that hall, Nettie! to see, coming down the stairs by Walter's side, our princess and looking it too, by George! instead of the vulgar creature I had been expecting. I never was so struck all of a heap in my life. As for Geraldine Balcombe, oh, it was rich to see her smiling when Mrs. Walter Desailly was introduced to her! I had walked there with her up that very grass ride you see before you, which is a good deal longer than it looks and all the way she had been dancing on her toes, as it were, full of the triumph she was going to have over them all, and especially over the wife Walter had taken instead of her; she couldn't keep her elation within decent bounds. Dress! I believe you. A regular ball gown of white satin, the best she'd got, and pearls round her neck a lovely neck it was, too and flowers out of the greenhouse. She'd got herself up regardless, thinking how mad Walter would be when he compared her with the low person, and how old Sir Thomas and my lady would curse the stratagems they had used so successfully to keep her out of the family. She

quite thought she was going to have a rich revenge on the lot of them that night. And there was Lexie, looking like a real princess, in her plain black gown, with hardly any neck showing, putting everybody in the shade. Oh, she was a beautiful woman, Nettie! There was no mistake bout it. Even Geraldine, though her vanity was like a rhinoceros' hide, felt it directly she saw her; and I know she hated poor Lexie like poison from that moment. There was no love lost on the other side either. When Lexie heard her calling 'Walter' here and 'Walter' there, like a cooing dove, I understood the look in her eyes. She was quick enough to smell a rat, and she wasn't the sort of woman to be trifled with. I can tell you she walked into that house all on fire with the humiliations they had made her suffer before they knew her, and if she didn't make them eat humble pie, from the great Sir Thomas downwards, I'm a Dutchman. Do you think she'd have her child sent for to be introduced and inspected? Not a bit of it. Everybody was dying to see the heir, for whose sake she had been condoned and acknowledged, and she calmly refused to have him disturbed out of his regular habits. Sir Thomas himself said, with his queer smile he and she became very good friends afterwards that he supposed they'd have to go on their knees at the nursery door before she'd deign to show it. Oh, she was a match for Miss Geraldine except that she was all open and above board, and Geraldine was so secret and treacherous. I know that girl began to make mischief between husband and wife and me before we'd been an hour together. Of course Lexie vas very pleased to see me."

"Why? if you don't mind my asking, Billy."

"Well, you see I was an old friend, and I was not so grand as the Desaillys. Though she was not bit afraid of them, their stately ways oppressed her Besides, she was angry with them for the way they had repudiated her, and too proud to submit to be suddenly patronized and tolerated, and to make herself cheap to them all at once. Moreover, Walter behaved like an idiot. Instead of keeping near her, to pilot her about and help her to understand the strange ways, he sat the whole blessed evening in Geraldine Balcombe's pocket. Her doing, of course, but that didn't excuse him. He was her husband, and he ought to have backed her up. I know she felt it. In fact, I could see plainly that they were not as happy together as they should have been. Walter would have liked to talk to me about that he did tell me he'd had a devil of a time keeping house on a bachelor's allowance but I always shut him up straight. He was a selfish fellow, Walter Desailly. She was infinitely too good for him."

He paused, gazing at the grey pile on the horizon, unconscious of the creeping twilight that had begun to blot it out. His wife heaved a pensive little sigh. He did not hear it.

"They asked me to The Chase to stay. By degrees the house filled, for Sir Thomas tried to make up to her for past slights and to bring the county families to receive and respect her. Men came to shoot, and there were parties given. Somehow Geraldine was always there, and she was always with Walter. The fellow must have been mad, or else the little cat had some power of witchcraft in her. To neglect a woman like Lexie, and she his wife, for such an unwholesome, cold−blooded however, she wasn't cold−blooded to him. I do think she loved him as far as she could love anybody. I know she turned against me as soon as ever he came home regularly hated me, in fact partly, I suppose, because I sided with Lexie, whom she hated more. Why, the very last time I ever saw her, when I went to say goodbye, she was deliberately burning a fichu thing of Venetian lace just because I had given it to her a valuable piece, mind you, of a rare pattern, that I had been stupid enough to pay a lot of money for; stuffing it into the fire, she was, and ramming it down with the poker, as if it was so much dishcloth."

"An extraordinary way to show spite!" Mrs. Wingate ejaculated. "And she did not scorn your offering in the first instance?"

"It wasn't my offering. She almost wheedled it out of me admired it so much that for very shame I had to give it to her. It wasn't meant for her at all."

"That makes it still more extraordinary. If it had been Mrs. Walter's lace, I could understand it. For whom did you mean it, dear?"

"I don't know. Not for her, at any rate. But she got it, and seemed to think no end of it too always wore it when she wanted to be extra smart. That very night she had had it on, over a blue silk dress. In a paroxysm of rage she just tore it off her shoulders and destroyed it. I asked her why, and she said because she did not want anything that reminded her of me. When I asked her why again, she said something implying that I had paid her attentions and then thrown her over. Which was a lie. But I was so upset myself that I didn't care what she said or what she thought. I left The Chase that night and went to the Himalayas, and I don't know where the farthest off that I could get. And I never heard a word of the Desaillys from that day to this. Oh, yes, I heard that Sir Thomas was dead that's all."

"But you haven't told me what happened, Billy?"

"Oh, nothing much happened. I stayed a little while the first time not long; you can't stay in a house when you see your host growing cool to you getting utterly unfounded suspicions of you into his head. I went on to other places, and wandered about a bit; looked up her people at Cambridge, to tell them about her and how she was settling down. They were a nice family, none the worse for being tradespeople three jolly young sisters, who were so proud of her rise in life; and when they asked me to stay a few days with them, I did, of course. She didn't know I was there, but one day it was winter time, and I'd just come in from my old college chapel with two of the girls we found her in the sitting−room, crying in her mother's lap as if her heart would break. She had come home because she could not bear it Geraldine, you know and said she was going to stay awhile and have a rest; but they were so awfully afraid she would make a breach with her husband and offend the Desaillys that they implored her not to. I went out of the room to leave them together, but presently they called me back, and she was quite recovered and calm. She made some excuse for her sudden visit, and said she must return before night it was nearly night already and would I look up the trains for her. She had the child with her, and, of course, she had remembered about his being the heir and belonging to The Chase in spite of her; and she was keener now than anybody to retrieve her false step. For it was a false step, and she, who was always so sensible and courageous, must have been fearfully treated to make her take it. I never knew what they did to her. They, I say. But Walter was a gentleman when not bewitched by that fiend of a girl.

"Well, I took her home. I had to, because the only man in her family was ill, and she couldn't be allowed to knock about railway stations alone at that hour. Besides, she was so perfectly innocent and unconscious of wrong that she asked me to escort her. We had the child with us, and we hardly spoke the whole way; she was full of her thoughts, so was I, neither of us could mention what they were, though we were such old friends. I wished with all my soul that I could leave her outside her gates, but I dared not suggest it; I had to go on right to the house, or put ideas into her head that she was above dreaming of. And Walter received us, and you can imagine how much he believed of the explanation we had to give; he just turned on his heel and walked away, leaving us standing together in the great hall. And I saw Geraldine Balcombe up in the gallery, looking down and smiling.

"Of course Lexie knew then. She was as white as a sheet. Poor girl! Poor girl! But I never saw such bravery in a woman, and she was more like a princess than ever. I had already arranged to sleep at the inn in the village the Desailly Arms, where we will put up now, if it is still in existence taking on the fly we had got at the station; and she just quietly bade me good−night, and thanked me for taking such good care of her; and I left her left her alone to bear it all.

"However, I went to The Chase next day. I could not rest, and I determined to have it out with Walter. So I did, and so lost control of myself that I did her more harm than good, but she forgave me that. Look here, Nettie, I will make a clean breast of it it is over and done with these twenty years, so you needn't be jealous but I was hard hit. I was damned hard hit."

"And told her?"

"Good heavens, no! I'd have cut my throat sooner. But seeing her in all that trouble burning to help her, and not able to I think she got a notion, just at the last She encouraged me to travel. She was so kind, never reproaching me, but I knew what she meant. She wished me to go away, and never come back. And I did for twenty years, at any rate. This is the first time what? Oh, you precious little noodle! You don't mean to tell me you are jealous, after all? Now, Nettie, I'll let you into another dead secret: for fifteen, at least, out of those twenty years I haven't cared a single, solitary straw about her, not even enough to inquire of anybody whether she was alive or dead. And surely to goodness you don't suppose I am going to do it now?"

"You are a faithless wretch," Mrs. Wingate ejaculated, wetting his cheek with the tip of an eyelash. "I suppose fifteen other women oh, I begin to see what I have done in marrying a handsome husband! But one thing I insist on, Billy I will see Lady Desailly with my own eyes before we leave this place, and so shall you. Call up that man who is going along the road, and ask him if the family is home."

CHAPTER II. Mystery

William Wingate had a feeling that he would rather inquire about his old sweetheart elsewhere than at the buggy side on the public highway. And so, finding his wife firm in demanding the immediate satisfaction of her curiosity, and that he should be confronted at the earliest opportunity with a woman old enough to be her mother another Mrs. Ross with an immeasurable waist he said he would seek information at the lodge, where he might find some one who remembered him. She approved, and took the reins. He jumped down, and the ivied cottage with the Tudor chimneys swallowed him. It was all but dark when he reappeared, and yet she saw at once that he had had a shock.

"Ah," she cried sympathetically, "your Lexie is dead!"

"Worse," he groaned, as he swung himself into the buggy. "Unutterably worse! But I don't believe it. It's incredible. Nettie, what do you think they say? that she eloped years ago with a foreigner who was staying in the house; that she left the child, who is now a young man, and that she took one of the most valuable of the family jewels with her a diamond necklace, with five star−rubies in it. I remember it well. The old man, when he was reconciled to her, and wishing everybody to look up to her as if she had been born to the position, gave it to her and asked her to wear it; she had it on the very last time I ever saw her. This fellow he is only a young keeper, speaking from hearsay and gossip says Walter would not have her followed scorned to interfere with her, both because he was too proud and because her lover had been his friend and let the necklace go with her, and that nothing has been heard of either of them since. As if Lexie, of all people, would carry off property! I laughed at the idea. I told the fellow I didn't believe a word of such a story. I don't. I'll lay my life there's been a mistake somewhere."

"She was an impulsive woman," Mrs. Wingate remarked thoughtfully. "See how she rushed home in a fit of impatience, and repented the next moment and rushed back again. And perhaps they drove her to extremities."

"It is conceivable," he returned, "she might have done a mad thing in sheer desperation, though I should have thought she'd have sooner killed herself. They say that she and the man were seen going off together though, if it was in the night, it may easily have been a case of mistaken identity. But supposing she left the child she would have to do that if she wanted to get free herself, for the heir they must have recovered which is sufficiently incredible, seeing what a devoted mother she was, she would certainly never have taken a scrap of Desailly property with her. That I will stake my head on, and every penny I possess."

"The man may have been the culprit there, Billy."

"Oh, it's awful!" he moaned, evidently cut to the heart. "I wish I could see Walter himself. But he's in Scotland

with his son. This place is deserted has been nearly all the time. The other day they opened it just to celebrate the boy's coming of age in the great hall, after some customs of the family; but it was all locked up directly afterwards, and stands there empty and falling into decay. Walter lives in London and abroad mostly, and when here, at the Dower House, a house near one of the other gates, where an aunt of his used to live. The old folks are both dead. There's a new rector too, but Geraldine Balcombe is alive and married. Well, my pet, you must be dying of hunger and fatigue. Let's be off to the Desailly Arms and a good supper, if they can give us one. After all, it is no concern of ours, I suppose."

"It has occurred to me that it may concern us closely," Mrs. Wingate said, in a matter−of−fact tone, no longer dreaming of jealousy. "If that house is empty, Billy, and Sir Walter cares so little what becomes of it, why shouldn't we try to find out whether it won't suit us? There must be an agent here somewhere who could give us particulars, and through whom we might open negotiations for renting it, if we found it to our taste and not too appallingly expensive."

Billy confessed himself struck by the idea, but inclined to postpone the consideration of it to a future hour. He was upset and preoccupied, also wearying for his dinner. So they drove through the beautiful twilight, tinged now with the haze of a rising moon, to an inn that he remembered, and were shortly absorbed in beef and bottled porter, and the comforting sensation of being safe and snug together, with the troubled world shut out. There are times when happy people cannot be bothered to think of anything but themselves.

But when the landlady brought the coffee, she was induced to linger and be interrogated, whereby further details were added to the Desailly romance.

"Yes, sir, I remember when Sir Walter brought his wife and child to The Chase. I was kitchen−maid there at the time, but I don't call to mind your face, sir. My husband's father was butler; perhaps he'd remember you, only he's in his second childhood, and, being paralysed, can't make himself understood. Mrs. Walter, as she was then, did not stay long; she ran away within the year. And her husband, he was so set on her and so cut up that he never was the same man afterwards. He never wanted to marry again. Though lots of people tried to persuade him to get a divorce, he wouldn't."

"Was he very much cut up?" inquired Wingate gravely.

"They say so, sir. The servants who saw him were always speaking of it. He seemed partly to blame himself, and I won't say that he's perfection. You can't expect it of a gentleman in his position, with no work to do to keep him out of mischief. He has brought young persons to the Dower House at times, and we hear of goings−on in London that it's best to take no notice of. But he did his duty by her, at any rate. He made her an honest woman, in spite of everything; he wouldn't take the law to her when she turned against him and disgraced a fine old family that had done her only too much honour; and as for that poor abandoned child of hers, why, he dotes on the very ground that Master Thomas walks on. Ah, let's hope that dear young man will make a better choice than his father did! He's the finest lad in the whole county, though he does come of a bad mother."

"If you are speaking of Sir Walter's son by his wife, Miss Alexandra Baird," said Wingate, slowly and with emphasis, "he comes of a mother who was simply one of the best women that ever lived. I had the privilege of knowing her well."

"Indeed, sir! But the best o' women don't do what she did not as a rule, sir −do they?"

The fat landlady, who regarded the peccadilloes of the male person with such extreme indulgence, smiled austerely.

"I have yet to be convinced that she did do it," said Billy, who, as he spoke, felt the hand of his little wife slipped into his, and grasped it gratefully.

"As to that, sir, there's the evidence of parties that saw them go off together. A lady staying in the house happened to be standing at her bedroom window, which she had opened, because it was bright moon−light and the garden looking so pretty, and she heard voices on the terrace underneath, close to a door at the foot of a private staircase; and when she looked down, there was Mrs. Walter and the young man, quite plain, so as nobody could mistake them. She had on the same white cloak that she'd left the hall with, the stairs and passages being draughty, and it slipped off her shoulders, and the lady saw the diamond necklace shining. The young man, he struck a match to see how to lock the door again, and that showed their faces clear. And the best proof was that neither of them was ever seen again, sir."

"And the lady did not give the alarm?"

"She said nothing about it because she hoped they'd come back before they were found out and scandals made, and because Mrs. Walter was in the habit of going to her family when she was in a temper with her husband; and they did have words that day. Sir Walter had his suspicions of the young man, and taxed her with it. They all thought at first that she'd gone to Cambridge, and the lady that knew she hadn't said the same, just out of kindness and to give the woman a chance. Besides, she couldn't bear to be the one to break the news. However, she had to do it at last, when they found out by letters that came for Mrs. Walter from her mother that she'd never been there."

"Poor mother!" Wingate ejaculated. "Nettie, we must go and see her. I want to hear both sides."

"So do I," cried Nettie, with cordial sympathy.

"Dead, sir; dead, ma'am," said the landlady, "many years ago; both her father and mother, and the business sold. There are no Bairds in Cambridge now."

It was Nettie who asked the next and most important question.

"Mrs. Venn, was the lady you mention the only person who saw the elopement with her own eyes?"

Mrs. Venn said she believed the lady was the only person who actually so saw it, but a servant in the house the baby's nurse heard the door of the private staircase shut. It was in the wing Mrs. Walter occupied a whole wing that old Sir Thomas had set apart for her and her husband's use, so that they could live independently, as if in their own house, when they felt disposed. The nurse had gone to bed in the nursery with the child; the noise of the door woke her, and she thought it was her master going into his dressing−room. But as it happened, Sir Walter Mr. Walter as he was then had gone to London unbeknown to her, and was away all that night came home, poor man, to find the bird flown!"

"And who was that lady?" Mrs. Wingate inquired, in a tone of voice that made her Billy sit up and prick his ears.

"Mrs. George Desailly, ma'am. She married a cousin of the squire's. A good−for−nothing he is too, though he does belong to the family, and stands next to Master Thomas too, worse luck."

Billy had heard already who Mrs. George Desailly was, and he seemed to spring out of his seat. "Aha! I thought so I thought so! Which took place first, Mrs. Venn, her marriage or the elopement the alleged elopement?"

"The elopement, sir years and years before. Miss Balcombe married quite late in life that is, late for a lady so good looking and attractive."

"Any children?"

"Two, sir, only a girl and boy. The poor little boy is not quite right, they say, but of course she thinks the world of him."

"And Walter swallowed all her damned lies? I beg your pardon; I can't help using strong language. Because I can see, as plainly as that you are standing there, that Mrs. George Desailly invented that elopement for her own purposes. Don't you see it, Nettie? You remember what I told you?" with a significant nod.

"Sir," said Mrs. Venn, "you are like many other people speaking, evil of that lady without knowing anything about her."

"I not know anything about her!" laughed Wingate grimly.

"Without knowing anything of the circumstances that, you say, happened after your time. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Walter and she were the best of friends. She has told me so herself."

"Oh," said Wingate. And he seemed to wink at Nettie from the corner of a sombre eye.

"And she could have had no interest whatever in injuring Mrs. Walter in telling lies about her, as you call it."

"Unless her lies caused Mrs. Walter's husband to divorce her."

"Which they didn't."

"No. But she could not have foreseen that."

"And never thought of such disgraceful things. Besides, sir, if her story was an invention, how do you account for Mrs. Walter's disappearance? She went away that night, and the young foreign gentleman went away that night, and they've never been heard of since. That's the truth, at any rate; and if you can find any explanation of it but the one that anybody who knows the world "

"I can find another without any trouble," Wingate broke in. "The fellow may have been a villain a foreigner generally is and enticed her away, and murdered her for the sake of the necklace."

"Not one who loved her. The whole house knew that he loved her, and that her husband had quarrelled with both of them because he'd found it out."

Wingate's face fell slowly, and he heaved a restless sigh. "It is strange it is indeed strange!" he ejaculated. Then, with an air of sudden resolution, he asked where Mrs. George Desailly might be found. "I am going," said he darkly, "to the fountain head."

Mrs. George, he was then informed, had no settled habitation of her own, her husband being a rolling stone, living by his wits and from hand to mouth, a frequenter of Continental gaming places and a sponger upon his friends; but it so happened that she was at this moment staying at the old rectory which used to be her home.

"They were both at the coming of age," said the landlady, "though they weren't invited, and the squire was very angry when he saw them there. He's the best of landlords, and kindness itself to everybody else, but he does hate those George Desaillys so that it's like a madness with him. The other squires don't think it looks well at all, seeing that Mr. George is his own blood, and so near the title too. And his poor wife goodness knows she has troubles enough without Sir Walter making more for her."

"What! Does he hate her too? You don't say so!"

"Like poison, sir. And all for nothing, I'm convinced. She once invited young Master Thomas to stay with her when he was home for his holidays and his father was away, and he got a bad cold, and told his father in a letter that his sheets were that damp you could have wrung them. Well, supposing they were damp any careless hussy of a housemaid might have done it, and the missus never known. Desailly ladies don't make the beds. But Sir Walter, he got it into his head then that she wanted to kill the boy so that her own might succeed, and now it's a regular monomania with him. He keeps Master Thomas always under his eye, and he's given orders that neither she nor her husband are to set foot on the property. Any gatekeeper that lets them through even into the park is to lose his place directly. I call it a shame though he is Sir Walter and my husband's landlord. She's a lady, like any other lady, and a Desailly moreover, and a sweet, gentle creature, incapable of doing such things as she's accused of. She was sitting in this parlour only. yesterday, talking to me about it, and saying how she missed her dear mother, and how nice it was to be in her childhood's home again. For my part, I hate to see people despised and insulted just because they're poor. Why shouldn't she walk in the park if she's a mind? And why shouldn't she go into the house as well as the rats and mice? Now that she's here, she just pines to wander alone through the old rooms where she had such happy days when she was a girl, and she was asking me whether I could not manage it for her, through my husband, who's that trusted by the agent that he could get the keys at any time he wished. I'm sure I was willing enough, and I did all I could, but there's no man here that'll go against the squire. It went to my heart to see her pleading for such a little thing, and having to disappoint her. She said she supposed Sir Walter was afraid she'd steal something; but the tears were in her eyes, poor thing, and she trembled all over. There's nothing to steal except what nobody could carry away. The valuable small things are all well locked up, or at the Dower House, or in the bank. A burning shame, I call it."

"It is," said Wingate, smiling strangely. "And she is staying at the rectory, you say?"

"Yes, sir; at least, she was yesterday. The rector now is Mr. Martin, a bachelor gentleman; he was tutor to Master Thomas before he went to Eton. He never saw Mrs. George till the other day, at the coming of age; but he was told how the squire had treated her, and was very indignant, and offered her his arm as she was leaving the hall, and asked her to honour him by making use of his house."

"How did the squire treat her?" inquired Wingate. "I used to know him pretty well, but I never thought him a man to be rude to ladies."

"This was what he did," said Mrs. Venn. "She and her husband came to The Chase because it was sort of open house at the coming of age though the house is so empty and out of repair that only the great hall, the state drawing−room, and the kitchens were actually used and because they hoped, she said, that on such an occasion the family might be reconciled. They wanted to congratulate Master Thomas, and to drink his health, and so make up all quarrels, and start fresh as friends. However, we noticed they were not at the banquet the company this time was only the people on the estate, and a few friends of Master Thomas's, very different from the coming of ages that used to be though we had seen them go in amongst the first, and it appears that Sir Walter didn't know they were there at all. But while the speeches were going on some one whispered to Master Thomas, and Master Thomas whispered to his father, and the squire looked as black as thunder, and as soon as the banquet was over ran up the stairs. They were not using the upper part of the house, and poor Mrs. George had taken the opportunity to have a quiet stroll through the rooms, the scenes of her happy days, poor thing! She was looking out of a window, and thinking of the past, when she used to be petted by Sir Thomas and my lady as if she were their own daughter, when up comes Sir Walter, and orders her out of the place just as if she was a common tramp. And she without even her husband to defend her. Mr. George had changed his mind about speaking to his cousin before so many people, and had left while everybody was at the banquet, and gone back to London, so that she was all alone by herself. She says he abused her shameful, but there was nobody to hear what they said till the rector met them in the gallery over the hall. Master Thomas had told the rector what was going on, for you must know that he doesn't hold with the way his father treats Mrs. George, which is real scandalous, though I oughtn't

to say it, being an old servant of the family. Mr. Martin, he ran upstairs to see what he could do, and there was poor Mrs. George crying, and Sir Walter calling Mr. Blackett, the agent, to come and lock all the doors, and give the keys to him. He says he wouldn't trust her not to lay dynamite about the place, and blow them all up which shows how mad he is in his spite against her. For anybody can see that a gentler creature never walked. Mr. Martin, he says he won't break bread in the house again while Sir Walter is master, though he did give him the living; and Master Thomas looked so ashamed, poor young gentleman! They say he had words with his father afterwards, though they are that fond of each other that they're more like twin brothers than parent and child."

"This," remarked Wingate, "is strangely unlike the Walter Desailly that I used to know. However "

He looked at his watch, and then at his wife, and then at the landlady, who was so enjoying her own loquacity.

"Can you tell me, Mrs. Venn, whether Sir Walter still keeps the keys?"

Mrs. Venn supposed not, as he was out of the country. She thought Mr. Blackett would have them, and was sure there would be no difficulty in getting leave to look over the house, if Mr. Wingate wished to do so. It was only Mrs. George who was shut out, lest she should plant dynamite upon the premises.

"Well," said Billy, who craved impatiently for a pipe and a quiet gossip with his wife, "what do you say to a little stroll before turning in, Nettie? It is a lovely night, and I don't feel a bit like sleep at present."

"Nor I," said Nettie, also anxious to dispense with the landlady, and not knowing how to do it politely. "Supper has made a new creature of me. I could walk miles. Only I'm afraid we might be keeping Mrs. Venn up."

The landlady offered to leave a key under a doormat, and otherwise to meet the wishes of a customer who had been at college with the squire, and whose whole equipment betokened wealth, and of the pretty young wife who was so considerate for other people She took them, with many apologies, through back passages and a kitchen to show them the door, the key, and the mat, and where they would find matches and their bedroom candle, incidentally bringing to their notice certain members of her family circle. These the strangers affected to ignore, from motives of delicacy, until a very old man, who was being helped to bed by a pair of stalwart grandchildren, actually blocked their path.

"This," said Mrs. Venn, "is my husband's father, that must have been butler at The Chase when you were there, sir. But I suppose you wouldn't have known him again. He's close on eighty−four, and was a faithful servant of the family from the time he cleaned the knives when he was only ten. Grandpa!" raising her voice to a loud yell "this gentleman used to come to the house when you were there Mr. Win gate
friend of the squire's went to col lege with him knew the lady that ran a way "

"Hush−sh!" cried Wingate fiercely. And she stopped.

"We have to bawl at him, sir, to make him hear. But it's not much use. He gets deafer and deafer, and his memory is quite gone. He won't know you. Oh, but he does, though! Look at him!"

Grandpa was evidently acting in an unusual way. He pointed a claw−like finger at Wingate's massive chest, glared up at him with his rheumy eyes, wagged his head, made strange gabbling sounds, and pulled at the arms supporting him, evidently in high excitement.

"Well, old gentleman, and how do you do?" Wingate jauntily addressed him, taking the trembling hand and sawing it up and down. "It is very flattering to me to think that I've changed so little. Hey? What? Look here, Mrs. Venn, if I were you I'd get him off to bed as soon as possible. He looks to me as if he were going to have a fit."

The Venn family removed the patriarch, with soothing words to him and apologies to the guest, explaining that the old man was quite childish, and not accountable for his vagaries. And the bride and bridegroom escaped, to their relief and pleasure, into the calm night.

CHAPTER III. The Scent Lies

Talking of Lexie Desailly and her fate, in which the one had become as much interested as the other, Mr. and Mrs. Wingate found their way almost unconsciously to the gates through which they had gazed, a few hours earlier, at what they supposed to be her home. It was now invisible amongst the distant shades, but half a mile of the green ride lay fair beneath the moon, looking like a lawn for elves to dance on. Nettie held two of the great bars in her little hands, and peered between them wistfully. Billy's eyes, over the top of her head, searched the night with equal eagerness. The Chase was laying a spell upon them both. The young lodge−keeper heard them talking, and came out to reconnoitre. Wingate accosted him, asking leave to enter the enclosure. The request was at once granted to an old friend of the squire's, who was exhorted to take his own time, and return when it pleased him. The man had some business of his own on hand, which would keep him up for an hour or two, and was willing to wait upon the strangers' pleasure.

"We shall have time, then, to get a peep at the house," Nettie joyfully exclaimed. She was "dying," as she called it, for that satisfaction.

"Perhaps, if we look sharp," said Billy. "But the length of this avenue is about three times what it looks."

And they set off to walk it at a swinging pace, keeping the middle of the grass, to be as far as possible from the black shadows of the woods on either side. Nettie held tight to her stalwart husband's hand, and after a little only spoke in low tones, glancing hither and thither in a furtive way, with occasional jumps and starts; for the sense of mystery was upon her delightful certainly, enchantingly English, but a little uncanny, all the same. Bushes to right and left rustled as they passed; twigs snapped; owls went by with no sound of wings, phantom−like; couching forms of deer arose, loomed for a moment, and disappeared. These latter were the most romantic feature of The Chase to her Australian mind, but an antlered buck in twilight, showing himself unexpectedly and merely as something alive and large, brings, as she expressed it, one's heart into one's mouth.

The spectacle of the old mansion, when they reached the inner enclosure of garden surrounding it, enhanced this sense of phantasmal things, the general awesomeness of the expedition and the hour. It was indeed the ideal haunted house. Nettie said she had seen the very "moral" of it, under that title, in an old volume of the Illustrated London News. Ivy cloaked embattled walls and hung ragged wreaths from projections of ornamental stonework; towers and chimney−stacks rose majestic from the mass, cutting large blocks out of the pellucid sky. Moss and weeds showed clear in the chinks of the flagged terraces, and unpruned growths from the once trim parterres overran the pillared balustrades and short flights of shallow steps leading from one level to another. A rusty gate hung awry on a broken hinge; gravel paths were all but obliterated; storm−strewn twigs and branches of trees lay where the wind had tossed them, bedded in rank grass; and over all this desolation the broad windows gazed blankly, from under their stone brows, like open eyes of the dead.

"What a change!" Wingate muttered, in an awed voice; "oh, what a change! I cannot understand it. For the boy's sake, if not for his own for common decency's sake he might have kept such a beautiful place from going to rack and ruin like this! He doesn't deserve to own it. Well, I don't think we'll try to make a home here, sweetheart."

"Oh, no!" whispered Nettie, shivering within the arm he had thrown around her.

Nevertheless, he looked about him with a keen business eye, trying to measure the extent of the dilapidation, and what it would cost to put the place in habitable repair. And while thus engaged, detached for the moment from the

sentiment of the scene, Nettie startled him with a sudden cry and a clutch upon his arm. In an instant she was within the rampart of that arm, as behind a padlocked door.

"Hullo!" he cried; "what's the matter?"

"Look!" she gasped. "Oh, look!"

He looked hurriedly hither and thither, not knowing what she meant.

"Hey? Where? I don't see anything."

"It's gone," she said, in the same dry−throated whisper. "But I saw it quite plainly in that great window the one hanging out on the wall up there."

"Saw what, child? Oh, this is getting on your nerves!"

"Billy, you may disbelieve me if you like, but I did see it a light like a candle in that window at the end of the wing. Watch; perhaps we shall see it again."

They stared steadily for several minutes, and saw no light except the moonlight, which was very clear and bright. In the silence they heard rustlings in the bushes near them, and, above all other noises, the thumping of their hearts.

"That," said Billy, in a low voice, "is the wing where Lexie lived. The big window belongs to what used to be her bedroom a great room, that was three parts sitting−room, one of the finest in the house. If you really saw a candle in it, of course some one must be there. But they certainly told me it was all shut up."

As he spoke they simultaneously detected a figure gliding across a moon−lighted corner of the terrace beneath the window. It was such a shadow of a figure, and came and went so swiftly, that they barely identified it as human, and were unable to distinguish sex. Nettie smothered a shriek in her husband's breast.

"I say, this looks very suspicious," he exclaimed excitedly, while trying to soothe her alarm. "There are some little games going on that the authorities don't know anything about, evidently. Poachers burglars somebody taking advantage of the empty house for unlawful purposes."

"Oh, Billy, come away, come away! They might see us, and you are unarmed, and we are so far from help!"

"Nonsense, pet! Don't be a little goose. Well, we'll go at once, dear only just let me run up and see where that fellow went to, first. It would be cowardly to leave them to do no one knows what mischief, and not lift a hand to prevent it. You stay here in shelter, and I'll be back in two minutes."

But Nettie, mustering a fair stock of native courage, declared that if he must go on such an errand, she would go too. Never would she be separated from her husband, whatever happened. They would die together, if need were.

Wingate would have preferred to make a sortie by himself it would have been the sooner over, and he could have dealt summarily with any difficulty encountered; the presence of his wife made an irksome caution necessary. However, her wish was law; and he lifted her over the rusted gate upon which they had been leaning, and set her little feet upon a path that led, by two flights of massive steps, to the terrace under the wing that had been Lexie's private dwelling, and the particular window in which Nettie had seen the light. Here they proceeded softly, the man holding his companion behind him with a firm grip, and keeping one eye on the window and the other on the bushes to right and left, until they reached the moonlit corner where the figure had been seen. Here Billy stopped

and pounced upon something something that lay coiled on the weedy pavement under the shadow of the balustrade like one of his native snakes. He pulled it out into the light, and lo, a rope of many fathoms, new and strong, with a long thin cord attached to it, weighted at the end similar to the tackle with which ships make fast to tug or wharf, but of inferior weight and quality.

"Burglars, of course," he remarked, delighted with his find. "Some of them must have got in, and others are outside; every window on the ground floor is barred like a prison, so I suppose they are hauling themselves into that upper one with the rope. But how the dickens did the first one get through? It projects so far from the wall that the ivy wouldn't help. They must have got the line over something, but I can't see what. And the casements are shut. There are two, in the lower part, opening like doors. Lexie loved to have them open; she was so fond of fresh air! By the way, there's the door of the little staircase that they say she eloped by; is that shut, I wonder?"

It was hard and fast. And, when he ran half round the house, and ran back, before Nettie had time to feel deserted, he found all doors and windows wearing the same impenetrable look. And no sign of life was visible, nor further trace of the supposed marauders. In spite of which, common prudence dictated a retreat under the circumstances.

"If I were alone," said Billy, "I'd get to the bottom of this, but I can't expose you to the tender mercies of a burglar at bay. The best thing to be done is to get you safe to the inn, and then come back with what men I can muster, and thoroughly search the place. We will take the rascals' rope with us, at any rate, and trust they haven't got another."

He quickly made a coil of the rope and slung it over his shoulder. With the other arm he embraced his wife and propelled her homeward. Along the cracked and weedy flags, down the moss−grown steps, through the wilderness of a garden they scurried, as if themselves detected housebreakers; and neither of them enjoyed the romance of the situation in the least. Bright as the moon was, their path to the rusty gate, through the rank, dank shrubberies, was a more fearsome passage than before; and when, at a spot where the branches closed above their heads, they heard a rustle and a movement as of some creature tracking them, Nettie's heart failed her, and she screamed aloud. Billy thereupon dropped his load of rope, clasped his wife to his breast, planted his feet firmly, and glared from side to side.

"Who's there?" he called sharply.

No answer. No sound.

"Who's that?" he repeated, in a still louder tone.

They listened with all their tingling ears, but heard nothing.

"A rabbit, or a bird, or perhaps one of the deer out of the woods," he murmured soothingly. "Why, child, what's come to you?"

But his own voice was a trifle unsteady. Eager to stand and fight any danger that he could see, this shadow business unnerved him.

A mile in twenty minutes was their rate of travel down the long chase to the lodge, and the little star that was Abel Rowe's parlour lamp, on which they kept their eyes fixed steadily all the way, was a great comfort to them. The young keeper came out to meet them, and speaking both at once and rather breathlessly, they poured the story of their adventure into his ears. He received it without visible surprise or concern, and did not agree with Mr. Wingate that a midnight expedition was necessary.

"Oh, you saw that light in the window!" he exclaimed, with much gravity. "I was wondering whether you would. I was out last night, looking at some traps, and saw it myself; and several other people have seen it. The conclusion they've come to is that the old house is haunted, sir. I don't hold with ghosts myself, but that's the common view."

"Haunted be blowed!" was Wingate's rude rejoinder; and he showed the rope, which was mysterious without being supernatural, and described how they had seen a man "scoot" round a corner of the house. "Besides," said he, "if ghosts were allowed to carry matches and candles, they'd burn the places down."

"I suppose there are ghosts of lights as well as ghosts of people, if there are ghosts at all," argued Abel Rowe. "Be that as it may, no mortal hand lit that light you saw, sir, if it was in the big window of the west wing you saw it. Because why? The day after it was first seen, Mr. Blackett and a whole posse of people, thinking just as you do that burglars were in the house, went in and all over it, and tried every lock and bolt, and thoroughly ransacked the whole place; and they proved that nobody could possibly have been there. Especially in that room where the window is; that was locked up tighter than any. Sir Walter doesn't like to have people prying there. It used to be his wife's room."

"There must be a hiding−place in it," said Wingate.

"There is not, sir, begging your pardon. Every bit of wall and floor was tapped and tested; some of the boards were ripped up. Mr. Blackett satisfied himself that there was no hiding−place."

Then they had got out of the window with the rope in the meantime."

"No, sir; for the casements were found fastened on the inside."

"Well, but here's the rope to speak for itself. It was lying close under the window. It is quite new just out of the shop no doubt bought on purpose. What do you suppose it was doing there? And the fellow we saw running? Must he be a ghost too?"

"I can't account for him, nor for the rope," Mr. Rowe admitted, fingering the latter in an abstracted way. "I thought nobody cared to go near the place of a night, since there's been this talk of the ghost in the window. I'll see Mr. Blackett about it in the morning "

"I will see him also," broke in Wingate, with a significant glance at his wife. "And I will keep the rope, if you please. It is my evidence, you see. I intend to sift this thing to the bottom, ghost and all."

He was about to leave, when Mrs. Rowe, the keeper's mother, having risen from bed and dressed in haste, in order to find out what was doing at this hour of the night, entered the parlour, curtsied, looked from one to another with an expectant smile, and then caught sight of the coil of rope and pounced upon it.

"Why, if this ain't the clothes line that was stole last night!" she ejaculated, with round eyes and uplifted hands. "Why, Abel, wherever did you find it?"

"This gentleman found it, mother, in the garden at The Chase."

"Lor! Right away up there! Whatever "

"Was it yours?" interposed Wingate eagerly.

"No, sir, the rector's. His housekeeper bought it new last week, and the very first time she used it she had it stole. Strange to say, the linen that was a−hanging on it for myself, I don't believe in leaving your clothes out all

night was left on the grass, and only the line took."

"Only the line was required," said Billy. "But how do you know it is the same?"

"Because there wasn't another new clothes line in the place."

"I suppose rope is used for other purposes. Probably this was brought to The Chase from quite another direction."

"And to The Chase, of all places!"

She desired ardently to enter upon a long discussion, covering the matter of the ghost, but sudden reticence had fallen upon the visitor. He affected surprise to find it near upon midnight, and concern that his wife was so late up after a journey, and took a hasty leave, carrying his rope with him. As soon as they were both upon the high−road, out of ear−shot of the lodge, he said to his wife, solemnly,

"Nettie, either that fellow is in league with the burglars, or Geraldine Balcombe has some game on hand. One or the other."

"Then it must be Geraldine Balcombe," said Nettie, "for I am convinced that Abel Rowe is as honest as the day."

"How are you convinced?" her husband asked.

"By the look of his face the way he speaks everything."

"Woman's instinct!" laughed Billy. "Now I think his manner most suspicious: his disinclination to have the matter inquired into his preposterous suggestion that the candle−man is a ghost everything, as you would say. But things look black against the rector's house too. We will interview Mrs. George Desailly to−morrow morning, and get particulars concerning the larceny of the clothes line. I'm awfully curious to see her, apart from that. I wonder how she'll receive me, and what she looks like now? She was uncommonly pretty as a girl, in her white−cat style. And I'll make her tell that story about Lexie before I've done and watch how she does it. I can't get it out of my mind somehow that it's all a pack of lies."

"But what then, Billy?"

"Oh, God knows! I believe she was enticed away by that foreign fellow on some charitable errand perhaps and murdered for the necklace. That, to me, is far more likely than the other thing. And they never seem to have thought of it! Fancy, never thinking of it, and never lifting a hand or taking a step to find her!"

"I suppose they had more reason than you know of," suggested Nettie, saying to herself, with an inward sigh, "How he harps upon that woman! How impossible he thinks it for her to have done wrong!"

They found Mrs. Venn's door−key under the mat, and slipped through the house to bed, and tried to sleep. Nettie succeeded, for she was only twenty−two and her heart was at rest she did not seriously concern herself about her handsome husband's past; Billy declared in the morning that the feather mattress had defeated him, and that if they stayed another night in that place he should lie on the floor. He took a nip of whisky before breakfast, to clear his brain of morbid thoughts that had haunted him through the dark hours.

Their buggy having no seat for a servant, and the English−feeling morning a mixture of delicate mist and sunshine being more inviting than usual, they agreed to do their errands to the rectory and the agent's house on foot. And they set forth early, without confiding their business and late experiences to their garrulous landlady, Wingate being still under the impression that a police case impended in which anybody might be involved.

Their first call was upon the interesting Geraldine Balcombe that was, and Wingate was almost certain that he saw her face at an upper window as they passed through the well−remembered garden, where the beech tree under which she used to make afternoon tea was beginning to turn yellow, and the myriad chrysanthemum buds opening into bloom. Great, therefore, was their disappointment when the genial rector, who received them in his study, presently intimated that she was too unwell to come downstairs. His mention of the fact that she had seen the linen taken from the lost line, when gazing at the moon from her bedroom window unfortunately assuming that it was the housekeeper who, for fear of thieves, was bringing it indoors saved Wingate the awkwardness of introducing her name, and gave him his opportunity to explain that she was an old friend. His touching account of his intimacy with her and her family in past years of how he had been a guest in this very house, treated like a son, and how interesting he found it to return to the old scenes and revive the happy memories connected therewith caused Mr. Martin to send a message to Mrs. Desailly, with the expectation that she would make a special effort in response; but her answer, long delayed, was that she begged Mr. Wingate would excuse her, and the report of the servant to the effect that the lady had had a kind of fainting fit at the moment of hearing his name.

Wingate expressed his sorrow for this state of things, looking becomingly grave, but revealing a certain elation at the back of his gravity to Nettie's watchful eye. His air of sympathy and his claim to old friendship had the anticipated result of drawing confidences from Mr. Martin which he would not have reposed in a stranger.

"I daresay," said he, "you are aware of the sad dissensions in the Desailly family?"

Wingate said he was, implying a complete knowledge of all their affairs.

"She suffers terribly," the rector continued, shaking his head; "more than Sir Walter can have any idea of, or he would never treat her so cruelly as he does."

"I cannot realize his character, as you and others paint it," said Wingate. "I was his chosen comrade for years when we were both young men, and never knew a kinder−hearted fellow. He must have greatly changed."

"He has, evidently. To hound a poor, weak woman into her grave or the mad−house no man worthy of the name of man, let alone a gentleman, and one with a kind heart, could stoop to such cowardly, such infamous conduct."

The warmth with which this speech was delivered suggested to Wingate that the fascinating Geraldine had not yet outgrown her fascinations.

"I am quite sure," he said, "that my old friend could not stoop to that, however changed. There must be a misunderstanding somewhere. Possibly you are not acquainted with all the circumstances."

"Pardon me. Mrs. Desailly has herself done me the honour to confide the whole matter to me, without reserve."

"I see," murmured Billy, with another look at his wife, who sat out of the discussion as far as her host's politeness allowed.

"And I have the evidence of my own eyes, Mr. Wingate of her terrible state of health, the result of these constant trials. They have so preyed upon a highly nervous constitution that the brain seems to have become incapable of rest. She is a martyr to insomnia in its most acute form."

"I am really awfully sorry to hear it," remarked Wingate, in a commiserating tone, and with all his wits on the alert.

"Yes. She has taken to walking in her sleep when she does sleep which greatly alarms me. And one doesn't know what to do in such a case, especially in my situation. I am afraid to lock her in, lest she should fall out of the window or have an accident with the candle. She naturally, objects to have a servant with her at night, and opiates she has a horror of so have I. I have known the habit of taking morphia to entirely destroy all moral principle and self−restraint. I would rather any one belonging to me poisoned himself outright than take a single dose of it."

"You have really proved the somnambulism?" Wingate queried gently.

"Beyond a doubt. I met her on the road a few nights ago, hours after she had retired to bed I was called from mine to attend a dying parishioner and she told me she had no idea how she had got there. It is a most serious symptom in her case. I have tried to impress this upon her, and to persuade her to seek medical advice."

"And won't she?"

"She wishes to give herself a fair trial of the country first. She thinks her native air and the peace and quiet of her present life are doing her good, and will soon restore her altogether. I am bound to say I don't. I think the disorganization of the nervous system increases daily. Indeed, if her husband does not come very soon, I must send for him, or else for a good doctor, for my own satisfaction."

"Does she expect her husband soon?"

"Any day. But he is rather an erratic person, as perhaps you know. I proposed to fetch her daughter to keep her company, but she won't hear of it. She thinks it bad for the child to be shut up with a nervous invalid. Perhaps it is. But I am sure it is advisable to have some one to stay with her. It would relieve me of much responsibility, and keep her from brooding and fretting so much."

"I should insist upon it," said Wingate, "if I were you. By the way, you don't think she may have taken the clothes line herself, when walking in her sleep?"

"Oh, no; certainly not. She was awake and looking from the window when she saw the thief, and that was one of her better nights. But last night she must have been out again. We did not hear her moving, but my housekeeper says there is no doubt about it. She judges by the state of her clothes and shoes. And she seems this morning to be prostrate with exhaustion, though she stayed in the house all yesterday."

"I should certainly get a doctor at once," said Wingate, rising, "and make him insist on her being watched at night. Your housekeeper looks a lady−like person; Mrs. Desailly could not object to her having a bed in her room, under the circumstances. But the best thing, of course, would be to send for her husband to come and take her home."

"I cannot be inhospitable," the poor rector faltered, "if the change of air is really doing her any good. But well, I must talk matters over with her when she gets up."

"And pray command me, if I can be of any use," said Wingate. "As an old friend, you know "

"Oh, thank you, thank you! Where are you staying? Won't you take lunch with me? Pray do you and Mrs. Wingate and perhaps Mrs. Desailly might then be well enough to come down. She will be deeply disappointed, I am sure, to miss seeing you. Everything connected with her happy girlhood is so intensely interesting to her. And I should like to show you the church and the improvements I have made. You will find things looking very different from what they were in poor old Balcombe's time."

The visitors pleaded the pressing nature of their business with the squire's agent, which turned the conversation upon the burglars, the ghost, and contingent matters, delaying their departure for another half−hour. But

engagements were entered into for an exchange of hospitalities when convenient, while the rector walked with them to his garden gate, gathering flowers for Nettie by the way; and before separating cordial offers of assistance in their respective difficulties were provisionally accepted on both sides. As Wingate shook hands with his new friend, promising to call again later to report progress in the affair of the rope, he saw a face in an upper window, peeping from behind a blind. While he tried to draw Nettie's attention to it, it disappeared.

"But I know that profile," he said, when they were again upon the road, "and I see the whole thing as clear as day. It isn't burglars it's some fight going on between Walter and her I should imagine for the possession of something he's got locked up at The Chase. Compromising documents, perhaps. Well, though it doesn't seem exactly chivalrous, and though I don't owe him any service, but quite the contrary, I am going to be on Walter's side. And we'll stop here, Nettie, if you have no objection, till we get through with the affair."

"Oh!, I have no objection," Nettie cried heartily; "far from it! I wouldn't go away now for fifty pounds. I never was so interested in anything in all my life."

CHAPTER IV. The Honest Truth

Mr. Blackett was stout and elderly and a good deal crippled by rheumatism, but he had young, keen eyes, deep set under intellectual brows, and with those eyes received Wingate as at the muzzle of a double−barrelled gun. The boyish face of twenty years ago was now lean and tanned, maturely dignified, wearing a slightly grizzled moustache and beard that had formerly been absent from it; but the agent who had been the agent for more than twenty years, and deserved his reputation for an almost miraculous sharp−sightedness instantly knew it for the same, though he had only seen it once. When the name belonging to it was announced to him, he concentrated upon the visitor a steely gaze that was unpleasant and disconcerting. Though Wingate gave himself no airs, it nettled him to be looked at in this way; he consequently remained standing, and stated his errand in the briefest terms, Nettie meanwhile lingering near the door, glancing at bookshelves and affecting not to listen. The rude master of the house did not rise from his arm−chair, but it presently appeared that he could only do so with difficulty, owing to physical ailments. The story of the rope, the candle in the window, and the visible figure of the supposed burglar was told again, but the information gathered at the rectory was withheld. Wingate said he thought it his duty to report what he had seen; he also desired to assist in the search which he presumed would immediately be set on foot to discover what was wrong.

"You may not be aware," he said stiffly, "that I am an old friend of Sir Walter Desailly's."

Mr. Blackett replied that he was quite aware of it, still transfixing the visitor with steadfast, steely eyes.

"I remember your coming here, Mr. Wingate, rather more than twenty years ago it was your last visit, was it not? and also your departure. Also your departure, Mr. Wingate."

"You have the advantage of me," Wingate returned, with his easy courtesy; "I have no recollection of having seen you before."

"I was Sir Thomas's agent, in succession to my father," said the old man. "I was cognisant, sir, of all the family affairs."

"The family affairs, I hear, took a sad turn after I left," remarked Wingate.

Mr. Blackett did not answer, but stared more strangely than before. Wingate thought the look referred to the elopement, and added, with warmth: "But I, for one, refuse to believe that Mrs. Walter Desailly was to blame. I knew her well, and never knew a better woman a perfect English lady, if ever there was one, in spite of her

people being shop−keepers. The circumstances may be as they have been described to me, but I am convinced that the popular theory is a wrong one."

The agent seemed much agitated by this reference to the great scandal. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and shut it without doing so; the gnarled hand on his writing table closed and unclosed sharply; he drew his brows together; his eyes flashed upon Nettie's pretty figure, which had not yet been invited to rest itself.

"You are married to this lady?" he jerked out.

Wingate bowed, while he wondered if it were not his duty to feel insulted by the question on her behalf.

"I must apologise for asking it," the old man continued, with a tremble in his voice, "but will she mind leaving us for a short time? There are some important matters the drawing−room is just across the hall I think my wife is at home "

He hoisted himself with difficulty out of his chair to reach a bell button, but before he could get at it, and before Wingate could explain that Mrs. Wingate had an equal interest with him in the proceedings, the lady had disappeared.

"I will wait for you on the road, Billy," said she, with fiery cheeks and an icy smile, and next minute was out of the house and marching along the highway in wrath. "If these are your English manners," she intended to say to Billy when she saw him again, "give me Australia." For it seemed to her that he was too much in the habit of glorifying England and its institutions (including its women) at the expense of his own country.

She had promised to wait for him on the road, and did so for nearly three−quarters of an hour, learning every hedgerow leaf and every blade of wayside grass by heart, exhausting all the charms of the harvest landscape. But when the little watch pinned to the breast of her neat tweed coat, as also an inward monitor of equal infallibility, informed her that it was one o'clock and lunch time, she decided to leave him to his devices. Doubtless he and that rude old man were so absorbed in their reminiscences of the incomparable Mrs. Walter as to forget that a mere every−day young woman with an appetite existed. She returned to the inn, ordered the cutlets to be served and the bottle of Bass opened, and sat down to begin her meal alone for the first time since she had been Billy's wife.

"I really could not wait any longer," she called out, when the sitting−room door opened to admit the laggard. But a glance at her husband's face caused her voice to change its note. "Oh, my dear boy! what is the matter with you?"

Instead of falling upon the beer and cutlets, Billy fell in a headlong fashion upon the horsehair sofa, planted his elbows on his knees, dropped his face in his hands, and sobbed audibly one sob only, no more, but enough to pierce her heart. She was instantly beside him, trying to span his huge back with her little arm, to pull his strong fingers from their tight clasp upon his brow.

"Darling! darling! Tell me! Tell your Nettie! What is it, precious one?" She cooed like a courting turtle−dove, pressing her cheek to his shoulder and his ear.

"Oh, Nettie, I have had a blow! I have had an awful shock!" he groaned, with a long up−drawing of the breath. "A bolt from the blue, and no mistake!" He raised himself and looked at her, with something wild in his eyes. "Who do you think the foreigner was, Nettie?"

"The the man she el "

"Me me!" he burst out, in the grammar of strong emotion. "They actually believed that she ran away with ME!"

"And called you a foreigner?" cried Nettie. "What cheek! Just like these ignorant English people! As if we were not just as much English as they are!"

"But don't you see, child? They have been supposing we went away together, because it seems we were missed at the same time. That cursed talk about foreigners has been putting me off the scent; but I might have known I did know that Geraldine's tale was a pack of lies of a piece with her tale of how she saw the linen taken off the clothes line. It was she who swore she had seen us sneaking away together, and made Walter believe it when no one knows better how I went than she does, for she accompanied me part of the way. Oh, that little devil is at the bottom of it all!"

"But where, then "

"Ah, that's the point! that's the point! That's the awful part of it! If Lexie didn't elope with me as certainly she didn't, and no other man has been mentioned in the case what, in the name of God, did become of her?" He struck his knee with a clenched fist. "But I'll find out, Nettie; I'll find out, if I take years to do it, and it costs me my last penny."

"Sir Walter will surely see to that," said Nettie softly. "She was his wife."

"We have telegraphed for Walter," said Wingate, for the first time turning an eye upon the luncheon table. "Yes, of course he will see to it; for I find he really did appreciate her, appearances notwithstanding, and from the moment he lost her turned against Geraldine as if he suspected something, and has shunned and hated her ever since. But we can help him. There is plenty to do before he comes. That woman is up to mischief at this moment, though we don't know what. It can't be anything that concerns poor Lexie now, but it may lead us to a clue. We've got to hunt for all fresh clues now. And Blackett is as convinced as I am that our best course is to stick like wax to her. Her story, you see, being proved untrue, is damning evidence against herself looks as if she either put poor Lexie out of the way, or knows who did. I am going to have a policeman this afternoon to go over the house with me, and I am going to sleep in that room where we saw the candle Lexie's room to−night."

"I with you," said Mrs. Wingate, putting a tumbler of fresh beer into his unsteady hand.

"My pet, I can't expose you "

"Now, Billy, let us understand one another," she broke in, with an inflexible air to which he was unaccustomed; and forthwith she stated a case in words that made an impression upon him. The result was what Rudyard Kipling would call an "interlude" of unwonted duration and intensity a general concession of her right, as a bride on her honeymoon, to anything she liked to ask for, on the part of the husband; and on the part of the wife, a renewed conviction that he was the best and dearest of living men, despite his little weaknesses. She sat on his knee while he ate his lunch as best he could with one hand; then she filled his pipe, and put a cushion under his head.

"Now," said she, "try if you can remember all that happened that night at The Chase. It may help us to an idea. You never told me before, by the way, that Miss Balcombe was with you when you left, and that is a most important detail."

"Well, it was this way, Nettie. You know I had a scrimmage with Walter. I wanted to explain about the Cambridge journey, and to stand up for Lexie, and it's always a mistake to begin putting things of that sort into words, especially as we were situated. I stood up for her too much because I saw he was taking it all wrong and I lost my temper, and said things I wouldn't forgive myself, if any man said them to me. As for him, he couldn't have insulted me more than he did. So, of course, there it stood. That was in the morning. There was nothing for me but to clear out as soon as possible, and I went back to the inn this inn, and this room too, only different people. I packed up for London, had some bread and cheese, and started to go by the next train. But just as I'd

settled in my corner, I saw Walter's dog−cart tearing along the road, and I knew he was trying to catch the train too; and I hated the thought of travelling with him, or near him, after the row we'd had; besides well, I'll tell you the honest truth, Nettie it was a chance to have a word with Lexie that I could not resist. I didn't do anything behind Walter's back that I wouldn't have done before his face, but for her sake I couldn't go near her while he was there misjudging us, and it was a cowardly thing to make off without even bidding her good−bye looked like deserting her in her trouble, and owning to wrong things. At any rate, I jumped out of the carriage, and kept out of sight until Walter got in. Then, when the train was gone, I went outside, and spoke to the groom. He said his master had been called to town on business, but was expected back next morning. My luggage had gone on in the van, so I telegraphed to London to have it looked after on arrival, and walked across the fields to The Chase. I daresay they made capital out of all that afterwards."

"You may be certain that they did," said Nettie, "and you can't blame them either."

"No, of course. Still, you mustn't forget that The Chase was Sir Thomas's house then, and not Walter's, and that the old gentleman and I were the best of friends. He was out when I arrived, and I just asked straight for Lexie, so as not to waste time. The man took me to her boudoir she didn't use it much, because she liked her big bedroom to sit in and no one came to disturb us. We had a a talk "

He paused absent−mindedly. The silence was broken by a plaintive little sigh,

"Ah, Billy! Billy!"

"Yes, pet, I know. But it was twenty years ago, and I've got over it this many a day."

"I don't believe you have got over it yet, Billy."

"You are the last person who should say that, or think it," he remonstrated, drawing her to his knee again, and settling her comfortably in a favourite place and pose. "And, besides, she's dead I know she is dead. Nothing but death would have taken her from the child. You can't be jealous of a dead woman."

"Oh, can't I? But I won't, Billy indeed, I won't! It was only my nonsense. You are mine now, and that's all I care about. Listen, dear, I've thought of something. There is that lake where you caught the big pike I expect that, being so unhappy, she committed suicide by drowning herself in it. That would account for her sudden disappearance, and her never being seen or traced. Billy, I have thought of another thing. Perhaps it was because but, no, I won't say it!"

"Say it, Nettie."

"She might have been broken−hearted at losing you."

Wingate drew in his breath, and went red and pale, but controlled himself instantly.

"No," he said, reluctantly impartial, "there was no motive of that sort. I'll tell the honest truth, Nettie I did let myself go that last time that we were together, though I tried my utmost not to. But she never did; on the contrary, she pulled me up in her firm, kind way, lectured me like a mother she did tried to make me see there were good things still to live for, and that she trusted me for a gentleman, and and so on. Oh, she was not the sort of person to play fast and loose with matrimony and motherhood not she; nor yet of the flimsy stuff that suicides are made of. Still, it's an idea. When Walter comes, of course he'll leave no stone unturned, and the lake must be emptied if necessary. But then why did Geraldine concoct that elaborate story? She must have had some object."

"She was staying in the house, you say?"

"Yes; and, unfortunately, knew about my having gone away before lunch, and come back after Walter had left the house, and being shown up to Lexie's private sitting−room, and staying such a long time with her things she could twist and turn to suit her tale. I did not know how late it was till I heard the dressing−bell ring, and then, when I tried to get away quietly, I ran up against the old lady and Geraldine, who were pacing up and down the terrace in the evening sun. They were both ready for dinner, and the girl had got that lace on which I afterwards found her stuffing into the fire "

"Ah! I want to hear more about that lace," Nettie interposed, with the air of a detective on a strong scent.

"Oh, that was nothing; I must have offended her in the course of the evening," said Wingate absently. "I know I was a surly boor, not fit for ladies' company; but they made me stay. The old people knew nothing of any quarrel, and couldn't understand why I should make off just before dinner, and pooh−poohed my excuse that I wasn't dressed. It was weak of me, I know, but I let myself be tempted; and after all Lexie went upstairs while the squire and I were talking over our wine, and never showed again. I particularly wanted to say something to her that I had forgotten, so I stayed late. I went to the smoking−room with the old man. At last he proposed that I should remain for the night, and some things of Walter's were put out for me, and we went to our rooms, and the house was closed. Oh, yes; I know how contemptible it was! But at the time every other feeling was swallowed up in my longing to put right a misunderstanding that I thought Lexie was labouring under to have all straight between us before I went away for good; in fact, I wanted to tell her I meant to try and do, and be, all she wished. I thought, as it was the last time but I was an ass and a fool, and very nearly a villain, too. I might have compromised her worse; perhaps I did. Somebody else besides Geraldine Balcombe somebody who wasn't a liar may have seen me messing about the west wing at three in the morning "

"What? You don't surely mean to say "

"No, of course I don't. All I did was to write a letter to her, and take it to her boudoir and slip it into a blotting case on her writing table, walking softly in my socks, so as not to wake anybody. I made sure that the whole place was dead asleep, for I hadn't heard a sound for hours. But as I was getting back to my room, I saw a glimmer of light through the crack of a door a curtain rather. There's a queer little circular room at an angle of the stairs where they run into the gallery that goes round the great hall; it's like one huge bay window with the bay enclosed; a big portière hangs across the entrance, which you can loop back or not, as you like; just the little nook for sitting out dances in, if there were balls in the hall, which would be a magnificent place for them, with a wooden floor. It isn't a private room, and yet it is; and they always had a fire there in fire weather. Having windows all round the room seemed to be built of the stone mullions, with a little churchy ceiling it was beautifully light and cheerful, and it had a lovely view. We were always meeting there on our way to other rooms, and going downstairs to dinner, and so on. There were two or three lounge chairs in it, and a small table no room for other furniture. Lady Desailly used to read the Times there of a morning, and sometimes have afternoon tea there, when there was no company, instead of in the hall. Well, though it wasn't cold yet, the fires were all going, and there had been one in this little room that evening. I had been there to look for Lexie after dinner, and saw it burning. And it was here where I saw the light at three in the morning. The curtain was down, but just one ray came through, like a finger. It seemed to me like a finger beckoning me to her. I made sure that she was there, and I stole up without a sound and put the curtain back a little. I had not undressed, of course."

"And saw Miss Balcombe burning the Venetian lace?"

"Yes. She was standing over the fireplace, with a candle in one hand and the lace in the other. She was holding it over the flame, and it was flaring and frizzling up, very nearly all burnt. I could see she had just taken it off, because otherwise she was fully dressed as when she left the drawing−room; the blue bodice was plain and bare, and the silk was torn where the lace had been stitched on, and wrenched off anyhow "

"Billy dear, you think nothing of this lace business, but I think it is the most suspicious of all the features of the case. Why should she have burnt her own lace that she was so eager to get, and so proud of when she did get it? And why secretly at three o'clock in the morning? You said she did it in a fit of rage with you, but she would not have been in a fit of rage that sort of rage for hours and hours all by herself, with you or anybody. What had she been doing in the meantime, do you suppose? Billy, do you know how I read the riddle? There was blood on that lace."

Wingate shuddered. "Oh, don't talk of blood!" he implored. "Besides, in that case, there would have been blood elsewhere. There was none on her dress, I know, and evidently none was found. Blood is a thing that cries out anywhere. The least trace would have altered everything and set them hunting."

"Did she have a guilty look when you surprised her?"

"I don't know what you call a guilty look. Of course it gave her an awful start when she heard the curtain move and saw me watching her. Anybody would have looked scared under the circumstances at that unearthly time o' night. She gave a loud catch of the breath, and then dashed the lace into the coals and rammed it in with the poker. There was still a little red fire left, and it caught, and was consumed directly. I think she was anxious that I shouldn't see it was my present to her, but I came a little too soon."

"And how did she explain herself?"

"At first she kept her back to me and said nothing. I was embarrassed too. I would have crept away when I found it was she and not Lexie; but when I saw she had seen me, and saw what she was doing, I went in. I made believe that I was glad of the opportunity to say good−bye to her before leaving in the morning, as I should probably never come back again. The fact was, I guessed she knew pretty well about me and Lexie, and I knew she was furiously jealous at having to play second fiddle, and I wanted, for Lexie's sake, to square her if I could. So I tried to be friendly, although I was so sick at heart, and I asked why she was treating my gift to her in that way. She said but I told you what she said. If you want the honest truth, Nettie it's the first time I ever let on about a woman in a matter of this kind she did all she knew to make me believe that it wasn't Walter after all."

"Made love to you, do you mean?"

"Like the very deuce. Said she was burning the fichu because the sight of it in the glass over the mantel−piece made her desperate at my treatment of her, and and so on. I've known women throw themselves at a fellow's head, but by George! And I might have been fool enough, Lord knows! if it hadn't been for feeling the way I did."

"If I recollect aright, you said she did go with you?"

"But not that way, of course not. Sit still, Nettie, until I've finished. Oh, I give you leave to be jealous of Geraldine Balcombe all you like. That won't hurt."

"Billy, you say she asked you to run away with her, and you said you distinctly said you did."

"Madam, I said nothing of the kind. Stay here and be nice to me, and I'll tell you exactly what occurred. After we had been talking in the little room for a bit "

"How much of a bit?"

"I don't know. But the mornings were still early, and all those windows showed us the dawn coming. There had been a moon, as she says in that precious tale of hers, but it had set long ago. She was frightened lest we should be

found up, and you may be sure I didn't care about it either. Indeed, I was raging to get clear of the house and her, and the whole blessed business, especially when I thought of Walter coming home in a few hours. As you know, I had no luggage with me. I was free to go directly I got an opportunity, and I made up my mind to slip off somehow so as to catch an early train across the fields. She seemed to know that I was trying to get away from her, for she said if I wanted to go she could show me how to do so without disturbing the house. I was so glad of any chance that I accepted the offer, and when I had fetched my boots and things, she took me down that very staircase and through the door which she says she saw me and Lexie elope by. She knew that door well, evidently, for she had the key with her, and locked and unlocked it as easily as if she did it every day. The nurse may say she heard it bang, but it didn't bang that time."

"And she locked herself outside as well as you?"

"I thought she would say good−bye there, but she took a hat and cloak from a peg and threw them on, and said she'd show me how to get out of the park without passing the lodges. That's the way she's getting in now, I expect, when Walter fancies he has guarded every point. There's a door in the park wall where it joins the rectory grounds; it's for the use of the rector when he likes, and she had the key. That's where she let me out, and that's where she made her last try; but I mustn't say any more about that. It still wanted nearly two hours to the train. She said she could slip into the rectory and up to her room by another secret way, I suppose and get some clothes. She offered to be my servant my anything if I would take her with me. Oh, but I am a cad to tell on her, though she is what she is! I got away somehow, and struck across country, and walked I don't know where, picked up the railway a dozen miles off, and took the train at a little station I'd never been to before. And as soon as I got to London I fell in with a friend just off to shoot wild sheep and goats in the Himalayas, and I got my rifles and things ready in a day and went with him the beginning of long wanderings. And I hardly saw an English paper, and never heard any news, and never wanted to. And and I think that's all, Nettie."

She put her arms round his neck, and kissed him, and thanked him. She said she didn't think any husband could have told the honest truth more honestly.

CHAPTER V. The Spirit Of Murder

The Wingates drove in their own buggy to The Chase, where they were met by Mr. Blackett's policeman, by whom they were escorted over the great house. It was a great house, in more ways than one; and Nettie, whose passion for things English was far greater than that of which she had accused her husband, walked about with clasped hands and head thrown back, uttering sighs and "ohs" and other senseless ejaculations, in a state of rapture too profound for words.

The hall the great hall, as it was properly termed had been left almost exactly as it was in what Billy called his time, and was impressive enough for anything especially in the dull light of a threatening storm which had unexpectedly followed upon the bright morning. It was not much unlike a church, with a fireplace in it and all the pews turned out. There was a screen like a rood−screen at the lower end, dividing it from an outer vestibule; at the upper end the massive staircase, down which Lexie had walked like a princess at her husband's side, branched into galleries running down the sides. The windows were mullioned and filled with old glass, partly stained; the floor was of chequered stone; the roof a mass of oak beams, spreading fan−wise in all directions. From the latter very high up and shadowed hung banners, beautifully dilapidated. There were trophies of arms on the walls, genuinely mediaeval; rows upon rows of family portraits, with authentic dates to them, historic and notorious; heraldic insignia on every hand, indisputably testifying that the Desaillys were an ancient and a noble family. Altogether, there was a fine, solemn, feudal air about the place, calculated to awe a colonial person seeing it for the first time.

Having been so lately used for the coming−of−age festivities, dust and cobwebs were not conspicuous; but the air

struck cold and had a musty, mouldy taint, causing Nettie to cry "Pah!" and put a perfumed handkerchief to her nose.

"It is the very smell of murdered bodies," she declared, shivering.

"How do you know what the smell of murdered bodies is like?" her husband asked her.

"Oh, by instinct," she replied.

"It's the smell of old age," he said, sniffing and peering about him. "Powers above! It looks as if it might have been like this for a thousand years."

They opened the shutters of the state drawing−room which had been used in Lexie's honour on the night Wingate so well remembered a place of com− fortless splendour such as may still be found in certain royal palaces which the changes of fifty years or so have respectfully passed by. Here was desolation again. The floral carpet and much of the satiny furniture had been removed, and most of the precious ornaments; what were left stood shrouded in bags of calico, bulging and shapeless. But the chandeliers, that weighed tons, and the cunning carved work of the sumptuous ceiling and doorways, were exposed so were the panels of tapestry said to be three hundred years old, and the famous pictures that carried history on their faces faces of Vandyke ladies in their stately and beautiful Henrietta−Maria costumes; Lely ladies in flowing and formless draperies, kept from flowing away altogether by a mere taper−fingered hand; Gainsboroughs, Sir Joshuas, Romneys, with huge heads and little scarves and fichus Lexie's noble predecessors in that most select of county families.

"Oh!" sighed Nettie Wingate, to all this forsaken beauty, "what a drawing−room I could make of this! Billy, what do you say ?"

But when they went upstairs she was afraid to repeat the suggestion. Here, where the rooms had not been opened for the coming−of−age guests, the utterly undomestic, deserted, haunted−house look of everything made the thought of the vulgarest Melbourne villa grateful. Anything like a home seemed inconceivable in that forlorn and fusty wilderness where rats squeaked in daytime, and spiders' webs, drawn over the heavily leaded windows, shut wholesome sunshine out. In every room carpets were rolled up, and only the heavy furniture left in place except in that most interesting room of all at the end of the west wing, identified with Lexie in the past, and with the rope and candle in the present, the place of the mystery which it was the object of their expedition to solve. Here what carpet the moth had left still clung to the floor, and curtains of flowered silk damask, that had been old and faded in her time, still depended from the canopy of Lexie's bed a monumental structure of mahogany that must have been built where it stood and from the cornice spanning the bay of the big window, which almost filled one end of the room and was the only light in it. The great wardrobes and presses, the bow−legged toilet table, with its oval mirror swinging between tall shafts, the sofa and the escritoire, the very mattress and pillows of the vast bed, with the satin quilt drawn over them everything that she had used during her brief occupancy of the apartment seemed to have been left unaltered; and Billy looked at all with a full heart and eyes that his wife did not care to meet for a few minutes. The rooms that had been Walter's dressing−room and the nurseries, adjoining each other in the passage outside, communicated with hers by one door only, the only one in the great room, corresponding at the one end to the only window at the other. The long side walls were unbroken save by the chimney−piece, which was the usual massive structure, sixteenth−century woodwork, with ornamentation reaching to the ceiling, the hearth wide and the shaft spacious, giving a far−off view of a disc of sky. The most casual inspection showed the impossibility of any living thing, save birds, being harboured there. The floor, as Wingate had been informed, had been taken up in various places and put down again, the old carpet now hiding the scars the window casements were fastened; and when he went along the wainscot, rapping sharply on every panel, and standing still to listen for the effect, the sound died immediately, with no hint of inward echo.

"We've done that," the constable observed with a smile. "There's nothing there, sir. Solid as a rock."

"What!" cried Wingate, "do you believe in ghosts, too?"

"No, sir; but I believe in the evidence of my senses. Those walls don't hide anything. I've proved it."

They were lined from top to bottom with wood panelling, that had been painted white and gilded in places, and was now soiled and tarnished. In five of the panels, three on one side and two on the other, the latter flanking the central chimney−piece, pictures were embedded as in fixed frames. They were so old that it was impossible to tell whether, as works of art, they were good or bad, for hardly an outline was visible under the varnish, which seemed to be many coats thick. Their blackened hues contrasted oddly with the white paint, suggesting that the latter was a recent innovation in the chronology of the house, and probably hid the beautiful texture and colour of old oak or other valuable wood. The visitors passed them over with a glance.

"Well," said Wingate to the constable, "I think that's all for the present. The place is empty now, whatever it may have been last night; the windows are secure, and we will lock the door behind us safely. When we have had something to eat, and gathered together a few things that we may want, we will return here, and stay in this room till morning. And if you will meet us with the keys, and share our watch, I shall be infinitely obliged to you. Of course I'll make it well worth your while."

"Don't you think, sir," suggested the constable, "that it'd be as well for somebody to watch outside as well as in? That fellow with the rope, that you saw in the garden, wants attending to."

"Certainly. I mean to keep a good look−out from the window. There will be a splendid moon if these clouds clear off. The fewer we are the better in a case of this sort. You don't catch fish if you make a splash in the water."

"No, sir. But I think it's my business to look after the man rather than the ghost, if it's all the same to you."

Wingate agreed that a policeman must be allowed to know his own business best, and had a shrewd suspicion that this particular policeman would rather deal single−handed with fifty corporeal thieves of the most desperate character than with one indeterminate spectre lighting its way about the deserted house with a harmless spectral candle. So it was arranged that he should patrol the garden, with a trusty friend for company, while husband and wife held the fort within. At six o'clock of a summer evening the prospect had no terrors for the latter. She was delighted to have gained permission to share such a brave adventure.

It was slightly otherwise at nine o'clock, however. Night was closing in then, and with the night came the heavy storm that had been slowly gathering during the afternoon. Sombre thunder clouds, riven with red lightning, and a deep and swelling murmur in the air, were the conditions attendant upon an uncomfortable start from the abode of Mrs. Venn, who, having supplied certain demands, was wild with curiosity to know what for the only fact confided to her being the intention of her guests to "camp out," which seemed about the last thing likely in the state of the weather. Half−way up the green chase, the horses, already at their fastest trot, delighting in the longest stretch of sward they had ever felt under their feet, were encouraged to break into a gallop; and the deserted stables were reached just as the furious rain began to fall. Here they found the constable and Abel Rowe, his chosen mate declared to be the best available looking far from happy. They helped Wingate to shelter his buggy, and make the horses comfortable, and then to carry the contents of the vehicle into the house.

How the great hall clanged to the tread of their hob−nailed boots! And the aspect of the place, in the light of one candle and a bull's−eye lantern the hollow silence and darkness filled with the sound of rushing rain how eerie it was! When such rain falls on your roof at night, particularly with trees about, you can always hear voices in it, gabbling to each other, if you like to listen for them; here they seemed to shout overhead, like wild birds passing over a ride of vallkyries above the storm; and the empty house reverberated till one could well fancy that kindred spirits within it were answering to the call. Nevertheless, Billy enticed his evidently uneasy comrades to remain while the downpour lasted, keeping them in heart with the whisky flask. He earnestly advised them to remain

inside for the night, and watch the terrace from a ground−floor window; but they preferred the risk of rheumatism and pneumonia in a damp summer−house outside.

It wouldn't do, they said, with sheepish smiles, to make themselves too comfortable, since they had to keep awake all night.

"Very well; only if you catch your deaths don't blame me," said Billy testily. He had scorned to plead nervousness on his own account, but was more and more conscious that it would have been a satisfaction to have his guards on the inner side of the locked doors during the witching hours.

"Look sharp that you do keep awake," he besought them, as they turned to go. "Don't take your eye off that terrace and the window for a moment. And cooee that is, call out to me, if you see anything suspicious. I will do the same. Good−night! Take the mackintosh rug with you."

He let them out into the sweet−smelling, rain−washed night, closed the heavy door upon them and turned the key with a vindictive wrench, reflecting with pleasure that their cowardice, as he supposed it, had cut them off from the support of his courage, companionship and revolver; then he and Nettie, crowding into each other's pockets, sat down to hearten themselves with a little supper.

"I've got some more whisky here," he said, rummaging, "and I'm going to give you some, old girl. I am wishing, do you know, that I'd left you with Mrs. Venn after all."

"Why, Billy? I am not frightened. I wouldn't have stayed at home, away from you, for anything; nothing should have induced me. But I do think," speaking rather tremulously, "that those men might have kept us company the first night!"

"I can easily make them, if you wish. I can drive them in by threatening to shoot them if they won't come. But that wouldn't help much, and I suppose it really is an advantage to have the house watched outside. Don't you feel safe with only me, sweetheart?"

He put his arm around her as she sat upon his knee, and she dropped a package of sandwiches to the floor in order to kiss him adequately.

"Oh, I do, I do!" she cried, and honestly meant it, for never had her bridegroom shown himself so much of a man and a husband as he was doing now. "But this place" they were in the great hall, for the security of a wide outlook all round them "oh, Billy dear, this place is so, so creepy!"

It certainly was even Billy confessed it; far more so in the moonlight than in the rain. No ordinary imagination could withstand the effect the conjunction of effects presented.

"We won't stay here any longer," he murmured soothingly. "We'll go to bed. Here, drink," holding a potent tumbler to her lips. "I know it is nasty, but it will do you good. Now just one little sandwich to please me. That's right! You feel better now, don't you? You are not nervous now, are you?"

Gladdened to the heart by his serious anxiety, responsively solicitous for his ease of mind, she assured him that she feared nothing so long as her husband was with her. In the silent hug that followed they touched a deeper note than had yet sounded in the merry music of their joint lives.

"Brave girl! Come along, then; stick close to me. There's nothing whatever to be afraid of. It's only that the place looks so big and grand, and feels so full of its old stories somehow. This is the sort of thing that makes people feel religious in cathedrals, when they are quite cold and callous in a common modern church. Just imagine that

you've been locked into Melbourne Town Hall by mistake, and see how little you will care then!"

"I can't. This is like being in another world."

"It's the same old world the same 'so−called nineteenth century'; and we're just as safe as hullo!"

"Oh!"

"Confound the thing! All right, all right; it's only one of the buggy lamps; I didn't see it was there." He had knocked it from a pile of bedclothes to the floor, and the glass and metal rang upon the bare stone. Echoes in the roof and galleries were like a flock of startled birds taking wing at the noise.

"That ought to be a warning to the ghosts," he growled, in a vexed tone; "the very thing I didn't want to give them. Wait a bit, Nettie; listen a moment."

They stood quite still, in their small island of light, peering into the sea of shadows round them. The flame of the candle glowed up into their handsome faces, so alive and alert, but left dark, as in ambush, the eyes of the dead Desaillys watching the intruders from the wall. Brighter every moment shone the moon through the blazoned windows, sharper its embroidery of cross−bars and lattice−work came out upon the pavement under them; and the lighter it grew, the more like a haunted place it looked. Oh, how different things appear at night from what they do by day! Billy wished again that he had left Nettie with Mrs. Venn. "Listen!" he said, holding her tightly with one hand and the butt of his revolver with the other. But they heard nothing, except their hearts beating.

So they started on their voyage to the west wing. Their supper had done them so much good that they dared to blow the candle out and find their way by the light of the moon; for, as Billy said, if they were to catch that ghost, it was necessary to stalk him carefully.

"But don't think of such rot," he hastened to add. "If you hear anything, mind, it will be the dripping of the rain, or the mice and rats, or the wind in chimneys and keyholes, or the windows shaking, or the old boards creaking and cracking underfoot. Natural causes, remember not supernatural."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of ghosts," boasted Nettie, whom whisky had made valiant for the moment. "Nor of anything else with you."

She carried the candlestick and matches, her dressing−bag and wraps; Billy had loaded himself with all their bedclothes, but kept his right hand free. They walked in their stockinged feet and talked in whispers. The first sensation, as of cold water down her spine, came to Nettie as they passed the little room at the angle of the stairs. No curtain masked it now, and the moonlight poured through its encircling windows in a melodramatic way.

"That's where I saw her burning the lace," said Wingate, pointing.

"Oh, don't!" gasped Nettie, seeing in her mind's eye the lace with blood−stains on it. All the tragical story, as her young fancy composed it, seemed to act itself again before her; she dared not look into the little room, lest she should behold the spirit of midnight murder bending over the hearth. Oh, this was indeed an uncanny place to be astray in at such an hour!

They reached, or all but reached, their destination in the west wing, creeping past the little well staircase and the row of doors to the carefully locked door at the end of the passage. Suddenly both stood motionless, arrested in the self−same instant; and Nettie uttered an involuntary exclamation which Wingate instantly suppressed.

"Oh!"

"Hush sh sh!"

"What was that?"

A sound which, if anywhere outside their own imaginations, was inside the sealed chamber, and not wind or mice or rain−drops now. The noise, a deep rumble, was as if some one were dragging a solid, smooth piece of furniture over the floor, rather like the sound of an earthquake, and the feel of it too. A distinct vibration was communicated to the pair, who were as yet some dozen yards from the spot whence the movement seemed to proceed, the air being at the same time filled with a muffled hum, swelling for a moment and then ceasing suddenly, leaving the tomb−like silence as before. It might have been an earthquake, or it might have been thunder, the tail end of the recent storm; but our adventurers did not think of either possibility.

"They've got in before us," whispered Wingate, dropping the bedclothes where he stood, and getting a grip of his revolver. "Steady now. Don't be frightened. Light the candle. Quick!"

He turned the heavy handle of the door, expecting to find it unfastened. But it was not unfastened; it was just as he had left it. Stooping, with the candle at his eye, he peered into the keyhole, and saw that no key obstructed it. Then he snatched his own from his pocket, wrenched it round in the lock, and threw the door wide open.

No one was visible. The room was silent and empty of everything but what they had left there in the afternoon; nothing had been moved. They stood for a minute or two just within the door, which, when they had brought in the bedclothes, they closed and locked behind them, staring up and down and from side to side; then, holding his wife's hand, Wingate approached the fireplace cautiously and looked up the wide shaft of the chimney, holding the candle high above his head.

"Nothing there," he whispered.

Then he tip−toed to the window, which he examined closely. No one, he found, could have got out that way. The two casements were both closed. He took hold of each handle of the iron catches and moved it up and down; both worked well, but both had been in their sockets, and no draughts could have displaced them. Opening one door−like lattice, he reached his head out; the window, resting on a bracket of heraldic stone−work, was thirty feet up in the wall, at least, projecting into the air, with nothing under it but flag pavements. Any burglar departing by that route would do so to certain suicide.

"What could it have been?" faltered Nettie, whose little heart was pumping violently.

"Thunder, I expect. It must have been thunder."

"It didn't sound like thunder, Billy. It stopped too suddenly."

"Couldn't have been anything else," he insisted, with some impatience; but he still prowled about uneasily.

"If any of the village people are watching the house," said Nettie, as she placed the candle on the dressing−table, not far from the window, "they will say the ghost is here to−night, at any rate."

"Blow it out," cried Wingate, and he extinguished the little flame himself as he spoke. "Let us watch for an hour or two. The moon is light enough for anything, and it's as well ha!"

"Oh!"

They stood like statues, listening, and heard the voices of the men from the terrace beneath. Wingate put his head out of the window and hailed them. "Cooee! You fellows there what's up?"

"We've only found another rope, sir. An old one this time."

"Oh, have you? Anything else?"

"Nothing else, sir. We heard a rustling and thought we saw somebody, but it was a mistake. We'll keep a good look−out, sir."

"Just scour the place well before you settle yourselves down, and report to me in half an hour."

They did so, but had nothing further to report.

"All right inside, sir?" the constable kindly inquired.

"As right as a trivet," was the ostentatiously cheerful reply.

"Did you light a candle and put it out just now, sir?"

"Of course I did. We like the moonlight best. You had better come along, you and Rowe, and sleep up here near us."

"Thank you, sir. It's very comfortable outside, sir."

"All right. Please yourselves. Good−night!"

"Good−night, sir!"

Wingate turned from the window, and he and Nettie made their bed by the light of the moon. They made it within the monstrous four−poster that had been Lexie's marriage couch for the few sad and splendid weeks that seemed to have been her last; the hair mattress and the big down pillows were dry and wholesome−smelling, for something seemed to have preserved the air in this room fresher than that of the rest of the houses a circumstance, however, which did not strike them at the time. As they spread their inadequate blankets and linen, and tucked the old silk curtains back behind the bedhead and the wall, they talked of various matters, but never mentioned Lexie.

When all preparations were made, they were still reluctant to go to bed. They sat together on Lexie's sofa in the window, and let the cool, clean air flow over them. They gazed at the high, clear sky and the beautiful moon−touched clouds, at the wide−branching "English" trees that were such a constant joy, and those majestic angles of wall with the ivy on them, the wet leaves twinkling where they caught the light. They sniffed the perfume of the rain, exhaled from earth and flowers, the sweetest of all sweet things to an Australian nose. And, with their late unsettled nerves composed, they remembered they were bride and bridegroom, and that, wherever they were, they carried their home shrine with them, as the snails, now coming out in such myriads, carried their shells upon their backs.

"It only wants a nightingale to make it perfect," sighed Nettie, slowly drawing hairpins from her chestnut plaits.

The nightingale had done his courting for that year; he was gone only just gone and would be heard no more in English gardens till April came again. But her lover beside her had no difficulty in proving to her that nightingales were, after all, superfluous.

At about midnight they lit the candle once more Wingate opened the door to take a last look into the corridor, and before he shut it laid a piece of paper over the outer keyhole, and stuck it down with some strips torn from the edge of a sheet of postage stamps. Then, locking it inside with the greatest care, he placed the key by the bedside, along with candle and matches and the loaded revolver. They extinguished the light, and, feeling safe and satisfied, lay down to sleep in each other's arms.

CHAPTER VI. The Catspaw

That first night in the haunted chamber was not so romantic in its incidents as the second one, and yet it was far from being commonplace. The occupants found it impossible to feel at home in such surroundings. They fidgetted through the long six hours, listening, watching, talking, dozing in brief snatches, waking on the threshold of dreams to cry, "Phew, how hot it is!" and disturb each other by asking whether he or she was asleep or not. And the mice were distracting. But for the testimony of universal experience, it would have been hard to believe they were mice, rushing and raging over the floor, and scratching and squealing behind the wainscot in that rampageous manner. The present auditors had no doubt about it blessed them in choice language without feeling any necessity to light the candle. Perhaps it was the familiar domestic associations of the noise which lulled them into their first sleep, when their ears had become accustomed to the noise itself. At any rate, they slept. It seemed to themselves that they had been off guard for about five minutes, when first Nettie, and then her husband, awoke to a sensation of something having happened during their absence. There was a subdued creaking, as when one tries to open a door or window without being heard a little cracking noise, then silence, then another crack.

"There's some one in the room," whispered Nettie, her dry tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth.

"Hush−sh−sh!" breathed Wingate in her ear, and he drew himself up softly into a sitting posture. The moon was obscured at this moment, and from their bed by the fireplace, nearer to the door than the window, they could see nothing distinctly.

Again they heard the creaking noise a noise that certainly had not disturbed them before they went to sleep and Wingate cautiously felt for the matches. He was not alarmed, but he trembled with the effort that he made not to betray himself by an untimely movement. He managed to secure the match−box without rattling it against the candlestick, and to open and close it without a tinkle; then he sat up in bed with a match in his hand, ready to strike the instant he heard the creaking sound again. After long suspense it was repeated, and, with his straining eyes fixed upon the door whence he believed it to come, he dashed the match upon the box, expecting to reveal the form of Geraldine Desailly or an accomplice in the act of creeping into the room. But he dashed with too much vigour; the match−head snapped without exploding, and fell off upon the sheet. He did not swear, as he felt inclined to do, but listened for a moment eagerly. Again there was the creaking sound, not so loud this time, but continued for several seconds instead of for one. He seized another match, struck it successfully, and held the little flame high, rising on one knee as he did so, and he saw that the door was closed and the room unchanged. He then lit the candle and got out of bed to explore more thoroughly, Nettie following close behind him; but the strictest search discovered nothing. The bit of paper was still over the outside keyhole, untouched; the passage doors were shut and fastened; the passage and the little staircase were empty and silent; the haunted room revealed no sign of any human presence, save their own.

"It must have been the mice," said Wingate, as he locked their own door afresh; and he bade his wife go back to bed.

"It was not a bit like mice," she objected timidly.

"Well, there's nobody about, at any rate."

So they returned to their pillows, and, listening for a long time, heard no more noises except such as mice ordinarily make in their nibblings at dry woodwork and their scamperings to and fro. Rain began to patter down again, and to tinkle upon the window.

"Perhaps it was the rain," said Wingate.

"Perhaps," suggested Nettie hopefully, "it was the furniture creaking after being moved and pulled about. I had a wicker chair in my bedroom once that used to make noises the whole night if I had been sitting in it before I went to bed."

"Oh, very likely. I daresay that was it."

Wingate turned over to go to sleep.

His wife, less satisfied, lay awake for some time longer, and then she, too, dozed again; but she had troubled dreams of ghosts and burglars that startled her into sudden recognition of the white moonlit and black shadows of the haunted room at very short intervals. On one of these occasions she crept to Billy, and whispered his name into his ear. He was slumbering lightly, but in a moment checked his audible breathing and brought all his senses to attention. There was a noise in the air again, but not the same noise as before. It was a sort of pulsation, half a sigh and half a snore, rising and falling gently and evenly, like the heavy breathing of some sleeping animal, and it seemed to come from under the floor.

"If we were in the bush," said Wingate, "I should say it was an opossum. It is exactly like the noise they make in the trees at night, just outside your window."

"It must be a dog," said Nettie.

"Yes. Or " he was trying to think of an English equivalent for an opossum, "or a squirrel out of the woods."

They were both sure that it was not man, woman, or ghost; so Wingate picked up one of his boots and flung it noisily across the floor, crying "Shoo!" loudly as he did so. Instantly the noise stopped, there was the sound of a stealthy, creeping movement, and all was still.

"A squirrel," said Wingate again. "An old place like this, deserted for so long, and standing in the middle of these lonely woods, must be alive with creatures making a shelter of it. No wonder there are noises."

Then they went to sleep for the last time, and awoke in daylight, safe and sound, satisfied with the issue of their adventure.

Nettie dressed provisionally, put a tin kettle to boil on a spirit stove, and made tea, first for her husband and herself, and then for the two men who had spent the night on the hard boards of the summer−house, and whom Wingate went in search of as soon as he had hurried on his clothes.

"Well, you fellows," he said airily, "now that you've got the light of day to reassure you, perhaps you'll come into the house for a little refreshment. Mrs. Wingate is brewing you a cup of tea; she thinks you'll be wanting something after all you have gone through. We have been as comfortable and snug as possible."

"Slept well, sir?" inquired Abel Rowe, as he and his companion walked stiffly towards the house, having returned respectful greetings and tendered thanks for the lady's kindness.

"Never better," replied Wingate.

"You didn't keep awake to watch ?"

"Of course I did. When I say I slept well, I mean that everything was quiet. The mice made a bit of a rumpus, that's all."

"And your lady wasn't frightened, sir?"

"Not a bit. She isn't one of that sort. Besides, there was nothing to frighten anybody."

Then he fetched his wife downstairs, taking the precaution to lock their chamber door behind them, because she was leaving silver toilet things and other valuables about; and she looked very fresh and charming to the tired men as she stepped into the hall, carrying her tea−basket in her arms. They saluted her with a shamefaced sense of her moral superiority over themselves.

"I should like," said Wingate, emptying the remaining contents of his spirit flask into the men's teacups, "to thoroughly satisfy your minds as well as my own, to prove to everybody that the house is free of ghosts, at any rate. It is just possible I may rent the place from Sir Walter for a time, and I am well aware that we should have trouble with servants, and so on, if any nonsense of that sort got about. I suppose you won't object to sleeping with us here to−night, now that a lady has not been afraid to do it, with only one arm to defend her?"

The men pocketed the insult implied, and professed themselves ready to spend nights or days wherever duty called them. If the gentleman and Mr. Blackett thought it better to guard the house from the inside than from the outside, well and good. They were there to obey orders.

"Then I'll see Mr. Blackett in the course of the day, and let you know the arrangements later. You can leave the keys with me; I will lock up safely."

They left him the keys, and departed to their homes and breakfasts. Then Wingate and Nettie enjoyed some hours of perfect independence and delight; feeding and watering their horses, roaming about the neglected grounds, where they found fresh footprints unmistakable woman's footprints amongst the marks of the men's boots in the moist earth, pointing as unmistakably to the rector's sleepwalker; wandering over the extraordinary house, and rummaging its many nooks and corners, its cupboards and cabinets, its wonderful relics of the romantic past; until they felt so hungry as well as so intensely interested that they determined not to waste time going home to luncheon, but to make shift with the scraps of the provision basket.

They camped again in the great hall, sitting on their carriage cushions and spreading a clean towel before them on the stone floor. It reminded them, they said, of many a picnic in the beloved bush at home, though it would have been hard to imagine a greater contrast. They lifted baggy napkins and spread them open, disclosing curly−cornered sandwiches, crumpled pasties, dry hunks of bread and cheese, with fragments of other dainties similarly the worse for wear. Only that Billy enjoyed the continual feast of a contented mind, Nettie would have expected remarks on her housekeeping; but he was satisfied to eat whatever she gave him, and only grumbled because there was not enough to drink.

"I will make some tea," she said. "I've got a screw left."

But he said he wanted something better than tea, and retrospectively begrudged the whisky he had wasted over−night. So she remembered that she had a medicinal flask in her dressing−bag upstairs, and offered to go and fetch it.

"I'll go," cried Wingate, springing to his feet. "You couldn't unlock the door with those bits of hands." And he tramped towards the staircase at the end of the hall, and pounded up the shallow oak steps to the gallery above

and the western passage leading out of it, singing as he went, filling the house with hollow noises. When he returned he was holding a silver−mounted bottle between his eye and the light, laughing discontentedly.

"Well, you're a nice sort of young person!" he exclaimed.

"Am I?" she replied. "And why?"

"Tippling on the quiet in this way, and all the time pretending to your husband that the smell of spirits makes you sick."

"So it does. What are you talking about?"

"This flask's empty."

"It isn't. It's brimful. I haven't touched it since you filled it for me in London."

Wingate solemnly turned it upside−down before her eyes. One drop only splashed upon the pavement.

"Then some one has been at it."

"Since when?"

"I don't know. I have never taken it out of its pocket since we left town."

"The stopper was hardly screwed on at all."

"Oh dear! I hope it hasn't been leaking into the bag."

"No, I looked to see. The bag is all right. But don't you keep it locked when you're going about in strange places? You ought. All those fittings are solid, you know."

"I will in future," said Nettie. "But it's a nuisance. I do hate not to be able to trust people."

"So do I," said Wingate. And they silently suspected a number of honest persons, while Nettie strove to pacify the disappointed one with a cup of tea.

It did not pacify him, so they put the horses to the buggy and returned to the Desailly Arms, where he drank a whole bottle of beer and was himself again.

Then Nettie, bathed and brushed, with stays off and an empire tea−gown on, spent a pleasant afternoon with a novel. Wingate, meanwhile, went to see Mr. Blackett. Mr. Martin, the housekeeper at the Dower House, and his late colleague the constable, to arrange the programme for the night. Time was required for the doing of so much business, and Mrs. Venn was ready to dish up dinner when he returned with his report.

"It's all right," he said. "Walter is hurrying home, but he can't get here till late to−night; I don't suppose we shall see him till the morning. He has telegraphed to Blackett that I am to have a free hand. Dear old fellow! I am thankful he knows it wasn't me, at last. It will be strange to see him after twenty years, and to see him under these strange circumstances. He is leaving the boy behind I'm glad of that; it would have been difficult to talk of his mother before him, and he might have hampered us in our dealings with Mrs. George, whom he seems, like the rector, to regard as a persecuted angel, more or less. By the way, I've done a good stroke in getting the rector to join our watch to−night. He's awfully interested in the business, and burning to help feels, of course, that it's a

parish matter in which he is primarily concerned. But I told him to be sure and not breathe a word to the lady. I said the mere suggestion of burglars and ghosts, of anything being the matter, would be most injurious to her in her nervous state. She's not sleeping any better, he says, but still refuses to see a doctor or to have any one in her room. His being away to−night will give her scope for enterprise; we shall be able to find her out now, if we are very careful. I don't mean to let anybody watch in the garden, to scare her off; I'll give her a chance to do whatever it is she wants to do."

"Blow us up with dynamite?" cried Nettie.

"Oh, it isn't dynamite," he rejoined confidently. "There'd be no sense in that. It's something that doesn't want to make a noise to attract public attention. And" with an exultant look "old Walter will be here to−night."

An unusually hearty dinner and an imperatively necessary cigar took another hour from the daylight, and by the time Mrs. Venn had replenished the picnic−basket, and been mercifully made acquainted with a part of the truth as to the business connected with it, Wingate found himself late for his appointment with the rector at The Chase. But the horses were fresh and fast, and the way was short to−night. A groom was in attendance to drive them back to the comfortable inn stables, for it was not supposed to be any longer necessary to keep the means of escape at hand; and husband and wife yawned luxuriously in anticipation of the quiet night they were going to have. Their nerves were entirely unaffected by its shadowy approach. It was delightful to hear the owl hoot, and the stag, with his fighting antlers ready, challenge his rival across a glimmering pool. The mystery of the thick woods to right and left had no terrors in it; and the old house, when again it loomed above them, was even as the Melbourne Town Hall to their placid imaginations.

They found Mr. Martin kicking his heels in the porch, and took him in, and entertained him, as if the place belonged to them; made him smoke and drink, and eat delicacies provided on purpose for him out of the basket, and join in pleasant talk and the telling of adventurous tales; and Wingate fed Abel and the constable with equal hospitality, after the manner of Australian hosts. Then, in good heart and condition, they mounted the grand staircase in a body and dispersed themselves to their respective posts. The rector was put into what used to be Walter's dressing−room, the two men had shake−downs on the passage floor, just outside the door of the large chamber that had been Lexie's, which Wingate and Nettie had appropriated.

And now this pair felt that the time had come to relax and recruit themselves after their exhausting day. Wingate sank into an arm−chair, in slippers and shirt−sleeves, and lit his pipe. Nettie squatted on the bed, and brushed her hair, and yawned contentedly. And they amused themselves with plans for renting The Chase which now seemed altogether desirable and discussed furniture and domestic arrangements, and how they would have a real English Christmas in the great hall, and invite all available Australians of their acquaintance to come to it.

"Oh, I am so tired!" sighed Nettie at last.

"So am I," said Wingate, getting up to stretch himself "It's the reaction after so much excitement. Well, we can sleep in peace to−night."

She tumbled into bed, and the heavy lids dropped over her sleepy eyes. He for the last time stepped to the now unlocked door, and, opening it for an inch or two, asked if they were "all right out there?"

"All right," the three men responded promptly.

"Good−night, then. Call me if anything is the matter, but don't make more noise than you can help. Mrs. Wingate is tired, and I don't want her to be disturbed."

They bade him good−night, and he extinguished the candles on the dressing−table. In ten minutes he and his wife were slumbering like a pair of healthy infants. They could not have "gone off" more quickly and soundly if they had taken opiates for the purpose.

Nevertheless, Nettie awoke in an hour suddenly, with an unaccountable sense of shock. Before she was able to think about it, before she opened her eyes indeed, she knew she was not being roused naturally, but had been frightened awake by some power of which her physical senses were not as yet conscious. It was with a heart−shaking thrill that she remembered where she was the tragical haunted room, and the pale moonbeams that only made it more so and at the same moment realized that she had been compelled to remember it. While far away in dreamland, fancy free, something something awful had called her back; she had no doubt about it, even while she did not know what it was, hearing and seeing nothing. Her husband calmly snored beside her, with his head rolled in the bedclothes; he had not felt the presence in the air, and she was powerless to lift hand or voice to stir him.

Opening her eyes every other muscle of the body being paralysed with fright she looked into the darkness straight before her, as with an instinct for the quarter whence revelation would come. There was nothing at the foot of the great bedstead, no footboard or rail, to obstruct her view, but the moonlight was not strong enough to show her the features of the room immediately. Gradually, however, the main outlines faintly defined themselves the division of wall from ceiling and of panel from panel until she could see the shape of the recess in which the picture that faced her was embedded. While her fascinated gaze was rivetted to this object, she saw a strange effect of broken lights, or rather of broken shadows, quivering on and off its surface, which still shone with old varnish; the next instant the picture was gone! Not altogether gone, but, as it were, cut in two the fact being that it had been pushed up in a groove, as one pushes up the sash of a window, leaving the lower half of the space void.

But not empty. Nettie knew now what it was that had chilled her blood even while she slept. Peering out from that black hole were a pair of eyes there was a head belonging to them, but the eyes were all she saw shining fixedly, like those of a hungry wild beast watching the time to spring; and it was at her they glared, with more and more ferocious intentness as the power of the moon increased, while she lay like a terror−stricken rabbit in the cage of a boa−constrictor, unable to articulate even the little whisper that would have sufficed to arouse her mate. She knew the eyes belonged to a man and not to a ghost, and felt sure that she and Billy were going to be murdered, like poor Lexie, as a penalty for meddling with that ghastly house, and that she would only precipitate the catastrophe if she spoke or moved.

The eyes and hers confronted each other during a dozen hammer−strokes of her bursting heart; then a hand became visible, cautiously extended; a head followed, craning to right and left; a naked foot stole out of the picture frame, and groped stealthily for the floor. When she saw that, Nettie concluded that the end had come. The spell that had paralysed her faculties seemed to snap and free her, and she uttered a ringing shriek that Sir Walter might have heard at the Dower House, where he had just arrived a shriek which was answered by an oath from the mysterious intruder, who had not seen that she was watching him.

The sound had not died before Wingate was out of bed, the rector, Abel Rowe, and the constable, stumbling to their feet, bewildered and quaking, all at sea for the moment as to what had occurred. Then the occupants of the haunted chamber heard bare feet slapping the floor, the crash of a chair overturned, the thump of a body against the door, the rattle of the handle; and Wingate bawled excitedly, "Look out there! Stop him! Stop him!" And then to the constable, who had the revolver, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! He can't get out!"

Even as he spoke the door was flung open, and the fugitive was seen running down the passage, where a lighted stable lantern had been placed for the night. Two of the guard, in the condition known as flabbergasted, looked as if they had been knocked backwards and breathless by the flying figure, and were not yet certain if it were flesh and blood or ghost; but the expression of the rector's face as he darted out of his room was even more astonished

and astonishing. All three set off in pursuit as fast as their legs could carry them; and a strange sound it was in the dead of night the echo, reverberating far and wide, of that hurry−scurry through the hollow house, along the gallery, and down the stairs where the moon made darkness visible.

Because Nettie held him back, praying not to be left alone with that hole in the wall and its terrifying possibilities, Wingate did not go for a minute or two, but he spent that minute in helping her into her dressing−gown, and then they followed the chase together. A man in his pyjama suit is already dressed for such emergencies.

The scuffle was over when they appeared upon the scene of action, but a dramatic picture met their eyes as they came into the gallery at the head of the grand staircase, and looked down into the hall. The moon and the stable lantern that Wingate held above his head just, and only just, revealed the size and sombre splendours of the place; the policeman's bull's−eye did the rest. It was opened upon the face of the central figure of the group gathered in the middle of the paved floor, and that face was the only thing distinct in the vast obscurity. The three men round it were shadows only. One shadow poured wine from a bottle into a cup, another flitted about with the provision basket; the third presented something to the Rembrandt face, and it opened unshaven jaws and snatched it wolfishly.

"Why, who the dickens is that?" exclaimed Wingate.

"It's all right, Mr. Wingate," the rector called to him. "It's Mr. George Desailly. He was locked in by accident on the day of the coming of age, he says, and could not get out."

"And he's clean starved," cried Abel Rowe. "There's nothing at all where his stomach ought to be."

"He hasn't been without food for a fortnight," Wingate whispered to Nettie, as they ran down the stairs together. "And he could have got out at least three days ago, if he had liked."

"Look!" she said breathlessly, and pointed to one of the great hall windows. With the moon behind it, a figure was dimly visible; a swing of the stable lantern showed a pair of peering eyes and a white nose flattened upon the glass.

"Mr. Martin," said Wingate, "your guest is walking in her sleep again. She is on the terrace there. Go out very quietly so as not to startle her, which is bad for sleep−walkers, and bring her into shelter, will you? Perhaps she is awake, and looking for her lost husband; if so, you can tell her we have found him."

Full of concern for his interesting invalid, the rector bustled towards one of the two archways through which one passed from the hall to the vestibule and porch. Wingate hurried after him and threw open a leaf of the heavy outer doors.

The fresh night air came pouring in, and with it the sound of wheels and horses approaching rapidly, not over the grass, but along another road reserved for carriages, entered at a gate near the gate of the Dower House. The master had arrived.

CHAPTER VII. Discovery

The rector, engaged in what he considered his first duty, did not return. Nettie, after some talk and a hasty toilet, was sent home to the Desailly Arms in Sir Walter's carriage. The constable and his mate retired from the hall, by order of their master. And so only the two old friends, so strangely reunited, were left there, sitting side by side on an oaken settle, with the prisoner sobbing and grovelling at their feet. The lord of the manor, at eight and forty, looked older than his years he had lived fast and his person, superficially considered, was not imposing. Nature

steadily refuses to be subservient to the otherwise all−powerful; wherefore we behold princes who are physically indistinguishable from peasants, and millionaires whom the diseases of low people have rendered incapable of enjoying money. The great Desaillys were of the best blood in the land, from a Heralds' College point of view. Their pedigree was blue throughout as a teetotal ribbon, until a bookseller's daughter came into it; yet the old Sir Thomas, Walter's father, had been meagre and undersized, sandy−haired, rat−nosed, puffy−eyed, pimply−skinned; in fact, just as common to look at as common could be; and Walter's son, by the bookseller's daughter aforesaid, was like a young king in a fairy tale. Walter himself might have been taken for a prosperous butcher or publican, at a first glance. But when you came to know him only to know him for five minutes you perceived that breeding is not altogether a matter of personal beauty, nor of manners either. That plain−featured, bull−necked, beefy and beery man had a way of looking at people that made them feel as worms before him. Race was potent, after all. Sir Walter was Sir Walter, in short; throughout Norfolk, at any rate, this sufficed to explain him.

Once upon a time his kinsman, George, had worn that distinguished air, and possessed some of the moral qualities that almost necessarily go with it; but a bad life and a bad woman had corrupted and destroyed all, or nearly all. At this moment, overwhelmed with the effect of his late terrible experiences, a trace of the lost virtue reappeared.

"In the name of God, don't ask me any questions," he implored hysterically, kneeling up on Wingate's buggy cushions, which had been made a couch for his exhausted frame. "My mouth is shut, Walter. I simply can't explain. For your own sake, for Tom's sake, for the sake of the old family, don't try to understand anything! Oh, why didn't I throw myself out of the window and break my neck! My God, what I've gone through! I think I'm mad! I hadn't bite or sup for three days and nights, till I got a thimbleful of brandy this morning. I dropped the rope I hadn't anything to get out by and she couldn't throw another up. Walter, old Walter we were boys together give me enough to go out of the country with, and I'll never let you see my face again, nor hers either."

"I understand," Sir Walter said, gravely studying the wild−eyed, bristly, grimy face before him. "You won't turn dog on your own wife. That's all right. But I know, without having to ask anybody, that she's at the bottom of it. She knew of that cupboard, which is more than I did, and that something worth having was in it."

"Nothing, Walter; nothing, nothing, I swear!"

"What! You had your labour for your pains? Or was there any other little game on? But we'll find all that out for ourselves when we've time to go into things. I'll just ask you one question, one that's easy to answer. Have you been doing any mischief to the house or to anything belonging to the house? Dynamite, or anything of that sort, hey? On your honour, George, as a man and a gentleman and a Desailly of The Chase, if you've got such a thing as honour left."

Mr. George Desailly hoped, dramatically, that he might die in slow torment, and be damned for ever, if he had done a single mortal thing. "I know you don't believe me," he said, "but it's as true as that you are sitting there."

Sir Walter did believe him, and dismissed such trifles as ropes and cupboards from his mind. "Very well," said he. "Now look here; I'll let you go, and I'll give you enough to get out of the country with, and an income to live on while you keep out, on one condition."

The face of the degraded wretch who had once been a gentleman shone with hope, then clouded with sudden fear.

"What's that?" he muttered.

"On condition," said Sir Walter slowly and emphatically, "that you tell me all you know about my wife's disappearance."

A pause followed this sentence, during which the two judges looked at the culprit closely. He moistened a dry throat, and returned answer to the effect that Mr. Wingate was the person to question on that point.

"Pass Mr. Wingate, if you please. That's played out."

The blanched cheek went whiter under its film of grime, but the man, seeing the corner he was being driven to, did the best his shattered condition allowed of to avoid it.

"Why should Mr. Wingate be passed? Everybody knew that he went off with her. You knew it yourself, and had good reason to."

"I know now that he didn't, as I ought to have known from the first. I did him and her a gross and fatal injustice, for which I shall never forgive myself, and never be able to make amends."

"Who says so?"

"He does."

The fellow cackled in a ghastly way, but his face was grey with fright. "And you take his word against the testimony "

"Of Mrs. George Desailly? I should rather think so."

"Well, it's your business, not mine. I know nothing of what happened, except what I've been told. How on earth should I? I was in Paris all the time. I never so much as set eyes on your wife. I was in Paris all the time."

"I know you were; but other people were not other people in whose confidence you are, or you would not be in your present situation. Look here, George, Lexie met with foul play that night there is no doubt that she did, either in my mind or Mr. Wingate's otherwise she would have come back, or we should have heard of her somewhere; and you've got to tell us just what you know about it. You understand me?"

The wretched man understood well enough, but said to himself that he was still man enough not to turn dog on his own wife blind, like all users of that figure of speech, to the fact that meanness and treachery are the attributes of men, never of dogs. Wingate, watching him steadily, said, in a quiet voice,

"Where did you say you dropped the rope, Mr. Desailly?"

Mr. Desailly gasped audibly, "What rope?"

"You said you had a rope, and dropped it, and therefore could not let yourself out."

"I don't know what I've been saying. I've been all but starved to death, and I think my mind's going. I hadn't any rope. I said my wife tried to throw a rope up to me, when she found I'd been locked in "

"Oh, come, George, let's have done with that farce of being locked in!" his cousin angrily interrupted. "Answer Mr. Wingate's question."

"I'll not answer any of his damned questions!" was the excited retort. "If it hadn't been for him oh, my God! I should have been safe in France by this time."

"Tell me," said Wingate, with the same calmly concentrated air, "was it out of the window that you dropped your rope, when trying to descend by it through the only exit left to you?"

"Of course it was only you confuse me so that I don't know what I'm saying. I was trying to carry it through one casement to the other, so as to get it round the stone, don't you know, and the reach was too long, and it slipped clean out of my hands, and dropped on to the terrace. You found it there your self."

"Well, of all the cool liars that ever I came across !"

"Hush, Wingate! let me conduct this business will you?" his friend whispered. "Lies won't serve him; we can test them all. Come, George, either here or in a court of justice whichever you like. Never mind about ropes and rubbish now. Tell me, what has become of my wife? that's the point I want cleared up first."

"Excuse me, Walter," said Wingate earnestly, I must know where he dropped that rope."

"Why, out of the window, man! Didn't he just say so?"

"And you could see he was lying as plain as the nose on his face. He didn't drop it out of the window; he dropped it somewhere else, and he doesn't want to say where."

"There's no other place where he could have dropped it, since the door of that room was locked."

"Exactly; that's what struck me. He knows of a place that we don't know of; and, perhaps, if we find that place we shall find out something about Lexie. We will explore your closet, sir, and see for ourselves whether it's as empty as you say it is whether it's a closet at all, in fact, or an entrance to one of those secret passages, or secret chamber places "

He stopped dead, with a sharp exclamation, for he saw that his random shot had hit the bull's−eye. Sir Walter saw it, too. Both men rose in their stern excitement and stood over the swooning figure on the buggy cushions, and forced a confession out of it as one squeezes water from a flabby sponge.

Yes, there was a passage out of the closet, and it led to a a a place. Walter might remember that there was always a tradition in the family about a secret chamber, though no one believed it because it could not be found. That, perhaps, was on account of old Sir Thomas coming unexpectedly into the property, inheriting from an uncle he had never seen. Doubtless that uncle knew, but, dying suddenly, took the secret with him. He (George) hadn't an idea of it up to a fortnight ago, and never was so knocked all of a heap in his life as he was when Jerry told him about it. How had she found it out? He was sure he didn't know. It was when she was a girl, and used to potter about The Chase to amuse herself when the family was away, with only a housekeeper in charge. She was always fond of nosing round, and poking into things, and there wasn't much that escaped her eye. She noticed a little hole under the moulding of a panel, close to the floor, and she had the curiosity to stick a hairpin up and, when she found it went all the way, a skewer or something, till she saw the picture shake that was how it came about, he thought. At any rate she did make the discovery, and she kept it to herself, because it was a convenient place to stow letters and things in that she didn't want anybody to find. Unfortunately, she showed it to Mrs. Walter. Odd? Oh, well, perhaps she couldn't help herself. He thought she had been getting something out of it, or putting something in, when Mrs. Walter came into the room and surprised her. It was Mrs. Walter's bedroom, and Jerry thought it would never do to let her see the closet without warning her what a dangerous place it was to go into. It looked just like an ordinary closet from the outside, but it ran off to the left into the dark, and some way along there was a a place. It had a trap−door over it, like a cellar door, flush with the floor, and not showing when it was closed unless you looked for the cracks carefully. Yes, perhaps, an oubliette, only the flap opened upwards in the ordinary way, instead of sinking treacherously underfoot fortunately, because Jerry only found it out by feeling it shake as she stepped on it. The hinges had got rusty and loose one was gone altogether now; so that it

couldn't be fixed up as it was before. It was not a sewage drain, or well, or place for running water from the roof, because it was dry all through, and the bottom hard. Deep? Oh, very going right down below the cellars, apparently, like a mine shaft. Jerry, after no end of trouble in prising the trap−door up, and lodging it against the wall, tried to sound its depth with a long fishing−line and sinker, and couldn't find it. It was she who put the thing out of gear, messing there by herself, and once she had shifted it up, it was too heavy to move again.

So the hole was always open after that; and when Jerry had shown it to Mrs. Walter, and gone to bed, she couldn't rest for the fear that Mrs. Walter would commit suicide by throwing herself down it Why? Because the poor woman was mad with grief about something or other, and just in the state of mind to make away with herself. Oh, he didn't know anything about Mrs. Walter's disposition whether she was the sort of person to do such a thing, or whether she wasn't; he could only tell the tale as it was told to him. She certainly was awfully cut up there was no need for him to say more in present company and poured out her troubles to her friend, as was only natural. What friend? Why, the only one she had at The Chase, so far as he could make out. People might pretend to think a lot of her now, but when she was alive all right: if the cap fitted, well and good. As he was saying, Jerry went to bed, but could not sleep for worrying about the poor thing she had left sobbing fit to break her heart; so she got up to go and see if she was all right. And there she found her just rushing into the closet, calling out that her husband had cast her off, and she could not live any longer, and was going to throw herself down the well, and have done with it. Likely? Anything and everything was likely with a woman in hysterics; you never could tell what they'd do in a moment of desperation. Those that weren't there to see could not possibly know. Yes, it was a pity they were not there, as much for Jerry's sake as for Mrs. Walter's. It was because she was alone, with no witness to prove that she hadn't murdered Mrs. Walter herself, that Jerry was obliged to invent the tale of the elopement. He did not, of course, justify her in the course she took far from it; but he expected that if they, Sir Walter and Wingate, had been in her cruel position, they would have done the same.

What happened? He could see they knew well enough what happened. An awful thing; but those who drove her to it were responsible, not he. Jerry ran after her to try to save her, but was just a second too late. On the very edge of the hole she caught hold of her, but Mrs. Walter fought to get loose, and very nearly carried Jerry down too. In the struggle Jerry's dress was torn some trimmings on the sleeve, or something and that, as well as all the other circumstances, when she came to think of them, made the affair look so black against her that she simply daren't tell anybody about it. She had been having tiffs with Mrs. Walter, and nobody knew they had made their quarrel up; and nobody knew about the closet and the hole; and altogether well, one could understand her being afraid to speak. It would have taken a brave person to do it; and, if not done at the first moment, every moment that passed made it more impossible. The house was quiet as the grave; she was certain no one would believe her, especially with a bit of her dress in the hole; and so she shut the picture, and she took the torn stuff off her dress and burnt it oh, Mr. Wingate might well smile! Mr. Wingate knew something about that. He, George Desailly, could inform Mr. Wingate that it was owing to his conduct that night, in insulting a lady whom he found alone and unprotected in a deserted part of the house, that those who had made a scapegoat of him had done so without the slightest shadow of compunction or regret.

"Have you anything to say to that, Billy?" Sir Walter inquired at this point.

Wingate said he had not at present and urged his friend to proceed to the investigation of those circumstances in which the prisoner was directly implicated.

But here it was most difficult to get him to be frank. These, evidently, were the damning circumstances from his point of view. He squirmed and sobbed, and cursed his madness and folly, and pleaded the bitter poverty that alone could have driven him to such deeds as he had been found out in. Walter had never known, and never would know, what it was to be dunned by Jew cads at every turn to have no means to bring up his children properly to see disgrace and ruin staring him in the face. It was not for one who had rolled in luxury all his life to understand the temptations of a man driven desperate by misfortunes that were no fault of his own. And so on.

At last it came out. Poor Lexie had gone to her doom in evening dress, with a jewel of great value round her beautiful neck; and Mr. and Mrs. George Desailly, in the extremity of their needs and as a last resource, had proposed to retrieve that jewel, dissect it, and turn the stones into money. Jerry had disclosed the dread secret of twenty years, and, when he had somewhat recovered from the shock, her husband had consented to the fearful enterprise which he never, never, never would have entered upon or dreamed of but for the straits that he was in. They prepared food, lights, and a suitable rope the latter concealed under the lady's skirts and got into the house on the coming−of−age morning, mingling with the invited guests. While the banquet was in progress, and the coast consequently clear, they successfully surmounted what they had supposed their greatest difficulty. Jerry opened the closet, showed the hole, explained the mechanism of the picture and the details of the business generally, and shut her accomplice up, before Sir Walter, being made aware of her proximity, found her, turned her out of his wife's room, and locked the door behind her. Anticipating this locking of doors, instructing her husband not to proceed until he was sure of having the house to himself, she had arranged that he was to let himself out of the window by the rope he had used to let himself down the hole, if no better means of exit were available, when his job was done.

His job! Great heavens, what a job! He did not realize the horror of it until it was too late. When the revels of the day were over when night came, and that voiceless solitude, filled with spirits of the dead his nerve failed him. Trying to fasten a rope to an iron ring just within the mouth of the well, evidently put there on purpose to fasten ropes to hurrying to get the thing over and done with as quickly as possible he fumbled and bungled, and it slipped out of his hands. It slipped and fell to the bottom of the shaft he heard it hit the bottom and there he was, helpless. The bottom, he declared, in reply to questions, was at least sixty feet from the top, and no one falling that distance could possibly have lived an instant.

He thought of tearing up curtains or carpet to make another ladder, but he had plenty of food then, and was afraid to do anything until he had conferred with Jerry, who came in a few days to see what had delayed him. She came by night, to escape observation, and spoke to him from the terrace. She was very angry when she heard of his accident, but forbade him on any account to leave traces of his errand in the house, or to leave the house without the necklace. She said she would manage somehow to throw up a line with another rope attached, and that he was to wait where he was until she did so, taking every care not to betray himself or her. But she was hindered in various ways, and when. at last things seemed to be going right, the sudden interposition of the Wingates frustrated and ruined all.

"My last hope," said George Desailly, "was to slip out while the doors would open from the inside, even if I had to do it by degrees, from one hiding−place to another; and to−night I was too hungry to wait any longer. I thought Mr. and Mrs. Wingate both asleep, and didn't know of the fellows in the passage. And and that's all, Walter. And I wish you'd take your revolver and put a bullet through my head!"

A few minutes later, Sir Walter and Wingate, with hands that did not fumble and bungle, fastened a rope to the iron ring in the well−mouth, and went down into Lexie's grave. It was not an oubliette, after all, but a perpendicular route to another secret passage, a subterranean tunnel, the door to which was found at the base of the shaft. That door had been locked for, perhaps, hundreds of years, and the mystery on the further side of it does not belong to this story. Lexie never got so far. The light of two candles, waved slowly to and fro, revealed her poor bones lying before it, flattened out upon the slimy floor flattened by a heavy rope that had fallen upon and disjointed them. An eyeless skull, that kept no record of her lovely face except the white teeth that grinned so horribly, still adhered to the thing that had been a neck of snow; and there, between the jaw and the mouldy garments, the diamonds and the star−rubies glittered resplendent, alive and immortal in the dust of death. The famous jewel, the strands of chestnut hair, the yet identifiable colour and texture of the silken gown and the embroidered slippers above all, the thick wedding ring with the initials inside it proved to her old lovers, as they would have to prove to the world at large, that a part, at least, of the story they had just heard was true. But when they disentangled from the bones of one skeleton hand a much−torn fragment of Venetian lace

"Am I," said Sir Walter, "to consent to the theory this piece of evidence so plainly gives the lie to? To let it be supposed that she was the woman to commit suicide in a fit of hysterics, and I the brute to drive her to it?"

"I have been thinking it over," said Wingate, "and I don't see what else is to be done. There were no witnesses."

And, in the final result, Mrs. George Desailly's word was taken as against all evidence to the contrary. There were protracted and sensational legal proceedings, in the course of which she had to un− dergo a trial that must have crushed and ruined socially ruined, at the least an ordinary woman, with the witness of a bad conscience against her; but she was no ordinary woman. Even Nettie Wingate, on first beholding her in the flesh, falling under the spell of that beautiful smile (tempered with tears and a black dress), exclaimed, "What! Is that the she−devil you have been telling me about? Impossible!" Everybody said "impossible," or thought it. Sir Walter himself Wingate also were glad to the heart when they found she was not to be put in prison, or otherwise openly degraded, although they knew they had no justification for such weakness, and that her victory had cost them dear.

When all was over, and the excitement of the affair allayed, Wingate and Nettie still thought they would like to rent The Chase and make an English Christmas in it. But the owner, when approached on the subject, announced an intention to put his old house in order and go to live there himself immediately. He was about to be married again, with a view to having several more sons, if possible, the engagement of young Thomas to do likewise being already satisfactorily arranged. Sir Walter sits now in the chancel of his parish church on Sundays with quite a family around him, and "Sacred to the Memory of Alexandra Desailly" shines from a marble tablet over his head. She had, of course, been virtually supplanted for many a year before her bones were coffined in state and laid in the vault underfoot with those of his noble ancestors.

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A BREATH OF THE SEA

Lizzie Dawson's friends sat in the drawing−room over the bank offices, and talked about Emma. For Emma had excused herself from coming in. "She's got one of her bad headaches," said Lizzie, "and doesn't feel up to seeing people."

"It was the same on your last day," remarked Mrs. Dean, who suspected "airs" on Emma's part. "She seems to be always having headaches."

"How different from what she used to be!" another lady ejaculated. "I don't believe she ever had a thing the matter with her before she was married."

"Different!" echoed the hostess, nearly smashing a cup with the teapot as she banged it down. "You wouldn't know her for the same! And all through that that that beast! I can't help it it's impossible to call him a man."

The visitors drew their chairs closer.

"Now, tell us, Lizzie you can trust us it won't go any further did he really throw her downstairs, and give her concussion of the brain? Everybody says so, you know."

It was the champion scandalmonger of the town who asked this question, with all her soul in her pretty, eager face.

"No, I don't think he went quite so far as that," Miss Dawson admitted, with evident reluctance. "At any rate, Emma says he didn't. She was very angry when somebody asked her. But then, she's so soft! Sometimes I get really out of patience with her standing up for him, when everybody knows he was too bad to live with. Why, he'd have killed her if we hadn't taken her away from him. She has been home six months, living in peace and comfort, and even now she hasn't got over it. She's nothing but a bag of bones, and her spirit
broken crushed" Lizzie stopped pouring out the tea to blow her nose savagely "so that you wouldn't know her for what she used to be before she fell into his hands. Brute!"

"But," urged the young matron, who was always anxious to get to the bottom of these things, "if he did not throw her downstairs and injure her brain, how comes she by these constant headaches? She never used to have headaches."

"Anybody's head would ache, if they were always crying like she is," replied Lizzie, as gloomy as she was ungrammatical. "Though what she has to fret for now !"

"But he did throw the soup−plate at her, with all the hot soup in it?"

"It didn't hit her it didn't actually touch her. He knocked it over in one of his rages with her, all over a nice clean tablecloth just fresh from the wash."

"What a wretch!"

"But he was quite capable of throwing it at her. I myself saw him throw a thing at her once. It hit her in the face."

"No! did you really? What was it?"

"It was a bank−note a five−pound note. He bought her a dress once a hideous thing and gave it to her in such a way that she wouldn't accept it as a gift. She wanted to pay him for it, and gave him the note; and he took it and flung it in her face, using the most dreadful language. She put up her hand to ward off the blow, and the note went flying into the fire, and was burnt up in an instant before our eyes. As it happened, those were the good times, when we were all well off when five−pound notes were more plentiful than they are now."

Lizzie sighed. The other ladies sighed. For the moment they became indifferent to Emma Knox and her affairs. It was the beginning of December, '92, and the depression was still deepening and deepening, instead of getting lighter; and everybody felt it. The great financial scandals were still in their most scandalous stage, and these little country people had lost their little savings, or their friends and relatives had lost theirs, through a mistaken confidence in balance−sheets. Therefore they found a private and local scandal less supremely interesting than it used to be. They fell to talking of their afflicted colony, their disreputable Government, their personally altered circumstances, the sad, sad blight that was over all. When they wanted to cheer themselves, they returned to a discussion of the iniquities of Emma's husband.

Meanwhile, Emma lay on the narrow bed that had been hers in the happy years when she had no husband, glad to be out of the way of their talk glad, even, to be out of the way of Lizzie's talk for once, dear and devoted as Lizzie was. It seemed to Mrs. Knox that nobody remembered she was Mrs. Knox; they seemed to imagine that she could come back just as she went away, and take her old place as if nothing had happened. It was a great mistake. When you have been married even if married miserably you have been spoilt for any other life. You can't be a girl again, occupied with the trivial affairs of girlhood, if you would. You can't stand having your father lord it over you, as if you were still nothing but his child. It is maddening to hear people when it is no concern of theirs discussing your husband, who, after all, is your husband, before your face, and making him out to be the lowest cad on the face of the earth. In short, the whole position is intolerable particularly if you are not well. Emma was not well. She had no strength, and her nerves had gone to pieces. Her father and sister were beginning

to get cross about it, and to talk of sending for the doctor. The doctor pooh! She knew what would do her good better than any doctor could tell her as she confided to Tommy, when he came, on his return from school, to ask if her headache was better.

Tommy was merely a rough, ugly, dirty, untidy schoolboy; but he was fond of his sister Emma, and worried to see her so out of health and spirits.

"What is it you think would do you good?" he asked her, as he sat by her bedside, his hat and books scattered over the floor. "If it's anything from the shop, I'll run and get it."

"It is nothing from the shop," said Emma, drawing herself up into a sitting posture, with unusual animation. "It is nothing that can be got here, Tommy. It's something better than doctor's stuff something that I have been longing for for weeks and months past."

"I know a letter from David," said the boy brightly.

Emma's pale young face flushed crimson, and one could see the signs of a haughty spirit behind it. She pretended to be both surprised and angry at this audacious suggestion. For David was the wicked husband from whose clutches she had been rescued by an indignant family.

"David!" she exclaimed. "What are you thinking of? Why should I want a letter from David? I have not written to him; I don't even know where he is. He he is nothing to me. Pray don't run away with the idea that I am fretting about him."

"Oh!" faltered Tommy, with an abashed and disappointed air; "I didn't know. I thought perhaps "

"Don't think, dear boy. The less we all think on that subject, the better and the less we talk, too. I can't" with a sudden change of front "oh, I can't bear to hear them all discussing him and abusing him behind his back, when he can't defend himself. I do think it is so mean!"

"So do I," said the boy promptly. "But I don't do it. I never did think he was as bad as they made out. You know you've got a bit of a temper yourself, Emmie. Perhaps you riled him sometimes without knowing it, you know."

"Perhaps I did," said Mrs. Knox. "I often wonder however, it is no use thinking about that now. The thing is done, and it can't be helped." She sighed; then, with an effort, roused herself. "I'll tell you what I want, Tommy a breath of the sea! You know how I love the sea, and what good it always does me. I feel, if I could have just one day on it, away from all these people say a run down to Sorrento in the Hygeia I should be set up for the summer. I should begin to get strong at once. I do want to get away for a little, Tommy I do want to get strong." Her voice quivered.

"Then, why don't you go?" he asked her.

"If only for a couple of days!" she ejaculated longingly. "Even one day one sight of the sea one breath of it would make a new creature of me. I know it would. Of course, it is expensive, and I haven't much money, and I won't ask father now now that I am married; but just a couple of days would not cost much, would it? I could go second−class, for that matter."

"You wouldn't go alone, would you?"

"I don't want to. It's lonely enough at the best of times; I don't want to make it worse. But I would not like to drag Lizzie away; I'd rather not do that. I was thinking you haven't got examinations next week, have you?"

"Not till the week after," the boy replied, breathless with delighted anticipation. "Oh, I say! you don't mean you would take me?"

"You could look after me very well," said Mrs. Knox, who, unfortunately for one in her position, had no vocation for independence. "I want somebody, and yet I don't want to be bothered. Suppose you and I go together shall we? It wouldn't put you off your examinations?"

"Not the least little bit," he assured her fervently. "If you stew up to the last moment, your head only gets muddled. It is far better to try and forget everything for a few days freshens the brain, you know puts you regularly into form."

"I believe it is the best plan," she said, when she had thought it over. "Then we'll do it, Tommy."

"Good egg!" he cried in rapture. This was the correct form of expression with schoolboys at that date.

Lizzie, when she came to hear of the projected enterprise, was dissatisfied with it.

"I should have thought," she remarked, "that the sea, and Sorrento particularly, would have been the last place you'd wish to go to." And she said so because it was near the sea that Emma had lived her disastrous married life, and at Sorrento that she had spent the honeymoon which began it. Emma assured her that, on the contrary, the sea was the first and only thing she longed for; and it seemed like pure perversity to Lizzie's mind. Lizzie then declared that she must go too, to take charge of her sister, who was not strong enough to travel alone. She ridiculed the idea of Tommy as a protector, to his great wrath. "That child!" she called him.

"He is fourteen, and he is devoted to me," protested Emma. "He is all the protector I want, and I have promised him, Lizzie. And of course father cannot do without you. It is only for a couple of days."

"A couple of days is not long enough to do you any good; and then suppose just suppose you were to come across that man?"

"Well? What if I did?" blushing furiously. "He would not kill me."

"You don't know what he wouldn't do. I would not have you run such a risk for the world, without me with you."

"There's no fear of that," said Emma, with set lips. "Not the slightest fear. I should think he'd be like the snakes, and get as far out of one's way as possible."

"A very good name for him," said Lizzie: "a snake. He is just like a snake that snake in the fable that was warmed in somebody's bosom and then turned to bite. Little we thought what we were doing when we let him into this house!"

Emma's flush deepened, and the hard line of her mouth grew harder.

"You may be sure," she said bitterly, "that he regrets the day he entered it quite as much as we do. I've no doubt he hates the very thought of me loathes it would not touch me with a pair of tongs if he could help it."

She had her way about going to Melbourne, with Tommy for an escort. On Monday night he scrubbed himself all over in a hot bath, and on Tuesday morning went to have his hair cut and to buy himself a new necktie; for it was not until Tuesday that Mr. Dawson gave his married daughter leave to please herself.

Then, on Tuesday afternoon, brother and sister set off by the slow train, Tommy gravely elated over his responsibilities, and Emma in better spirits than he had seen her at any time since her separation from her husband. They did not travel second−class, which in Australia is thought a low thing to do, even by the little shopkeepers; Mr. Dawson had forbidden it. "For we have not come to that yet," he said, "poor as we are these times." And Lizzie would not hear of eight hours of hard seat for a weakened back. They wanted Emma to wait until next morning for the express, but she could not wait. That was the one thing about which she was irresistibly obstinate.

"Father might change his mind, or the weather might change; let us go while we can," she urged Tommy confidentially; and the boy sincerely assured her that he was "on."

They left, therefore, at 3.30, and reached Melbourne before 11. It was a delightful journey to both; weather warm, without sultriness or dust, and the country, that looks so lonesome to un−Australian eyes, beautiful to theirs, after the heavy rains of the cool spring. The grass was seeding, of course, and therefore taking its tawny summer tints, but never had they seen it so thick and fresh in the last month of the year. The corn was being cut in the cultivated fields, scattered like isles in the sea of bush. The plenteous harvest was almost the single sign of prosperity left to the country in its day of unexampled adversity, and it was easy for the most superficial eye to read it. Emma's eyes, having looked on a landscape of wild hills only since she fled home from her cruel husband, feasted upon the scene, so full of associations of other times and journeyings.

"My word!" was the bush boy's frequent comment, "do look at that grass! Won't there be some bush fires presently!"

Yes, she supposed there would. She talked to Tommy from time to time, but for the most part she sat silent, thinking her own thoughts. It was in December, she remembered, that she had gone on her honeymoon over this same line, by this same slow train. Then the grass had been burnt up by weeks of blazing weather. What a roasting day it was! and how strange and home−sick she had felt, how heart−broken at parting with Lizzie, how terrified at the prospect before her! She smiled as she recalled her girlish foolishness, and Tommy thought it made her look like her old self again. Now she could not disguise from herself that she was home−sick in quite a different way. It was homesickness that was drawing her from her father's house back to Sorrento and the sea. She was beginning to feel, though she did not understand the fact which really is a fact, though it is the fashion to deny it that it is not only better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, but better to have even a bad husband than to have none; meaning, of course, a bad husband like David, who was still a man not a brute−beast in human shape, like Neill and Deeming.

I don't think I have mentioned that Emma Knox was pretty very pretty and only twenty−five last birthday. In her dark serge skirt and jacket and striped cotton blouse, with the neatest sailor hat on her curly fringe and protuberant Clytie knot, and a trim little veil to keep all in order, she was a charming figure that kind of figure which you see, as soon as you look at it, was never meant to go about the world without a man to take care of it. Emma had never known what it was to want a man certainly not at a railway station in the night and so felt a little timorous, a little of the castaway, on stepping upon the platform at Spencer Street. But Tommy rose to the occasion, shaking himself from the fetters of untimely sleep. He shouldered the bag they shared between them, thrust his arm gallantly between his sister and the crowd, and escorted her to the tram and the Victoria Coffee Palace with the air of a father in charge of a toddling babe. He had not seen the lights of Melbourne since he was a petticoated child himself, but nothing daunted him.

They had little bedrooms side by side, in one of which they shared a frugal supper of Lizzie's sandwiches and wine and water from a travelling flask and the toilet bottle. In the old days David used to put up at Menzies', and she remembered how he once brought her the most delicious trayful after she had gone to bed, with his own hands.

"How odd it feels," she mused aloud, "to be in a place like this without him!"

"I should think it does," said Tommy, knowing whom she meant by him. "I should think you'd miss him awfully sometimes."

She was not angry. She sighed, and looked tired. "Well, you are a good substitute, dear," she rejoined, gathering the crumbs of their repast into a screw of paper. "But now we must get to sleep as fast as we can, so as to be fresh for our trip in the morning."

She saw him to bed and tucked him up, and he was asleep in five minutes. But she could not get away from her thoughts of David David at his good times for hours. It was four o'clock before she ceased to hear the post−office chimes. At seven she awoke, and the first sound she was conscious of as the pattering of rain.

"Oh−h−h!"

Tommy heard her groan and came running in.

"It won't be much it can't be so lovely as it was yesterday," he cried.

"Even if it is, we must go, Tommy."

"Of course we must."

They dressed themselves, and found their way through a public drawing−room to a balcony overlooking the street.

"Hurrah!" cried the boy. "It's left off! I told you so!"

It had; but the sky had a dull and stormy look, and a fierce, muggy wind was blowing.

"North," remarked Emma gloomily, with her hands over her hair, and her eyes screwed up. "Just my luck!"

"Well, a north wind will be much better on the sea than on the land."

"If Lizzie were here, she'd make me wait till tomorrow."

"Oh, I wouldn't wait, if I were you."

"I can't! I must go! I feel as if something was drawing me that I can't resist. But I know all my pleasure is going to be spoilt. It is my fate always."

Tommy continued to combat this point of view, and they went to breakfast. Before breakfast they bought a paper from the little girl on the doorstep, to assure themselves that nothing had happened to prevent the Hygeia from keeping her engagements. No; that was all right. She was to start at 10.30, as usual.

They were ready to set off by a little after nine, and then it was raining again. "A few heat drops," said Tommy; adding, when they soon ceased to fall, the inevitable and triumphant "I told you so!" When they sat down on a bench at the railway station, tickets in hand, to wait for a Port Melbourne train, a little sheltered from the howling blast, they persuaded themselves that it was really going to be a fine day, and Emma's spirits rose. She began to think of the Back Beach, and the ocean rollers, and the sweet little bowery paths cut in the scrubby cliffs, where she and David used to wander, yawning for weariness of them and of each other (a disagreeable detail that she

chose to forget), in the first long week of their married life. How she longed to see them again! And it was going to be fine, after all.

The wind blew them on to the pier and up the gangway of the boat, Tommy holding on to his hat and his bag of bananas, Emma trying to keep her hair and her skirts together; and then they reached a haven of peace in two of the Hygeia's little chairs, on her spacious covered deck. There the wind, if only it had been not quite so boisterous, was beautiful. Wind and sea go naturally together. The bay was lumpy and ruffled, full of little waves; they lapped and splashed against the piles of the pier, and seethed along the vessel's side; and Emma's ears drank in the sound like music, and her heart swelled as if with the exhilaration of strong wine.

"This is what I wanted!" she said, settling herself in a quiet corner by the open rails. "Oh, I know it is going to do me such a lot of good! Oh, Tommy, you don't know what the sight of the sea is to me after all this long time!"

She caught her breath hysterically, and was silent for a minute; then, with cheerful calmness, urged the boy to walk about and amuse himself, and not mind her. She was all right now. She had her book. She wanted nothing more.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles, in one volume, lay ostentatiously open on her knee, and she turned the pages over. But never a word, even of that new and notorious work, did she read, or want to read, to−day. However, Tommy was satisfied, and went to look at the saloon and the machinery, and to make friends with the ship's officers, who fed his country curiosity and entertained him gloriously for the whole voyage.

Even after the last train had arrived there were not many passengers a mere handful, compared with the hundreds that used to crowd the bay boats in the old times the good old times, when she and David took trips together. And the ships were few at the port piers, not jammed together from end to end, and overflowing into the open, as she had always seen them. And all was changed! Where life used to be bright and stirring, it was now flat and dull "stale," to use the expressive schoolboy adjective so much in vogue stale as soda−water uncorked since yesterday. The fizz was gone out of everything. But then a north wind always predisposes you to look on the dark side; and not only did the wind keep in that detestable quarter, and blow as it always does blow therefrom, but the rain came on before the boat reached Queenscliff, destroying all hope of a fine day.

Tommy came to tell his sister when Queenscliff was in sight the pretty hill of trees, and the town that rises so charmingly out of the water on a fine day. In its sad, wet veil she did not want to look at it. She sat still where she was, with her face to the sea, while Tommy watched, with deep interest, the debarking passengers scrambling under their umbrellas down to the streaming pier. "After all," he said, when this sensation was past, "it's a pity we did not wait another day. I can see you are not enjoying yourself a bit."

"Oh, but I am I am!" she responded to the reproach in his voice. "And there's plenty of time for it to clear before we reach Sorrento. The wind is going down. I daresay it will be delightful when we get there."

And when they got there it did not rain much, not enough to wet them seriously between the pier and the hotel. Dinner at the Continental was an essential part of the programme. She and David had lived at the Continental during their honeymoon, and she had been tantalising Tommy with descriptions of the meals they used to have.

When they reached the house, the feeling of things being changed came back in force. There were no gay visitors flocking around, as they used to do at this hungry hour; and, having been accustomed to walk into hotels under the wing of a big husband, Emma felt vaguely small and mean as if she had greatly come down in the world when she entered this one without him. The large dining−room, where they had eaten so many nice things together, had the air of desolation that prevailed elsewhere. All its tables were fully set, with flowers in the middle and spiky napkins sticking out of the wine−glasses, as for a hundred guests; but no guests were there. Yes five; so few that they were lost in the expanse, but enough to show that the dinner had not vanished, if the company

had. Mrs. Knox sat down in the wilderness of white damask, and drew off her gloves. A silent waiter stole up with a couple of soup plates, and Tommy fell to with all his heart. And gradually the room grew so dark that they could hardly see the end of it, and the rain swept past the windows in an opaque sheet.

"Isn't it too, too bad!" wailed Emma, under her breath. "My one day!"

"Perhaps we might come again to−morrow," suggested Tommy, with his mouth full of fish.

"I can't afford two days," she sighed. "And we shall never, never get to the Back Beach!"

"Oh, yes, we shall," he replied comfortingly. "This won't last. It is too heavy. Have some beer, old girl it'll cheer you up."

"I really believe I will," she said, with a tearful laugh. And she ordered some. "Well, at any rate, whatever else goes wrong, the dinner is all right, isn't it?"

"Rather!" assented Tommy, with all the emphasis at his command. He had got hold of the bill of fare, and found that he could go on for as long as he liked without adding to the necessary fee.

They had enjoyed an excellent ragout of beef and olives, and Emma had finished, and Tommy was starting a course of poultry, when a belated guest entered making eight. It was still raining heavily, and the room was a cave of shadows; but this person, by reason of his size, the light colour of his clothes, and the bright redness of his beard, shone in the doorway like the sun through clouds. It was impossible to overlook him, unless your back was turned, like Tommy's. Emma sat against the wall, with her face to the door, and had nothing to do but to gaze about her; consequently she saw him the moment he entered, and to the best advantage. Also, he saw her. But whereas she started as if she had been shot, turned crimson as a peony and then white as milk, his cold eyes travelled calmly over her, and he walked to his seat, shook out his napkin, and signalled for his dinner, as indifferent to her presence, apparently, as if she had been a piece of furniture.

In a dry voice she said to Tommy, as soon as she could speak, "Make haste, dear; I want to go."

"It's no use going while it pours like this," he answered reasonably. "Where could you go? Better stay under shelter till it holds up. And I want some lemon tart, if you don't mind and some maraschino jelly, and cheese. Wouldn't you like some cheese and salad? You haven't had half a dinner."

"I can't eat any more," she whispered faintly. "But you have what you like. Only don't be long."

She leaned back against the wall, and tried to look indifferent and calm, like David. But she felt sick. Was this what she had made such frantic efforts to get to Sorrento for? To meet her husband like a stranger, and to be spurned in that insulting manner, as if she were the dirt under his feet as if he were the injured instead of the injurer! She should have listened to Lizzie. Oh, if Lizzie were here, how she could pay him out for that! But she had no Lizzie she was alone and defenceless. That was his opportunity. That was what he had always done taken advantage of her helplessness to be cruel to her. Oh, it was cruel! How could he do it when she was not well when he could see how solitary she was, straying about unattended and uncared for, save by a little schoolboy, too little to defend her against a big, strong man. Tears of self−pity came into her eyes, but she got rid of them quickly, terrified lest he should see her letting herself down to care. She did not care not she. But a great lump stuck fast in her throat, and she could not keep her eyes off him.

Of course he had turned his back on her, or nearly turned it. She could just see the tip of his blunt nose and the line of his hairy cheek. What a fine man he was! She thought he was a little stouter than of old their troubles had not told on him as they had on her and his rough grey suit was very becoming. Positively he was handsome. They

used to jeer at his red beard, but it was a beautiful beard. Auburn not red. His severe tranquillity, under the circumstances, was astounding. He ate his dinner as calmly as if she were a hundred miles away from him as, doubtless, he wished she was. No, it was a matter of perfect indifference to him. He didn't care where she was or what she did. He would not care if she were dead. Perhaps he wished she was, so that he could marry somebody else. And she wondered with terror for it had never occurred to her before whether he had begun to love somebody else. She wondered what he had come to Sorrento for. Not with any idea of seeing her, and making the quarrel up, clearly. With her heart swelling and thumping in every part of her body at once, burning through and through with mortification and resentment, she wondered whether she could sit out Tommy's dinner without bursting into tears.

Fortunately, she managed that. When, with a satisfied sigh, he announced that he had done, there was nothing in her veiled face to attract the attention that was again wholly at her service. He was quite happy and comfortable, and assumed that she was, too. And now all her desire was to get him out of the room in ignorance of his brother−in−law's presence there, and to get herself past that maddening person with a proper show of dignity. This, also, she managed fairly well, by keeping her nose very much up in the air, and hustling the boy along at a run. And great was her satisfaction, when out of doors again, to feel that she had not made a fool of herself for David's amusement.

Out of doors it rained still, and she did not know where to go. In the bright and stirring old days the trams would be running to and from the Back Beach every few minutes, but now they had stopped, and the cabs were at the pier. She could walk to the Back Beach, but it would tire her dreadfully, and there would hardly be time to walk there and back too. Besides, she would be soaked; not that that mattered. There was no one to care whether she took her death of cold or not. It would be the best thing that could happen. But in the first place it was necessary to get out of the path that David would traverse when he had finished his dinner.

She stepped over a magnificent dog lying on the door−mat, and led Tommy round the house to a quiet corner that she knew of, where a verandah sheltered them, and they were out of view from the public approach. Here they stood and watched the rain, until the grey sky lightened, and Emma calculated that David must have finished his meal and gone.

Then she said to her brother: "Tommy, dear, go to the Back Beach I must! It is clearing up, and we have over an hour still. Run, like a good boy, and find out if any trams are starting. If not, get a cab and bring it here. I am a little tired, and you'll go quicker without me."

Off went Tommy at full speed. Emma stood on the steps of the paved path to the hotel dining−room, to wait for his return. And David quietly came down that path behind her.

As soon as she knew that it was he and she knew it the moment she heard his step she moved aside to let him pass, and stood very rigidly, staring at the sky. And he did pass her almost. Just as she was seized with an insane impulse to beg him to take some notice of her, he checked his stride and spoke. His voice was abrupt and cold, but she had never before been so glad to hear it.

"Won't you get wet?"

She answered, without looking at him, "Oh, no; I have my ulster on" and then wished she had not been so familiar. She remembered how she had been humiliated, and pressed her lips together.

"I think you had better stand under the verandah. There's no use in catching cold for nothing."

"I shall do very well where I am, thank you."

"Where's Tommy gone?"

"To get me a cab or a tram. I want to go to the Back Beach."

"I'll see about it. Perhaps he doesn't know where to find them."

"Pray don't trouble. He knows perfectly. We don't require any assistance."

She was quite pleased with her lofty tone and demeanour. But when he took her at her word, and then and there walked off, without even a good−bye, she raged at herself for having spoken so nastily, and was seriously upset. "That was my first chance," she said, "and perhaps it will be my last. It would serve me right." Yet she looked eagerly for the coming cab or tram, making sure almost sure that David would return with it. He had evidently noticed that she was not strong, and was alive to the fact that she was not adequately protected. He really had a kind heart at bottom. And he must care something about her still. He was not anxious for her to die, so that he might marry somebody else.

It was the tram that came, and she ran across the road to meet it. But only Tommy sat in the open carriage, and she saw by his face that he had not seen David. She was absurdly disappointed, and could not speak when the boy pointed out to her that it had quite left off raining. She thought of the times when she and David had gone spinning together over the bosky tram−road to the ocean shore. Could he have forgotten them? He had heard her say that she was going now; had he no wish to return to those old haunts with her? But of course he had not. And it was all her fault.

The little engine whisked them through the wet bushes, and set them down upon the lovely headland overhanging the sea the real outside sea, with breakers spouting round the big rock, and foaming like whipped cream along the sands; and as she gazed at the familiar scene her throat ached, and her eyes burned, and her excited pulses shook her all over, worse than ever. The wind had died down, and the rain cleared off; beyond the breakers and the rock the waters seemed almost calmer than the bay. And the colours were too wonderful for words. A wide band of dove−blue sky herald of another squall lay over the horizon, and under it a breadth of peacock−purple sea that no painter would dare to imitate, because the critics, people who don't notice atmospheric effects, would turn up their noses and exclaim, "Who ever saw sea like that?" And the sea in the middle, under the clearer sky, was more artistically unnatural still a metallic, translucent, bright pea−green, with pinky−lilac shadows under the clouds. It had almost a stagey glare and gaudiness about it or that is what a faithful picture of it would have had; the real thing was so exquisitely beautiful that no one in a pensive mood could stand it. Emma stumbled down the winding paths a little way, until she came to a bench where she could sit at ease and look out, as from a lighthouse tower, upon the scene, and there she dropped, feeling as if her heart would break. It had come to this cry she must. She had borne up gallantly, considering that she had no health to support her, but she could bear up no longer. So she said to her brother, "Tommy, dear, I feel as if I should like to be alone a little while. I'm I'm tired. You go down to the beach and amuse yourself. Get some shells and things for Lizzie. I'll sit here and rest till it is time to start."

This, of course, was Tommy's natural impulse, and down he went, promising to be back by a quarter to four, when the last tram started for the steamer. He was out of sight immediately, and not another soul was to be seen. She looked all round to satisfy herself of that, and then took out her pocket−handkerchief, laid her two arms on the back of the bench, buried her face in them, and thoroughly enjoyed a good hearty outburst got the lump out of her throat, and the swelling out of her breast, and felt better after it than she had done for months.

While still abandoned to this paroxysm, but over the first violence of it, the big grey man from the hotel came down upon her, and this time she did not hear him. For not only did she indulge in tears, she also moaned aloud, because that was a luxury denied her in her father's house, where Lizzie was for ever watching her. She cried, "Oh oh oh−h−h!" in long−drawn wails and sighs, which filled her ears to the exclusion of other sounds. Thus

the noise of solid steps on the soft sand of the winding footpaths was lost.

David saw her while yet some yards away, and paused to look at her. He had fully intended to cut her if he met her again to cut her with particular precision and emphasis but now he changed his mind. He had the temper of a fiend, no doubt, but there was a little something of the angel under it, if one took the trouble to look deep enough, and that part of him was touched by her forlorn attitude. It was a very pretty attitude for a slender figure, particularly about the waist. She sat as on a horse, only much more gracefully, and under her twisted shoulders and upraised arms the curves of her girlish shape were very dainty. Her jacket was under her, for the bench was wet, and the simplicity of a cotton blouse and close−clinging serge skirt exactly suited her. She had an instinct for dress, and therefore her clothes always suited her; they were quite simple, but never lacked distinction and style. People are born with this attribute in all classes of life.

Presently she lifted her head to dab her red eyes and set her hat straight, and then she saw her husband. He was behind the seat, but not behind her face, which looked thunderstruck for the moment. As there was not time to think how she should behave, she did not behave at all. She cried out, piteously, "Oh, David, why do you torment me?"

He came forward at once.

"I have no thought of doing such a thing," he said stiffly. "I did not know you were here, or I would have taken another path."

There was a little pause, and then she burst out vehemently, "One would think I had the plague!"

He raised his brows. "Isn't that what you wish?"

"Oh," she cried, "I don't know what I wish! I'm miserable!"

Then she turned round upon the seat, and sat up primly, giving hasty twitches to hat and veil. He hesitated for a moment, and boldly sat down beside her.

"That cloud," said he, "is getting thicker. There's another storm coming."

"I am afraid so," she answered, looking at the dove−blue belt, which had a more slaty hue and a greater width than when she last noticed it. "But it doesn't matter. There is more shelter here than there used to be."

"Yes. They've built that shed since our time."

The mention of "our time" was paralysing. She racked her brains for another topic, but could not find one. A terrible silence ensued.

David broke it with a thunderbolt. "What makes you miserable?" he asked her. And, though he looked quite away from her when he spoke, she cowered and cast her eyes upon the ground. Of course she gave the inevitable answer "Nothing!"

"People don't say they are miserable, and cry their hearts out, for nothing."

"How do you know I was crying?"

"I saw you. I heard you."

"Have you been watching me?"

She took on her indignant tone, and he disdained to reply. Upon which she veered round hastily.

"Everything makes me miserable! How can I be otherwise than miserable?"

"Why, I thought it was only being with me that made you miserable. I have been imagining you quite enjoying yourself with that dear, amiable sister of yours."

"Say what you like to me, but don't sneer at her," she exclaimed in a quarrelsome tone, and again since he did not "answer back" repenting. She had no real heart for quarrelling now; nor, it appeared, had he. Lest he should get up and go lest this brief but precious opportunity should be wasted like the last she hastened to make herself more agreeable.

"Are you are you quite well, David? You look well."

"Yes, thanks. I'm all right." He silently poked the damp ground with his umbrella, and, having rooted up a weed or two, stole a side glance at her. "I'm afraid I can't return the compliment," he remarked. "I don't think you are looking well at all. I noticed it directly I saw you."

"Just now?"

"No at lunch."

"Did you really take the trouble to notice me at lunch?"

"I did." Another palpitating pause. "What's been the matter with you, Emmie?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Of course. I expected you would say that. Well, I suppose it is no business of mine "

"I mean, nothing serious; I haven't been really ill. It's it's more mind than body, I think."

"How's that?"

He poked five holes in the gravel while he waited vainly for an explanation.

"I daresay," she presently continued, "I shall be ever so much the better for this little change. The sea always does me good."

"Are you staying here?"

"No. We came by the boat this morning, and are going back now. It must be nearly time, by the way."

"More than half an hour yet," he said, looking at his watch. "Who are 'we'?"

"Tommy and I. He has gone down to the beach to look for shells."

"Only Tommy? Are the rest of them in town?"

"No at home. We came by ourselves, just for the trip just because I pined so for a breath of sea. We shall return to−morrow. Are you ?"

But she could say no more. Both jerked their heads sharply towards the sound of an approaching step hurrying up an unseen path beneath them. In a moment Tommy's freckled face appeared above the bushes.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Emma weakly. She pretended to be much relieved, but she was ready to cry with chagrin.

"Well, my boy," said David, with assumed heartiness, "how are you?"

Tommy stopped dead with amazement, red and breathless; then came forward to shake hands with his brother−in−law, accepting his presence without comment for even a rough school−boy has a wonderful knack of behaving like a gentleman at times in such awkward crises. His first idea was to make himself scarce immediately.

"It's coming on to rain," he stammered. "Hadn't I better run up and see if there's a tram about?"

He looked at David, and David looked at him, with shy affection. They had always been good friends.

"Perhaps you'd better," said David, as Emma's reluctance to move kept her silent. "Yes, it is coming on to pour badly. Put on your jacket, Emma."

She stood up, and he helped her on with her light coat, just as he used to do in the honeymoon days. Perhaps he would have done something more, and so would she, had not the storm cloud burst in a fierce shower and driven them to seek instant shelter. They scrambled up the hill to the long shed that was a strange place to them, and there stood side by side behind David's umbrella for the rain drove from the sea; and Emma began to wonder, with a shaking heart, how the adventure was going to end. Tommy was at the tram platform, skipping up and down with glee.

"You needn't," said David, "hug that damp thing against your thin skirt, need you? Give it to me." He alluded to her ulster, which hung over her folded arms.

"It is all right, thank you."

"Give it to me."

She handed it over with a smile her first smile pleased to hear the imperious tone at which she used to be so absurdly offended. When he had carefully felt it all over, he bade her put it on. He also helped her to adjust it with the hand that was not holding the umbrella. As his big fingers fumbled with a button near her throat, she cast down her eyes, and blushed and trembled, as if she were being tentatively wooed again. The old girl bashfulness prompted her to frustrate their mutual ends by a stupid and commonplace remark:

"What a day for a bay excursion!"

"Yes," he said slowly. "What made you choose such a day?"

"I did not choose it." And she went into explanations. "I might say," looking at him almost archly, "how came you to choose such a day?"

"I? Oh business."

"Not pleasure?"

"No, indeed. I haven't been thinking much about pleasure these days. I'm like the rest, as I suppose you know pretty nearly stone−broke."

"What? You don't mean that! No; I never, never knew!"

"Well, I've lost a good two−thirds of the income I had when you were with me, and Heaven knows whether I am going to save the rest. So you see," with sudden bitterness, "you timed it very well."

She moved closer, and looked squarely up at him, and there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, David, how can you speak so? Do you suppose I cared for money for anything "

"You certainly did not care for me," he broke in roughly. "That's all I know."

"But, if you come to that, did you care for me?"

"I never deserted you, at any rate."

"But, Davie "

Alas! At this critical juncture they were interrupted again. Tommy came running to inform them that the tram was about to start. Stern duty compelled him.

"Oh!" Emma faintly ejaculated; and then a deadly silence fell.

When all three were in the car, exposed to a rush of rain that was like a volley of bullets, she whispered under David's umbrella, held broadside to the gale, "Are you going by the Hygeia too?"

He said "Yes." And then they spoke no more, except to Tommy, until they reached the boat. On the way thither they had to shelter for some minutes in the tram−shed on the bay side. When they walked down the pier and climbed on board, the air was clear and soft, and a pallid sky gleaming over a mauve and pea−green sea.

On deck David picked up a chair, and asked his wife where she preferred to sit. She chose a place astern, between two of the fixed seats, where there were fewest people. There, being comfortably settled, with her feet upon the rail, and her back to everybody, she felt that all she wanted in the world was to have him in another chair beside her, to talk to her all the way to Melbourne, which would be for two hours and a half. In that time, surely, she would be able to explain away some of the misapprehensions that he evidently laboured under. She burned to explain them to justify herself. No, not to justify herself exactly; perhaps not even to excuse herself; but to disabuse his mind of the idea that she had left him because she did not care for him to make him understand, above all things, that she was not the woman to seek comfort for herself while those she loved were in difficulty and poverty to wholly reconsider the situation, in short, with a view to better arrangements.

But, instead of sitting down with her in that deliciously quiet corner, which she had chosen on purpose, he strayed away with Tommy. They disappeared together before she was aware of it, and did not come back. She kept her ears pricked and her eyes turned over her left shoulder for a long time; but the Hygeia is a boat on which one can easily lose and be lost to one's friends, and for nearly the whole distance between Sorrento and Queenscliff she never saw a sign of them. The fact was that David had a great many vital questions to submit to his small brother−in−law before he could proceed further; but this she did not think of. She imagined that Tommy had gone off to leave the coast clear for a lover's tête−à−tête, and that David had gone off to avoid that tête−à−tête. As time went on, and hope and patience failed, and it seemed evident to her that he was quite implacable, she ceased to

make any pretences to herself. She admitted that she could never bear now to go back to the country as she had come away from it that if he refused to let her retrace the mad step she had taken six months ago, her heart would break, and her life become wholly valueless to her.

A very miserable woman she was as she sat forlornly alone in her nook between the empty seats, watching the rough tumble of the water that could hardly shake the floor beneath her, and the floods of swirling foam that ran past her feet, tucked between the open rails. Listening to the sound she loved the sweetest music in the world and gazing on the scene for which her soul had hungered as an exile for its home, she said to herself that she wished she was dead that she would like to jump up from her chair and throw herself overboard. "If I were dead, past troubling him any more, perhaps he would care for me a little," she thought, with tear−filled eyes and a bursting heart. "Oh, I wish I was drowned and dead at the bottom of the sea!"

Then something occurred whereby she nearly had that wish. The Hygeia was nearing Queenscliff where Emma was convinced that David would get off and finish his journey by train, so as to be finally rid of her and the Flinders, on its way to Launceston, was making for the Heads. The two fast boats, like long−lost brothers hastening to embrace each other, kept their respective courses at full speed until they met, and the bows of the Tasmanian boat were only a few yards from the side of the bay steamer, rather more than a few yards from the end. To err is human, even in the case of ships' officers, who, it must be admitted, err less, professionally, than any body of known men; and the navigator of the excursion boat had the apparently reasonable idea that he could get past in time. So he did; but an "imminent collision" was spoken of in the evening papers, and the Marine Board, not having enough to do with inquiring into things that did happen, gladly took note of those that might have done so, and decided, in sundry forms and ceremonies lasting over a fortnight, that the Hygeia had incurred penalties for violating or nearly violating the rules of the road. Certainly a collision did seem imminent for a moment even inevitable. Romantic reporters described the Hygeia's people as rushing for life−belts and cork jackets in a panic of fright; but there was no time for that no time even to turn the button which would have showered those articles upon all in need of them. They simply got up from their chairs and stood for a breathless instant with their hearts in their mouths. Then, the Flinders having already backed her engines, the Hygeia ported her helm, whisking round with the light speed of a waltzing lady; and, sideways to each other, they swept apart, and went their ways as if nothing had happened. In fact, nothing had happened. It was all over in a breath.

But in that breath things changed for Emma. She sat facing the Flinders as it came up, exactly in the path of the towering bows; and as she sprang from her chair an arm was flung round her, and she was whirled from that dangerous place.

"Don't be frightened, dear; stick to me," said David, And the boat slewed round, and they saw they were not going into the water. Emma, though she did not want to drown now, had a moment's keen disappointment. She thought how beautiful it would have been to be shipwrecked, and saved by her gallant husband; for, of course, he would have saved her. Next moment he was leading her back to her seat, laughing confusedly; she, hanging on his arm, bathed in delicious blushes from head to foot.

"Ha! I say, that was a narrow shave! I really thought she was into us," he said, as he handed her a chair.

"Yes; and wasn't it odd?" her voice quivered and her eyes filled "I was just wishing I was at the bottom of the sea."

"Don't talk nonsense," he rejoined, very roughly, but with no unkindness in his tone.

"It isn't nonsense. I don't care a bit for my life as things are now." There was a wail in her voice. "David, you are not going away again, are you?"

"Only to get a chair."

He fetched a chair, and sat down beside her, very close. Flanked by the two empty seats, and with their backs to the deck, where all the passengers, Tommy included, were looking towards Queenscliff pier with their backs to them, they enjoyed some minutes of welcome privacy.

"And so you haven't found it so very jolly, after all?"

He smiled a little to himself, but did not let her see it.

"Oh, David, I have been so miserable so utterly miserable without you!"

"And you were utterly miserable with me. So what's to be done?"

"It was my fault, David. I know I don't deserve to be forgiven "

Too overcome to proceed, she looked at him with swimming eyes, and put out her hand appealingly. He took it and held it, gently kneading it between his own.

"I think it was mostly mine," he said. "I know I've got a vile temper, and you did use to rile me, old girl, now didn't you?"

"I was a beast."

"No, no, you weren't. But well, we didn't understand each other, did we? We were both too new to it, I suppose. I should have been gentler with a delicate little thing like you. I have been awfully sorry about it many a time."

"You never wrote to me, David!"

"You never wrote to me, Emmie."

"I didn't like to."

"And I couldn't, after your telling me "

"Oh, don't speak of that! If you knew how I have regretted those hasty, wicked words, how I've wanted to come back "

"There, there!" he whispered soothingly, for her emotion was so great that it threatened to attract notice. "Let's say no more about it. Come back, if you feel you want to; if you think you can put up with such an ogre as I am a ruined man, into the bargain."

"Oh, I don't mind your being poor all the better! I can work for you, as well as you for me. I can do without a servant "

"No, no; I'm not so badly off as that. I'm not going to let you slave and fag, and wear yourself out. It's for me to take care of you, pet. And I mean to do it a little better than I did last time. When I get you again, I'll see if I can't fatten you up a bit, and put the roses back into your cheeks. You are looking wretched."

"No wonder! No wonder!"

"Only you must promise not to throw me over again, Emmie, if we happen to quarrel. I daresay I shall be obstreperous sometimes I'll try not "

"Darling! Darling!"

She leaned against his bent shoulder, put an arm across his breast, which she could hardly span, and her lips to his prickly red moustache. He clasped her for a moment, and they snatched an eager kiss. Of course people saw them, even with their backs. turned, and were visibly scandalized. But Emma, while blushing for her indiscretion, refused to be ashamed of it.

"Are we not husband and wife?" she demanded bridling.

"Thank God we are!" he replied; "and what we've got to do now is to keep so. But, Emmie, let us behave ourselves in a public place. Put your hat straight, my dear. I am going now to get you a cup of tea."

He lent downstairs, leaving her, in her palpitating happiness, to tuck up her loose hair, arrange her veil, and otherwise compose herself. When he returned, Tommy was with him, grinning from ear to ear, and capering for joy.

"My word," he whispered audibly, "you little thought what you were coming to the seaside for, did you? And on such a bad day too! Wasn't it a bit of luck?"

Emma looked at him with solemn, impassioned eyes.

"I believe," she said, breathing deeply, "that I was led."

It came on to rain and blow again harder than ever a gale fierce enough to snap hawsers wholesale, according to later reports; but the Hygeia, with weather awnings down, slipped calmly through it, and David and Emma, when they had moved forward a little, were perfectly dry and comfortable. Never in all their lives had they been so comfortable before. Then, at about five o'clock, the colour came into the sea again, and the loveliest rainbow into the sky.

David pointed to it.

"The world is not to be drowned any more, Emmie."

"Not by me," she answered, with a chastened smile.

Tommy had left them for a long time, and now came creeping back to give them the encouragement of his opinion that it was going to be a fine evening after all.

"I believe so," said David. "And I was just regretting that we hadn't stayed at Sorrento. We could have had a nice long ramble before dark."

"Oh, but we couldn't have stayed, you know. We promised to go home to−morrow. I've got my examinations next week."

"Well, my boy, you can go. I'll see you off safely, and get somebody to look after you on the journey. But Emma had better stay with me. One day of the sea isn't enough for her she wants a longer change. Tell Lizzie I don't think, by the look of her, that she has been at all well taken care of up there "

"David, hush!"

"And that I think she's safer in my charge. We go back to Sorrento, Emmie, and stop there over Sunday, since the sea does you so much good."

* * * * * * * * * *

TWO OLD FOGIES

CHAPTER I

"Tuesday next being Prince of Wales' birth being er er the Feast of All Saints, there will be Divine Service in this church at seven o'clock in the evening." Anna Paine was sitting in the choir, nearly fronting her father, when he gave out this notice. She looked at him with steely eyes that transfixed him like daggers. The girls beside her tittered; the men behind her nudged each other, and whispered, and fluttered leaves of music noisily. A smile rippled over the faces in the body of the church. One decorous maiden lady in a front pew hung her head and blushed.

"Certainly," thought Anna Paine, "he is falling into his second childhood. Last Sunday he gave out the wrong hymn, and the Sunday before he put his hood on inside out. Nothing but the infirmities of age can explain this increasing absent−mindedness."

She totted up his sum of years, and saw that he was indeed growing an old man fifty−five next birthday.

The lady who had blushed and not laughed at the parson's blunder she also was quite an old woman, forty at the least emerged upon the footpath after service in company with a youthful niece and nephew. They dawdled as they walked, for the brother of the lady and father of the girl and boy was counting the offertory in the vestry, and it was their habit to wait for him. It had been their habit since the boy came home. The boy, by the way, was a smart, moustached young man, taking a little holiday between his labours at the University, which were over, and the labours of his profession, which were yet to come. But, of course, he was a boy to his aunt, just as she was an old maid to him.

He pounced upon Anna Paine as she was sedately walking towards the parsonage. Her severe young face, full of trouble and responsibility about her aged and erring father, melted into smiles.

"Oh, is it you?" she cried, as if she had not been lingering on purpose to let him catch her up. "Good−morning."

"Good−morning, Miss Paine. Oh, I say, did you hear what your father said when he gave out the notice? Prince of Wales' birthday, by Jove! You should have seen aunt's face. I nearly had a fit. Now, if it had been me ! I've done nothing but think of Prince of Wales' birthday ever since he asked me to come and see the fireworks from the church tower."

"What?" cried Anna.

"Don't you know? He said we shouldn't want to be in the crush of the street, and that we could see everything from the tower beautifully; and he proposed that we should all go up and spend the evening there. I think it's the jolliest idea, don't you? Didn't he tell you he had asked us?"

"Not a word," said Anna. "He is getting dreadfully forgetful. I am really afraid that he is losing his faculties a little that his memory is going "

"I daresay. But don't you think it a delightful way of seeing the fireworks? I believe he did ask us to tea; but, of course, he had no business to do that without speaking to you."

"Oh, do come; come to tea, of course all of you. We shall be delighted."

"Thanks thanks; it's too good of you. My father never goes out to tea, as you know; but poor old aunt will be charmed, and Eve too."

"I ought to go and speak to your aunt."

"You needn't. She's got Toby."

They glanced back towards the church, and laughed to see aunt staggering in the embraces of the parsonage dog, a mongrel collie, strong and ardent enough to knock the little woman down.

"How can she let him?" exclaimed Anna, who permitted no such liberties herself. "He will tear that lace mantle to rags. I can't understand why he is so fond of her, can you?"

"Cupboard love. She's a soft−hearted old dear, and gives him cakes and bones when he comes to the house."

"Then no wonder he almost lives there."

"Is he too much away? She shall leave off encouraging him. I will tell her."

"You need not; I don't want him. I hate dogs about the place; they are so messy, especially in wet weather."

"I hope to goodness it won't be wet on the ninth."

"I hope not, indeed."

The treasurer came out from the vestry, with the morning's takings in his pocket, and his young daughter claimed him. Mr. Paine hurried to release aunt from Toby's loving persecutions.

"Down, sir! down this minute! How dare you, sir?"

He would have cuffed the collie had not aunt protected him.

"Do not scold him," pleaded she, looking at the tall grey man with the softest woman's eyes. "It is just pure affection, Mr. Paine, and we old folks don't get too much of that."

"I hope you don't call yourself old, Miss Ransome," said the parson earnestly.

"Oh, yes," she rejoined, with a fluttered laugh and blush; "a most ancient person."

"Then what must I be?" he inquired tragically.

She blushed a little more as she tried to make him believe that he was in the golden prime; and the young people the real young people came up.

"Well, Miss Ransome," said Mr. Paine, "I hope we are to have the pleasure of seeing you on Prince of Wales' birthday. By the way, what a stupid mistake I made this morning! Yes, my dear" to Anna "I know you are going

to read me a lecture, but I assure you it was the purest accident. I can't think how I came to do it. So many things just now Prince of Wales' birthday, Guy Fawkes, and so on that I suppose I got confused amongst them. I wonder I did not say 'Guy Fawkes' Day,' with all the boys in the town coming to beg subscriptions for their bonfires and crackers."

"One does not," said Anna gravely, "connect things of that sort with the services of the Church. At least, I am glad you did not say, 'Tuesday next being Cup Day' for it is Cup Day, more's the pity."

"I should hardly have made that mistake," said Mr. Paine, with dignity, "seeing how much I disapprove of racing and gambling one of the curses of this country."

"Yes," murmured aunt, glancing at her nephew, who had sunk a pound of precious money in Tattersalls' Sweep.

"I should hope you disapprove of Guy Fawkes, too," said Anna. "Anything so absurd as to preserve a custom of that kind as a British institution, in a new country, and at this time of day! No wonder the Catholics are offended."

"But, my dear," said aunt gently, "no one thinks of its origin now. It is only kept up as an excuse for bonfires. Boys do so love bonfires!"

Aunt loved boys, and was kind to their little weaknesses; but Anna was for doing what was right and reasonable, regardless of human whims. "They should be taught better," said she. "It is ridiculous to give them a good education with one hand, and with the other to encourage them in a display of ignorance and bigotry that would disgrace the most uncivilized nation. Don't you think so, Mr. Ransome?"

She spoke to Mr. Ransome junior. Mr. Ransome senior had been dragged into the church tower by his daughter Eve, who desired to assure him that the ladders were safe.

"Certainly," said young Ransome, in his cheerful way. "But since bonfires are to be it's idiotic, of course but as they will be lit, in spite of us, wouldn't it be nice to go up the tower to look at them? I know of six at the least. They would look very pretty at night, burning on the hills."

He had, in fact, helped to build one of those six bonfires; he had given his oldest hat and trousers to the straw man who was to crown its apex instigated by aunt.

"Saturday is your father's busy night," suggested aunt.

"But I could get forward," said Mr. Paine eagerly. "I could spare an hour or two."

"No need for that, sir; I'd look after them," said Alan Ransome, with an exulting look at Anna.

"Then suppose you all come round before it gets dark?"

This plan was agreed to, in addition to the plans for Prince of Wales' birthday; and then the party separated. Old Ransome (he, too, was over fifty), a bank manager of standing in the town, led the way home with his daughter, a bouncing girl of fifteen. Young Ransome followed, escorting his little aunt. He wanted to give her his arm, to aid her feeble steps; but the umbrella skirt of her Sunday gown required a hand to hold it up behind, and the other was occupied with her parasol and Prayer−Book. In the rear of the party Toby trotted stealthily, sniffing the beloved footsteps on the pavement. He always liked to see her safely home, even when his sense of duty to his own family prevented him from staying there with her.

It was the loveliest day, that 30th of October, and promised settled weather for the great events. Both aunt and nephew were thinking of this as they paced the street towards their dinner.

"It isn't often we have a really all−fine Cup Week," said Alan at last, "but I do think we are safe for it this time."

"Yes," said aunt, smiling at the intense blue sky. "I am so glad! I hate to think of poor holiday−makers having their pleasure spoiled."

She did not allude only to the racing folks, on whom the good Church people desire that rain should fall. Cup Day being a public holiday through the length and breadth of Victoria, and all the trains and steamboats running at excursion fares, the Y.M.C.A. and Sunday Schools innumerable disport themselves in pious games, and shopkeepers and postmen, with all representatives of industrious respectability, go a holiday−making in their best clothes as a social duty, and in a more thorough manner than at any other time of the year even Christmas. And the sun must shine upon just and unjust together. Perhaps, however, aunt was not even alluding to these.

In the parsonage Mr. Paine sat down to his dinner, vis−à−vis with his daughter, who kept house for him so admirably. She was a very pretty girl, and looked charming in her new summer frock of pink zephyr and the neat apron she had put on to preserve it. No one would have guessed, from her appearance, how severe she could be. She caused her father to shake in his shoes at times like the present, when he knew he had failed in his duty as a clergyman and a rural dean. Anna, somehow, never failed in hers.

"What delightful weather!" remarked the parson, with affected light−heartedness, beginning to carve the cold lamb set before him. "The collection was double what we had last Sunday morning."

Anna turned the salad over thoughtfully.

"It is very unfortunate that Cup Day should fall on the first," she said. "I am afraid we shall have no congregation. I think, father, you ought to have said something about it in your sermon. How many will remember All Saints' Day when their heads are full of the winner and their gains and losses?"

"Perhaps I ought. But I will have a choir practice after service. That always brings a few. I will give it out to−night."

"I am afraid even the choir will not come on a Cup Night. But I will go and see some of them, and ask them to set an example. And, by the way, my dear father, do please write down your notices in future, and read them from the paper. Your memory is not as good as it used to be, and a mistake such as you made this morning is too, too dreadful. The whole church was giggling. All the young clergy will hear about it, and make fun of you. I dare say it will come to the bishop's ears."

"I know, my dear. I am extremely sorry. But we are all liable to blunder sometimes. I suppose I was thinking of your young friends coming to see the fireworks from the tower, or something of that sort."

"We might have thought of it," said Anna, "though not in church, I hope. But such things can't interest you."

Mr. Paine attacked his dinner resolutely. He was an old man, grey and bald, with lines in his thin, large−featured face; but his teeth and his appetite for food (amongst other things) were as good as hers. She lectured him throughout his meal, gently, but firmly. Then she made him a nice cup of tea, and sent him forth to his afternoon bush service with a great coat and comforter in the buggy; for she was a devoted child.

"My dear," he protested, "I don't want wraps this summer day."

"That is just where you careless people make a mistake," she replied calmly. "You think that one warm day, like one swallow, makes a summer. It may turn cold at any moment, and will when the sun goes down. It is very well for us young folks to run risks though I never do it, for I think it is wrong but not for people of your age. The first heat is worse for giving colds than winter weather."

So he drove off, with his wraps under the seat, accompanied by Toby, who had returned from his visit to aunt to join the expedition; and Miss Paine went to Sunday School. She was a terror at Sunday School. Of course I mean that she was a terror to misbehaving boys and girls. To the school itself she was foundation and coping stone; it never could have got along, not to say excelled in good management as it did, without her.

The first of November came. The first of November is All Saints' Day, and when it falls on a Tuesday it falls naturally on the first Tuesday of the month, and the first Tuesday of the month is Cup Day. The combination, as sadly anticipated, was fatal to the success of Mr. Paine's service. A morning week−day service never had a chance, save on Good Fridays and Christmas Days, but an evening one, especially with a choir practice tacked on to it, did sometimes come off, to flatter the poor parson that the church was still what it used to be in the good old times. On this occasion there was no congregation only Anna and another; and the verger was furious at having to pull the bell on Cup Night. He rang for ten minutes instead of the regulation quarter of an hour, and then plunged into the street and was lost to sight and use. Mr. Paine waited dejectedly for the girls of the choir; was then commanded by Anna to read the prayers and give a short address, as a duty to the solitary parishioner who had been led to expect them, but who would gladly have let him off; he then put out the lights himself, and locked the western door. Before he left the vestry he wrote down in his sermon book that a service had been held, and had been poorly attended on account of rain. But it was not the rain that killed that service; it was the Cup. The great race had been run two hundred miles away, and the astonishing victory of Glenloth had been known for hours; but still the excitement of the event reverberated through the little town, and so absorbed the thoughts of nearly every man, woman and child in it that they never noticed the lighted windows of the church on the hill. The bell tinkled to deaf ears.

"I did think," said Mr. Paine, "that Miss Ransome would have come, if nobody else."

"Yes," said Anna, who was aggrieved because Alan had not brought his aunt though, indeed, even she acknowledged that it was too much to expect of any young man who had not a pronouncedly pious bent. "She, at any rate, might have set an example."

Though it was with no idea of setting an example that she did it, aunt had duly prepared for church. To her it was a blessed privilege to sit under Mr. Paine, and the Cup was nothing; she did not even know that Glenloth had been last horse but one in the betting, until Alan told her at tea. But just as she was creeping downstairs in waterproof and goloshes, her niece intercepted her, and loudly forbade her to go out on such a night.

"The idea of your thinking of such a thing, with a cold already!" cried Eve. "You naughty old woman! I will not allow you to risk your precious health, so don't imagine it. Take off your things this minute."

"My dear, I am quite protected from the weather," pleaded aunt; "look at me!" She displayed her rubber−shod feet and the wings of her Russian cloak. "How can I take harm with these?"

Eve called her brother, who had just rushed in to give his father the latest news of sweep winnings, and she put the case to him.

"Look here, Alan! are we to let this old lady go out and catch her death of cold, just for the sake of making up a congregation for Mr. Paine?"

"Certainly not," said Alan. "Most decidedly not. If she doesn't know how to take care of herself better than that, we must teach her. A little woman, under seven stone, as thin as tissue paper, with a chest as delicate as I don't know what I daresay we are going to let her get cold and catch her death, just to please Mr. Paine!"

"Dear boy," murmured the object of his solicitude with a hand on his arm, "to think so much of his old aunt! But I am well wrapped up, love, and I do so want to go!"

"You are not to go," he declared firmly.

And the end of it was that she took off her waterproof and goloshes, and sat down to listen to his story of the rainy Cup rainier than in Assyrian's year and the fortune that would have been his had he drawn Glenloth in Tattersall's. She made a bad listener, which was not often the case. The sound of the church bell, faint and thin in the distance, distracted her.

CHAPTER II

This was the first disappointment. And the sad Cup Day, taking its colour from the general aspect of public affairs, seemed to have set the key for all the November holidays. On the fifth it rained again, and harder than before. There should have been an eclipse of the moon on Friday night, and the astronomers had their turn of frustrated hopes, for no moon could show itself through such density of cloud. All Saturday it poured so continuously as to preclude the possibility of bonfires burning, as it was thought, though boys might be expected to try to light them. Mr. Paine got forward with his sermon, and aunt was all day putting her head out of doors to see how the sky looked; but at seven o'clock it was dripping still, and they had to resign themselves to fate. Aunt knew she would not be allowed to go out in the rain, and was not so foolish as to propose it. Eve, also, was ordered by her father to remain at home. Only Alan, who was a young man and could do as he liked, shook himself into his caped ulster, set a flannel cap on the back of his curly head, and marched off to the parsonage. "I came, sir," said he at the study door, "to say that aunt and Eve are very sorry, but it was too wet for them to come out to−night."

"Yes," said Mr. Paine, "I was afraid so. Well, we must hope for better luck next week. There would be nothing to see, I suppose. Bonfires will never burn after being soaked like this."

"I don't know," said Alan; "I expect they'll pour buckets of kerosene over them. Trust the boys not to be done, when they've set their minds on having them."

"But it's too wet to go out to them. The parents would not allow it."

"It is not as bad as it was. I think it is holding up. More like a Scotch mist than actual rain. You can hear them letting off their crackers. I'm sure, if it doesn't actually pour in sheets, they will have the bonfires somehow. Shall we just take a run up the tower and look?"

This was not the same thing to Mr. Paine as escorting a party which included aunt, and he begged to be excused. "But you go, if you like, my boy," he said hospitably. "You know the way. Anna will give you a lantern."

"And would would Miss Paine?"

"You can ask her. I don't suppose she would, on such a night; but you can see what she says. You will excuse me now; I am rather occupied. Saturday is my busy night, you know."

He retired within his sanctum, and shut the door. Anna, he knew, would do all that was right in the entertainment

of the young man. He never thought of her as needing a chaperon or parental protection of any kind. She never thought of it either, young and pretty as she was.

She was sitting in the dining−room, delicately darning a rent in her father's cassock. He had torn it on a nail last Sunday, and said nothing to her about it until Sunday had nearly come again for which she had severely reprimanded him. She thought it another proof that the forgetfulness of old age was creeping on. But he had not forgotten; he had merely put off telling her to the last moment because he was afraid of what she would say. When Alan Ransome returned from his mission to the study door, she snipped the silk thread, folded up the garment, tucked all her implements into her neat work−basket, and gave herself up to a girl's enjoyments.

"Well," she said, with a welcoming smile, "you have not persuaded him to do anything so foolish?"

"No," said Alan, sitting down comfortably and spreading his arms on the table. "But he said I might go up, and that you would give me a lantern."

"Certainly. But are you really so set on seeing a bonfire? Not that there will be any to−night "

"There will," he interposed. "Listen! it has left off raining."

He held up his hand, and they listened, looking into each other's eyes. It did not seem to be raining now, but they could hardly have heard rain, in any case, for the constant popping of Chinese crackers in the street.

"Are you really so keen to see a boy's bonfire that you would toil up those ladders in the dark and wet alone ?"

"Not alone," he again interrupted. "I'll go if you'll go; if not, I shall stop down, of course."

"And do you think I am going to be so silly?"

"I don't see anything silly about it. It is not raining. They are sure to light up. And the effect will be very pretty seen from there."

"I have not your passion for bonfires. I disapprove of them."

"I know. It's just the artistic effect. You can imagine they are the beacons those old Scotch fellows used to burn to summon the clans to war. Do come! You promised that you would on Sunday."

"Yes, if fine. And when I thought we were going to be a party."

"You and I are party enough. Your father told me I might ask you."

The colour rose in her pretty face. She got up and went out to look at the night. Alan promptly followed her.

"It is pitch−dark," she said falteringly.

"All the better," he declared. "They will show up splendidly. Far better than if it were clear."

"It does seem so idiotic," she continued, laughing. But there was indecision in her voice, and he felt his point was gained.

"Go and wrap yourself up and get the lantern," he urged. "If you don't like to climb the tower, we can just have a look from the church gate."

Still protesting, she fetched a cloak and hat, and procured a lantern from the kitchen. The maid−of−all−work was out for the evening, like all bush−town maids on this day of the week, when shops closed at ten instead of at six, and a faint flavour of Continental boulevard made the lighted pavements attractive, even in wet weather; so there was no one to spy and make remarks upon the young lady's proceedings. It is needless to say that she would have indignantly scouted the idea of doing anything, at any time, that the whole world might not see and know of; but we all have our weak moments, and the unacknowledged feeling that she was taking rather an extreme liberty with conscience and the convenances caused Anna Paine to respect her father's judgment and prerogatives a little more than usual. She was glad that he had told Alan to ask her to go with him, and that he saw no harm in her doing so.

Of course they did not stop at the church gate. A glow in the distant darkness showed that one bonfire, at least, had been started successfully, by kerosene or otherwise; and Alan believed it was the one that he had built, and insisted that they must go up the tower to prove it. Anna said, "Oh, well, just for a moment"; and the sudden thumping of her heart seemed to presage the fate that she thereby rashly invited.

The key was in the vestry door "as usual!" Anna interjected and they let themselves into the church, the intense silence of which was almost audible. It was, by the way, a superior church for a bush town; large and strong, built of the white granite that formed the hill on which it stood and the wooded ranges that surrounded it. The tall, square, battlemented tower was a particularly rare distinction, of which the parish was very proud. It had three storeys, the middle one being the bell chamber; and on the leaded roof stood a tall flag−staff, from which the royal standard flew on Queen's birthdays and other national occasions. The ascent was made by very long and extremely shaky ladders, which, however, were guaranteed to bear.

At the bottom of the lowest of these, in the porch behind the great west door, Alan halted.

"I will go first and open the trap," he said. "Stay here till I get up. Don't start till I am off the ladder, and can hang down the lantern for you to see by. Are you sure you don't feel nervous?" His tone was very tender.

"Not a bit," she replied; "I have been up too often to feel nervous."

But still her hands trembled as she grasped the rungs, one after another, and slowly hoisted herself after him towards the square hole overhead.

His eager, handsome face overhung the hole, and his arms were outstretched to receive her as soon as her hat was on a level with it. The trial to women's nerves was at these points, because the ladders stood against the wall, and one had to clamber sideways over a little chasm to reach the floor; and he was resolved to take every care of her.

"Don't bother," she cried, hurriedly scrambling to her feet; "I am used to it. I don't want help. It's your poor aunt whom we shall have to look after, if she is really determined to come up on Wednesday."

"She is quite determined," said Alan. "You would think she was a girl looking forward to a ball the way she is counting on it. Poor old thing!"

He lowered the cover over the trap door, and they ascended the second ladder, past the beam that supported the bell, which projected rather dangerously "Mind the beam! Mind the beam!" he kept calling out, until the little figure had passed it, and was near him once more. Then he dashed aside the lantern and was in time to half lift her from the ladder to the floor.

"I told you I wanted no help," she protested shaking out her skirts. But she said it with a friendly laugh, and her face, gleaming for a moment in the little haze of lantern light, was lovely with girlish blushes.

Again he made the trap−door safe, and they ascended the third ladder, which came out upon the roof. This time he set the lantern upon the edge of the opening, and when she came up he seized her in both arms, and dragging her and himself to their feet together, stood on the leads and held her to his breast, and kissed her face and hair under her hat brim.

She uttered a cry of consternation. "Oh! oh was this what you enticed me up for? Oh, Mr. Ransome, don't you forget yourself "

"But you don't mind you do care for me," he murmured, continuing to kiss her with all the ardour of a lover of his years. "I know it and you are not angry with me really not really, Anna? I couldn't help it it had to come some time. Well, I won't tease you, if you'd rather not. Let us look at the bonfires. Yes, there they are two of them and that biggest one is mine. At least, I helped some little fellows to build it."

They stood, silent and trembling, in an embrasure of the granite battlements, and looked out upon the world. It was one limitless sea of gloom, save where the street lamps and the torches of the Salvation Army defined the broken outlines of the town below them, and where the bonfires blazed upon the black hills that ringed them round. One of the fires soon went out; the other lasted longer, and made a brave show to the end.

"That's mine," said Alan.

But it was useless to pretend to be interested in trifles of that sort now. They were two young things, as nature made them, and it was all dark night around, and they were absolutely alone in it. Lovers never could have found a place better fitted for love−making than the top of that church tower, with the three trap−doors shut down. Before they knew it they were leaning against each other, like two shocks of corn in a summer field. And Alan asked his companion whether she loved him, and she confessed frankly that she did.

"But, dear," she said solemnly, "I am very sorry that this has happened. I have been hoping praying that you might not come to care too much for me."

"Oh, Anna! Why?" Her head was resting on his shoulder, and his moustache upon her lips, so he could not understand it. "Because, Alan, I can never marry you."

"Oh, why?" he cried again. "Not just yet, perhaps, until I have begun to make a living "

"Never!" she reiterated, in a tragic voice. And she stood away from him, and leaned upon the breast−high parapet of stone, which was wet with unheeded rain.

"That's nonsense," said Alan Ransome.

"No," said she; "it is duty."

How should it be duty, he wanted to know. For his part, he couldn't for the life of him see it.

"I will never leave my father, Alan. He is getting infirm, and he has no one but me to take care of him. While he lives I must not think of making a home for myself."

"But, dearest, other girls do it. Every day they do. It is what fathers expect."

"Other girls may be selfish, but you would not wish me to be so, Alan."

"At any rate, he won't live for ever. He is getting old, as you say."

"People sometimes live to be eighty and ninety, and so may he. We will not count on his death, please, dear."

"No, of course not. Still well, we need not bother about the future yet one never knows what may turn up. Let us be happy in the present, darling," drawing her again into his young arms.

"But if I let you be happy in the present," she urged, "I shall be laying up unhappiness for you in the future. No, Alan, I will not drag you into a long engagement, that might last till I am an old maid as old as your aunt. You shall be free to marry and to live your life. I am not free. I am dedicated to my father for as long as he lives. You must give me up, dear." And here she sobbed a little, and kissed him.

"I won't give you up," said the boy tempestuously.

"You must, darling. You shall not sacrifice yourself for me."

"I tell you I won't," said Alan.

Then the cruel rain came down, and they had to go down too. At every trap−door they stopped to hug and kiss each other, to say that they must part, and to declare they could not. On the bench in the porch, at the foot of the last ladder, they sat down to repeat the process. They did so again in a pew in church, and once more in the vestry. There they did indeed part for the moment, for they could not bear to re−enter the house together, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER III

And the old man and the old maid had no luck at all. On Prince of Wales' birthday it simply rained in torrents from morning till night, without stopping once. The flag on the church tower clung like a wet dish−cloth to the staff, from the time it was run up at what should have been sunrise until it was taken down at dusk. And at dusk the town crier went round with his bell, and announced that the display of fireworks was postponed to a future date. It would have been something to have a little tea−party at the parsonage, without the fireworks and the tower. But it was too wet even for that. The old man was depressed and dyspeptic, and the old maid went to bed at nine o'clock and cried herself to sleep, though such very old fogies were certainly old enough to have known better. But at last it all came right. The town was not to be defrauded of its holiday, and Tuesday, the 15th, was appointed, by advertisement in the local papers, as the day when shops would close, sports be celebrated in the public park, fireworks let off and torchlight procession take place, all as they would have done on the 9th had weather been favourable. And Tuesday was just as perfect a day for the purpose as the previous Wednesday had been the reverse.

Mr. Paine sent a note to aunt before he had his breakfast.

DEAR MISS RANSOME,

"Will you and your young people give us the pleasure of your company to tea to−night? The weather does seem settled at last, and it will be pleasant on the church tower, if you think you can manage the ascent. I am told the fireworks are to be very fine. With our united kindest regards,

"Yours very sincerely,

"WILLIAM PAINE."

Aunt hastened to return an answer by Eve as she went to school.

"DEAR MR. PAINE,

"Thank you very much for your kind invitation. Tell dear Anna that we shall be delighted to come. We are quite looking forward to our little excursion up the tower, especially in such beautiful weather. I shall be able to get up quite well, I am sure. I have always been fond of fireworks, and it will be so nice to see rockets go up without cricking one's neck.

"Believe me, dear Mr. Paine, most truly yours,

"ELIZABETH RANSOME."

The recipient of this note spread it on the breakfast−table, beside his plate of egg and bacon, and read it again and again, as if it were some choice bit of literature.

"How would it be," he suggested diffidently, "to ask one of Eve's schoolgirl friends? She is so much younger than the rest of us. She might be dull without a companion of her own age to talk to."

"A good idea," said Anna graciously. "I will do so. Then," she thought, "there will be six of us. Father looking after aunt, and Eve having another child to keep her company, Alan and I will have a chance to talk over our affairs. And the table will be balanced properly."

She set the table with her own hands at half−past five. There was a nice cold fowl, and a tongue, and a veal pie, and delicious cakes that she had made herself, and a salad, and a dish of strawberries, with cream. She was a sparing housekeeper, as a rule, so that Mr. Paine, when he came out of his room from dressing, was surprised to see so handsome a repast, and his pleasure equalled his surprise. Aunt had not had a meal in the house for years, and he had been anxious lest Anna should think less of aunt's entertainment than of the keeping qualities of food in warm weather.

It was quite warm weather full summer now, and aunt came at six o'clock, in the prettiest new crépon gown, grey, with a puffy vest of white silk, that gave quite a style to her little figure. She had iron−grey hair, which had once been black, and her thin, small face was ivory−white; but her eyes were dark and brilliant still, with something of the expression of Toby's: very sweet and earnest, if you took the trouble to notice them. Her hair was drawn plainly back into a knot of braids behind, as an old woman's hair should be; but she had pinned a red rose into the lace at her neck, which was an anachronism, a false note, to Anna's mind.

"I think, Miss Ransome," said that prudent young lady, "you would have been better advised to put on an old gown to−night. The tower is a dusty, cobwebby place, and you will spoil that pretty new one."

"Oh, no," said aunt carelessly, patting her hair before the glass in the spare bedroom. "It won't hurt."

"You had better let me lend you an old one of mine."

Aunt would not hear of such a thing. She was like poor father, who thought nothing of tearing a good cassock on a nail.

They went into the drawing−room, which was profusely decked with roses, and almost immediately into the dining−room, which was similarly adorned, several vases of them standing about in the interstices of the well−filled table. Alan, with a bud in his button−hole, sat by his hostess, and aunt at Mr. Paine's right hand. The two old folks beamed as they settled themselves in their chairs and opened their napkins, but the four young ones were too occupied with their own interests to notice it. The French windows stood wide to the exquisite light and air, and on the verandah Toby lay at full length on his stomach, with his nose between his paws, keeping an eye

cocked upward in the direction of aunt's face. Now and then she threw him a confidential smile, which set his fringed tail thumping vigorously.

"You are not eating," remarked the host, breaking off a little story of a quarrel in the choir aunt was so sympathetic and understanding about these things to note the condition of her liver wing.

"Oh, I am getting on beautifully! It is a delicious fowl I am enjoying it so much," she assured him; and urged him on with his absorbing narrative. But the fact was she had the very least sore throat, which somehow seemed to have taken away her appetite. No one, of course, was allowed to suspect this.

"And so I went to the girl, and told her I was sure Miss Lomax had not intended to insult her, and begged her to take the solo, since there was no one else able to sing it; and I had a talk with Miss Lomax to try and persuade her to explain. But they would neither of them listen to me. Each said she would never come into the choir again while the other belonged to it. So they are both staying away which means that we have not a reliable soprano at all. The others will not open their mouths without some one to lead them, and Anna cannot do everything."

"It is too bad," said aunt warmly, "that you should be worried with those petty squabbles, when you have so much else, so many more important things to think of. It is a pity I am not a young girl, with a good treble voice."

"Yes no, no, I don't mean yes. It would be a pity if you were anything but just what you are. Do let me take your plate and give you some pie. Some strawberries, then? Anna, Miss Ransome's cup is empty."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Ransome," said Anna, with a start. She was forgetting her duties for the moment in a semi−private discussion with Alan on the great subject of individual responsibility. The pair of schoolgirls were chattering across the table about the affairs of their school, their approaching examinations, the holidays, the matric., and so on. It was a most successful tea−party.

After tea, it being still broad daylight, the children sat down to a game of tiddledy−winks, to pass the time until it was dark enough for the fireworks. Tiddledy−winks looks a silly game to those who do not play it, but to those who do it becomes strangely fascinating; so that even after the lamps were lighted it was difficult to make those players leave off. Anna took Alan for a stroll round the garden, but before she did so gave proper heed to the question of what was to be done for aunt.

"I think, father," she said, "that Miss Ransome ought not to go up the tower in the dark, for the first time. If you were to take her now, while it is still daylight, and make her go gently and take plenty of time, she would not be nearly so nervous. Al Mr. Ransome would see after us."

"That is a good idea," cried Mr. Paine. "Come, Miss Ransome, we will lead the expedition. What wraps have you?"

Aunt's little mantle was fetched, and declared to be inadequate. Mr. Paine insisted on an old furred jacket and woollen hood, provided by his daughter.

"It will be chilly up there, though it is so mild now," he said, "and you must be careful of that delicate chest. Put on all the warmth you can carry, Miss Ransome. Be on the safe side."

"Perhaps I had better," she said, submitting meekly to Anna's resolute hands. "I seem to have just a little touch of cold hanging about me from the damp weather."

"If I had known that," said Alan menacingly, "I wouldn't have allowed you to come. I've a great mind to forbid your going up."

"Dear boy, it is nothing," she answered in a panic, and hastened out before he could say more. Alan was going to be a doctor, and was beginning to practise on his aunt. She thought it so sweet of him to take such care of her, and to give her pills and potions when she was not well; but to−night she preferred to be taken care of by Mr. Paine. Luckily, Alan desired her room at that moment, and not her company; so he let her go.

Happiness is not the prerogative of youth, whatever the young may think. Those two old fogies, left to their own devices for three−quarters of an hour, were perhaps as happy as they had ever been in their lives. When they had shut themselves into the vestry, and shut out the dutiful children who loved to keep them in order, they felt young themselves; and, though they treated each other with a delicate respect that is somewhat out of date, the same light was in their eyes, the same glow in their hearts, as had been kindled in those of the girl and boy now walking round the garden.

"This is my new chalice−veil," said the parson eagerly, "that I got out from London last mail. I have been wanting to show it to you. Is not the work perfect? And here's the illustrated catalogue I want you to tell me which of these altar cloths you like best. I must manage somehow to get a new one before next Easter, and I have such faith in your taste; I am always wishing for you to consult with and to decide for me, Ah, it is too dark to see properly! Put it in your pocket and look at it when you are by yourself at home."

This was the sort of thing they talked about. Trumpery, doubtless, to people who are not old fogies, but heart−satisfying to them.

The dusk was gathering fast when they passed down the church to the front porch and the ladders, and Mr. Paine began to be anxious about aunt's nerves, and she anxious to show him how intrepid (under certain circumstances) she could be. He reproached himself for not having rigged up certain appliances to make the ascent easier, and she skipped up the trembling rungs while he was talking about it, so that his heart came into his mouth. Anna would have been scandalized to see an old lady so conducting herself had she been there.

They reached the top safely, but slowly. The rapid twilight had become night by the time they emerged upon the roof, and when aunt was led to the battlemented parapet to look out upon that view for the first time, she cried, "Oh h h!" in rapture.

It was indeed a beautiful picture, well worth the waiting for. There was no rain or mist to spoil it now. The sky was clear of cloud, full of its own deep Australian night colour, and thick with stars. Like waves along the horizon rolled the forest−covered ranges, all distinct in the transparent air; shadows of velvet, with here and there a house−light, like a diamond twinkling out of them. The town beneath lay suffused in Rembrandtish glows from lamps, seen and unseen, and red torches beginning to flare under the new−leaved English trees. The atmosphere was pure and fine to an intoxicating degree, for no factory chimney, no coal smoke, no mud, no dust, no anything that was unclean, defiled it; it was the atmosphere of the hills and of an early summer night washed in plenteous spring rains and perfumed with the wholesome breath of gum−trees and flowers. In short, perfect.

Aunt sighed a long sigh once or twice in silence. When she spoke there were tears in her voice.

"This makes one feel," she said and stopped, unable to express herself.

"Yes," said her companion softly.

The torches were all lit, and glowed redly down the street like an invisible house burning. Out of the glare the clock−tower of the post−office rose, pallid and unsubstantial, into the upper darkness, like something in a lime−lighted transformation scene. Little foreshortened figures, mere ants upon the ground, were moving hither and thither members of the fire−brigade, in their smart uniforms, arranging the torchlight procession.

"I must call the children," said Mr. Paine.

He went to the trap−door and listened; then he went to the parapet overlooking his own house and grounds, and signalled with a gentle "cooee" over the tree−tops. Presently the young ones, heralded by the lantern, which was extinguished as soon as possible, came scrambling up, laughing and calling to one another; and as the last one Eve put her head out of the hole, whish sh sh the first rocket shot into the sky, burst with a little hollow noise like a bursting pea−pod, and rained down its enchanting stars.

"Those rockets," said Eve to her companion, "cost five shillings apiece."

"I think it a wicked waste of money," said Anna.

"In these bad times, too," said Alan sympathetically.

But aunt whispered, to the grey man beside her, that she simply loved to look at them; and he said, so did he.

The procession was formed, and began its march round the streets, to the stirring music of the town band. They could not see it for a long time, but saw where it was by the illumination of the trees above it as it passed. Every now and then it emitted a spray of little rockets, that died upon the roofs and roads, and, like great chords in a merry tune, another and another of those soaring big ones, which would have beckoned the souls of spectators like aunt to the infinities they seemed to pierce if Eve had not persisted in stating how much they cost. At last it came flaring and clanging into the street beside the church, along by the tree−walled church garden, and round the corner, and past the gate; and just in front of the tower it halted, spread, re−formed, and lit itself up in the most amazing blood−red flame a wizard light, celestial or infernal, anything but earthly, transfiguring the world, "just as if Biela's comet had run into us," Eve Ransome said. The grey−white granite of the tower wall blushed crimson as a rose, and the faces on the top of it were the faces of angels or ghosts. The church trees glittered, leaf by leaf, like the jewelled trees of fairy−land.

"I would not," said aunt, in a low tone of rapture, "have missed this for anything!"

"I am so glad," said Mr. Paine earnestly, "so devoutly glad that it is a fine night. I did so want you to enjoy it."

Then the red light died out, and the cool, clear, blue darkness came back, with all the quiet hills lying out in it. The procession marched back into the town, with its Liliputian rabble after it, and worked its magic in other streets. Four more great rockets another pound, as somebody remarked leaped, hissing, into the empyrean, and dropped each its handful of coloured stars in space. Then all was still, the church tower was left alone, and the night suddenly began to feel cold.

"It's over," said Eve, jumping up from where she lay on the flat of her back along the sloping leads. "Polly, let's go down and have another game of tiddledy−winks."

CHAPTER IV

Next morning aunt awoke with a very sore throat. But a maiden aunt is not privileged to be ill on account of so ordinary a complaint as that, and she got up and dressed and pursued the trivial round and common task as usual.

First she went into her nephew's room, picked his slimy sponge out of his soapy hand−basin, and his towel very wet from the floor, where he had flung it, on top of his pyjama trousers. Also she removed his hair−brush, which he had plunged into the ewer before using, from the book the good, new, medical book on which he had left it, face downwards, to drain. Though she had brought him up, she had never been able to make him keep his things

tidy nor Eve either. She, too, liked to throw her nightgown on the floor, and anything wet that might be handy upon it, or upon the bed. She would never hang up frock or jacket by its loops, nor upon a knobbed hook if there happened to be a sharp−ended one available. She would never wear her "sets" in rotation, but always took the garment that came first out of the drawer; and she forgot to change her things on the right days, and to put them into the wash when they were changed. Also, she never brushed her teeth when she could help it, nor thought it necessary to do more to her hair than have it superficially smooth for meal−times. Aunt did not blame them, for they had had a slatternly mother. She just did their tidying for them. This, of course, was worrying work at times, and worry tells upon you when you are not well. To−day, somehow, she did not feel as if she could stand too much of it.

Going into her niece's room, before descending to breakfast, she found Eve dressed in the white frock she had taken off last night by no means a frock to go to morning school in. She was ordered at once to change it.

"It's cool," said Eve mutinously, "and all my others are hot ones. Besides, it's dirtied out, going up that tower."

"It is scarcely soiled at all," said aunt, "and will last some time for afternoons. Take it off, my dear, when I tell you."

Eve pulled it off tempestuously, dashing about the room. She had a writing−table of her own a birthday present from aunt and on it stood the travelling ink−bottle which she persisted in using rather than the solid vessel that had been provided for her. The two halves of the travelling ink−bottle were nearly equally heavy, and she mostly left it open. It was open now, and as she ill−temperedly flung herself about she knocked it over, and the ink streamed across the pretty table−cloth. She hastened to mop it up with one of her best cambric pocket−handkerchiefs.

"Oh, Eve! Eve!" wailed aunt. "When shall I teach you sense!"

"I'm awfully sorry I didn't mean to do it," pleaded Eve. "Don't be cross, there's an old dear. It's all right now. And I'll put my old frock on, though it is such a fearfully hot day."

"I will try to get your new print finished, darling," said aunt, appeased.

Eve took off the too−smart white dress, and stood in the coloured petticoat which had been showing through. On the breast of that petticoat was a large dark patch. Aunt saw it, and touched it; it was sopping wet.

"Well, aunt, there was a slug got upstairs and crawled over my clothes in the night. I only saw the slimy mark where it had been after I had put on my petticoat, and I just took a sponge and cleaned it."

"Child, take it off directly take everything off. You will catch your death!"

"I can't, aunt dear. I haven't got another petticoat. It's in the soiled clothes−basket. I forgot to put it in the wash. And the other one is slit all down the front."

"Give it to me to mend," said aunt, in a voice of despair.

The troubles of the day came thick and fast, and before noon the little woman broke down under them. Alan, hunting for biscuits to stay his stomach until dinner−time, found her crying in the pantry, where she was trying to fill a glass jug from an empty filter.

"Hullo, old woman, what's the matter?" he cried, affectionately concerned.

"Did you ever see such a minx as Sarah?" moaned aunt bitterly. "You would think she did it on purpose. Empty again and in this weather! And I have just found the big kettle cracked right across the bottom! She left it to go dry on the fire, and when it was red−hot poured cold water into it."

Aunt dropped her head on her nephew's stalwart arm and sobbed aloud.

He put the arm round her. "Here, you are not going to cry about a rubbishy thing like that, surely! Give me that jug I'll fill it at the bank filter. Why, you're all of a tremble! And how hot your hand is!" He grasped the little hand, and laid his large, cool fingers on the flurried pulse. "Aunt, you're ill that's what's the matter with you not kettles and filters. Come along and sit down and tell me how you feel. It's that beastly tower business, I expect. I just thought you'd catch cold, exposed so long to the night air."

"I had it before, darling. I could not have caught it there, wrapped up as I was so well taken care of."

He took her to the family sitting−room, and there looked at her tongue, listened to her breathing which was decidedly heavy and put a clinical thermometer into her mouth. Temperature, 101°.

"You go straight off to bed, old lady," he said sternly. "That's the place for you."

"I can't, dear boy. I must get Eve's print frock finished. Now that the weather has turned hot, she has nothing to wear."

"Off to bed," he repeated, with the inflexible air of the professional adviser. "If you don't go of your own accord, I shall call the Governor to make you. I shall send for a doctor whom you won't like half as well as you do me."

Aunt went to bed, and Eve put on a poultice in a great hurry before going to afternoon school, and Alan administered a dose from a bottle he had procured at the chemist's. Then the patient was ordered to go to sleep, and no one thought anything more about her until tea−time. The boy went to the club tennis−ground, and the girl, on her return from school, practised exercises on the piano. Aunt, propping herself on pillows, and with her work−basket beside her, sewed at the print frock all the afternoon, and finished it.

She was accustomed to a cup of tea at four o'clock, and to−day pined for it desperately, choked with the scorching thirst of a fever now at 103°. She heard the rattle of the tray as Sarah carried it to the sitting−room, and trembled with suspense as Eve strummed on and on, regardless of its arrival. After five minutes' waiting, aunt called aloud; she waited, weeping a little, and called again; but she was too far off for her voice to be heard, and she had no bell. At last, in desperation, she got out of bed and went down the passage in her nightgown a thing strictly forbidden by her medical man. Eve heard her then, and came flying to scold her for disobeying Alan's orders.

"You bad old woman! What's the use of doctoring you, when you undo it all like this?"

"I want my tea, love; and I want it hot," said poor aunt.

"All right. I thought you were asleep. Go to bed, and I'll bring it to you."

Aunt retreated to her room, and Eve brought the tea. But now it was tepid and nasty, the milk a brown scum upon the top no comfort at all. However, aunt bore the disappointment, rather than trouble Sarah and Eve to make a fresh cup, since they did not volunteer to do so. She drank the wretched stuff, while her niece eagerly turned about the print frock and urged her to finish it if she could, so that it might be put on in the morning.

When the girl had gone, having been called for to take a walk with a school friend, the little hot hands sewed on desperately until their job was done. Then aunt got out of bed again to put away her work−basket, lest Alan

should suspect what she had been doing and scold her; and, returning, lay down in the pensive dusk to realize how solitary she was, and how much more ill she felt than she had done in the morning. "Oh, how happy they are that have their own dear husbands to take care of them!" she thought, with her handkerchief at her fevered eyes.

However, she was not without some one to care for her. In the evening, when the family were making merry with a casual guest over a game of cards, and Sarah was talking to her young man at the yard door, a shrinking, slinking form came gliding through the passages and up the stairs and straight into the darkened room. Toby seemed to have foreboded that aunt was ill, and felt impelled to come and see, the reason of which unusual solicitude on the part of a dog for a person not belonging to his own household being due to his instinctive knowledge that she ought to have belonged to it, and virtually did so. He laid his damp nose on the edge of the mattress and whimpered under his breath, begging her to reassure him. Then, after standing still for a long time, while she embraced his head and let him lick her face as much as he liked, he stealthily climbed upon the bed and stretched himself at full length beside her. He was full of fleas, but she did not mind that now. They lay there together in silent sympathy until Mr. Ransome, learning that his sister was not well, came to ask her how she felt, on his way to bed. Then Toby was kicked downstairs and bundled out into the street.

All next day Mr. Paine kept audibly wondering what on earth was the matter with that dog. Toby left the house, and came back, whining and restless; left it again, and returned in the same perturbed condition, as if vainly looking for something.

"What is it, old dog? What is it, then?" he demanded cheerily, slapping Toby's sides.

Toby yapped, jumped with all his feet at once and made little runs to the door.

"Do you want me to take you for a walk, old fellow? Very well; let us go for a walk." Mr. Paine went to get his hat and stick, and Toby shrieked with eagerness. So the object of his desire seemed understood.

The parson, who was an inveterate gossip, saw and stopped a few parishioners in the street; then he remembered that he had something to say to his treasurer about a Church meeting, and called at Mr. Ransome's bank. The manager was at home, but seemed less interested in Church matters than usual.

"I hope," said Mr. Paine, "that your family are all well."

"Thank you," said Mr. Ransome, "they are, with the exception of my sister, who has managed to pick up a nasty sort of feverish cold."

"I am sorry for that. She is not seriously indisposed, I trust?"

"I trust not," said Mr. Ransome. "For the house all seems to go to pieces when she is laid up."

He said no more, and Mr. Paine, feeling that he was not wanted particularly, got up to go. "Here, Toby! Toby!" he called. "Where is that dog of mine off to?"

"I daresay he is in my sister's room," said the banker, with wonderful toleration, for he had been heard to threaten that he would shoot Toby some day. "You might leave him, if you don't mind. It amuses her to have him."

"Certainly," said Mr. Paine, "if he is not a nuisance. Give her my kind regards, and tell her I hope she will soon be herself again."

That evening, when he was in his study, looking up a subject for Sunday's sermon, Toby came and clawed at the door, and whined more urgently than ever.

"He can't want a walk now," thought the parson, annoyed by the disturbance; "and if he goes on like this, he will have to be punished. Quiet, sir!" he thundered.

Then Toby gave up asking him to come and help poor aunt in her extremity, and went back to do what he could for her by himself. He found the bank shut up, and lay on its street doorstep till morning.

In the morning the town rang with the news that aunt was in a critical state with inflammation of the lungs. The veriest nobody becomes a somebody under these circumstances. Mr. Paine, breakfastless, was rushing off to make inquiries, when a note was put into his hand.

"DEAR MR. PAINE,

"My poor aunt has had a very bad night, and the doctor seems to consider her case a serious one. Father thinks it would be a comfort to her to see a clergyman, so will you kindly come round to−day, if quite convenient? They are trying to get her to sleep now, so perhaps you had better not call until after dinner.

"Yours sincerely,

"EVE RANSOME."

Mr. Paine called four times, but it was not until late in the afternoon that he was let in, though his daughter had been assistant nurse all day. It was Anna who withheld, and then gave permission to admit him, and who gravely escorted him to aunt's room.

"She is a little better now," said the young clergywoman, in her business−like way, "but it will not last. You had better urge her to take the sacrament while she can. I suggested it for this afternoon, and that we should join, but she seems to wish to see you alone first. I am afraid she does not realize how short her time is likely to be."

The clergyman, leaving behind him his prayer−book for the sick, and all concern for the viaticum, to which Anna attached so much importance, crept into aunt's room. What a change, in three days, from that happy, happy night! She had just rallied from a sort of half−drowned state, out of seas of stupefying pain and narcotic insensibility, and she smiled at him wistfully with her heavy, dark eyes. But death was in her face. He saw it the moment he looked at her, and she knew that he saw it.

He sat down in the chair by the bed on the far side of her lay Toby, looking from one to the other with solemn satisfaction and he took her poor hand in his, and wept over it and kissed it. It was the first lover's kiss that aunt had ever had.

"Lock the door," she whispered, panting.

He stumbled across the room, blind with tears, and turned the key in the lock. Going back to her, he dropped on his knees, put one arm under the pillow and the other over her labouring little breast, and kissed her again on the lips this time. She kissed him back, moaning, with shut eyes, holding him to her as well as she could with hands so fast losing their power to hold anything. Toby gently stretched forward from where he lay beside them, and licked the two grey heads.

"I have chosen the altar−cloth," gasped aunt, when she was able to speak. "Number fifty−two the Latin cross with the three stars on the super−frontal in silk velvet the best "

"Oh, my dear," he groaned, "don't mind those trifles now!"

"Yes. You must get it for Easter. I want a lawyer to come and make a codicil. I want to leave the money to buy it number fifty−two. Then when you go into the church and see it you will remember me."

"Oh, my God! As if I shall need anything to remember you by!"

A bursting sob broke from him, hushed down quickly, lest the people in the house should hear. Aunt's face screwed up for a moment, and two tears rolled down. Toby rose to his feet in alarm, and sniffed and whined.

"Don't darling!" breathed aunt. "Oh, I never knew I never thought that you cared like that!"

"Didn't you? You must have known. But the children, dear the children "

"They would never have allowed it," sighed aunt.

"I might have had you all this time to take care of, to nurse "

"And I could have been such a comfort to you William "

"Elizabeth! Oh, what a different life! What a home "

"But the children wouldn't let us. They would have said we were mad. They would never never have allowed it, William."

"And now now we have lost the chance!"

"Yes no, not quite. This has been our chance. Kiss me, William. Oh, William! I never thought to call you William to have you kiss me William "

"Oh, Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

Toby whined again, begging them to command themselves. But they could not.

Anna looked at the clock in the sitting−room about this time. "Father must have finished his prayers and reading by now," she said. "I must take her some nourishment."

She took it, and firmly administered it. Mr. Paine witnessed the operation in mute anguish, hovering between the bed and the door, while the patient did her best to show him that she could swallow still. Then he was ordered to go home and do his sermon. For it was Friday night.

On Sunday night she died, while he was preaching a sermon that was several years old. And, of course, he had not been allowed to nurse her in her last hours, though Toby was privileged to stay by her nearly all the time. Toby would have been turned out often, but whenever he saw a chance of that happening he got under the bed, and so evaded notice. He also learned that he must not open his mouth, though his heart should burst with grief; so he lay and watched in passive patience, or with pricked ears and quivering nose, until his friend ceased to see that he was there, ceased to respond to his surreptitious licks, ceased to be visible to his yearning eyes. Then he did lament most dismally. They overlooked him, lying under the bed, when they left her in a long box with a sheet over it, hidden in a nest of cut paper frills; and the noise he made gave Sarah such a turn that she declared she durs'n't sleep in the house till the corpse was out of it. A corpse that a dog howled over in that fashion was something out of nature, she said.

They tied Toby up with a strong chain all Monday, so that he might not disturb the funeral.

The weather changed on Monday in that sudden way that is peculiar to Australian weather from summer to winter, in a night. And the hundreds of mourners that "followed," in cabs and buggies, and on horseback and on foot, after the kindly Australian custom, felt an unusual grey dreariness in the familiar function, and were glad to get it over and get back to the warm precincts of home and the public−house. By four o'clock twenty hours from the time when she had belonged to the living world poor aunt was in her grave, with the raw earth heaped above her; and the gates of the cemetery were shut, and not a soul within them.

But one came back. Mr. Paine, having gone through the ordeal of getting his tea, could no longer endure the proximity of his daughter, with her untimely questions and advice. On a pretext of parochial business, he went out while it was still daylight, and took Toby off the chain to go with him. The dog sprang forward, wagging an expectant tail, as if there were still hopes that aunt might be somewhere whence she could be brought back. But when he stood beside her grave, and saw how his master looked at it, he seemed to understand what had been done that day, though he had not been to the funeral. He lifted up his nose and howled on a long note; then he fell upon the new−made mound, and began to rake away the earth with his fore−paws.

"No use, Toby!" said his weeping master. And he stopped the dog's proceedings, replacing the scattered mould with his hands, and patting it smooth. Dogs were not allowed in the cemetery, by order of the trustees, but the print of Toby's body was discernible upon that mound as long as the soil was loose enough to take it. The caretaker laid wait with his gun for the desecrating beast, until the matter was explained to him. Then he and the trustees gave Toby the freedom of the city that city of the dead.

The Ransomes wanted to buy him, for aunt's sake, and the enticements of pats and bones were offered from many other quarters. But a dog like Toby is not to be bought, though men and women are. He stuck to his fellow−mourner, making more of him than he had ever done, seeing a new need for his devotion a double need. The parish did not see it, but Toby saw it the change that the 20th of November had worked in William Paine. The children might call him an old man now, for he was an old man. But he had not been old before.

* * * * * * * * * *

"ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES"

"I am going," said Mrs. Atcheson to her young friend, Minna Smith, "to have tea on board the Seamew this afternoon, and the captain has asked me to bring you. Will you come?" She looked up, suffused with smiles, from a note she had been reading. This was the note:

"DEAR MRS. ATCHESON,

"Bring your visitor by all means. I shall have no difficulty in finding some one to help us to entertain her. The children, I fancy, can amuse themselves.

"Yours very faithfully,

"JOHN BRENT."

John Brent was the captain of the Seamew, and the Seamew was not that sort of ship which makes a business of afternoon teas. She did not fly the white ensign, nor even the blue; she was merely an old merchant sailing vessel of about sixteen hundred tons, unloading steel rails and loading wheat at Williamstown. Williamstown, it may be remarked, still felt the stir of commerce in her veins, and the pier over the way did not lie naked as a breakwater for half the week, as it does now.

Miss Smith was delighted. She was a bush girl, to whom ships were a novelty; at the same time she had cultivated a romantic passion for the sea, having sailor blood in her. She thought it was so very kind of Captain Brent to think of asking her.

At three o'clock she put her pretty little sailor hat on her pretty little curly head, and tied a sailor knot in the coquettish necktie that finished off her navy−blue serge gown. Mrs. Atcheson whose husband was a pilot, cruising outside at this moment in a gale of wind put on her beady bonnet and a little veil that ended at the tip of her nose, and they set forth on their expedition. The children did not go; they did not even know they had been invited. Mrs. Atcheson preferred the freedom of her own arrangement. She wished to do what was quite proper, but she did not wish to have her tête−à−tête with the captain interfered with.

The Seamew lay near the end of the pier, and a sister ship, called the Penguin, of the same company, chanced to lie beside her at the extreme end. The former had but recently arrived, the latter was ready for departure; her sails were bent, her flying jib−boom run out, her sides glossy with new paint, all spick and span as she could be, a foil to her neighbour, rusty and weather−beaten, whose toilet was still to make. The yards of the Seamew swung bare and lop−sided, her deck was in confusion with the open hatch and swinging cargo and clanking windlass, and her grimy hull was only made grimier by the stripes of gleaming scarlet that men on hanging platforms were beginning to daub upon it. But ships, and captains of ships, must not be judged by these outward appearances.

No sooner were the two ladies in view of their destination than two men cast themselves over the side of the Seamew, disappeared amongst railway trucks, and, emerging, saluted.

"There they are!" cried Mrs. Atcheson joyfully.

"Which is your captain?" inquired Minna Smith.

"Oh, the fair man, the fair man, of course. Such a nice fellow! But I never knew a fair man who wasn't," said Mrs. Atcheson, who was thirty−nine, and had had a vast experience of both sorts.

Minna pointed out that the other gentleman was dark. Having tawny locks of her own, inclining to the fieriness of Captain Brent's beard, she rather preferred dark men. As yet, however, they were only pictures to her mind not men.

"So he is. And a handsome fellow too! I don't suppose all dark men are bad," the matron allowed, smiling her sweetest smile upon this one, whom she had never seen before.

Cordial greetings ensued, and the stranger was introduced as Captain Spurling of the Penguin. Mrs. Atcheson had not seen him before because his ship had spent her time in port at a Yarra wharf. She had loaded in the river, and was only touching at Williamstown on her way out. Her master was as much smarter than his host as she now was to the Seamew a fine, tall, full−bearded, straight−nosed, black−eyed fellow, young for a sea captain, but not so young as he looked. Despite his colour, Mrs. Atcheson was strongly tempted to annex him, but she remained faithful to her older friend, who, having made Miss Smith's acquaintance, desired to know why the children had not turned up.

"Dear Captain Brent, it was so good of you to ask them! But Maudie had a little cold, and Jacky was awake half the night with toothache, and the weather was so bad."

They walked on together. Captain Spurling and Minna followed. The latter, being unaccustomed to society and the other sex, wore a modest blush and smile that were very becoming; and the bold eyes of her gallant escort dwelt admiringly upon her. "I am decidedly in luck," he thought. "I don't think I ever saw a prettier young creature." Which was quite true. And her great charm lay in the evident fact that she was not yet quite old enough

to know how pretty she was.

He helped her with much tender care up the somewhat rude gangway of the Seamew, steadying her with his arm; and in a very short time they were left to their devices by the chaperon and the host. Mrs. Atcheson cared for captains, one at a time, but not for ships, and when the wind seemed likely to tear her best bonnet to pieces she retired to the saloon, whence she refused to budge until it was time to return to her family; but Minna was eager to see everything that was to be seen, and revelled in the merry blast that brought the dew of the salt sea to her fresh young lips, and the bloom of a carmine rose−petal to her cheeks. Wherefore she stayed outside, and Captain Spurling stayed with her.

From the poop he showed her his own ship first of all, pointing out wherein she was superior to other ships of her kind, and especially to the Seamew; then he directed her gaze to the ships across the water and the St. Kilda and Brighton shores, through a telescope that he held steady for her. He walked her out upon the bridge, merely an open platform between the boats, and explained the working of the compass and the wheel, while the freshening wind blew her up against him, and, but for him, might have blown her off. He showed her the little engine room, with the forge and tools in it, the bo'sun's and the sailmaker's lockers, the cook's galley, and the tiny forehouse shared by these men and the carpenter, one of whom was performing a rough toilet in it; and, further on, he did the honours of the cavernous fo'c's'le, the modesty of whose inmates was protected by its dense gloom. He introduced her to the fowls, hanging in a huge bird−cage under the boat skids aft of the deckhouse, and to the pigs in their sty forward; and he instructed her in the matter of running and standing rigging, and mysteries of that kind. She did not understand the half of it, but was charmed with everything, and above all with him, the most devoted and delightful showman. When the rain came along on the back of the wind, slanting and stinging, and shelter was desirable, neither of them felt drawn cuddy−wards. Captain Spurling's suggestion that a descent into the Seamew's stomach 'tween−decks and the hold might possibly be an interesting excursion, was considered a most happy one, and unhesitatingly jumped at.

The men were ceasing work, having sent up the last of those dangerous−looking bundles of railway iron, and only a part of the main hatch was left unclosed. She was lowered to him through this and down the perpendicular ladders with great care, and found herself in an awesome place of shades astonishingly vast. Of course she had no fears with him but when that black cavern suddenly rang to a blood−curdling yell that she did not know the cause of, she jumped and gasped, and clutched her companion's arm.

"Don't be frightened," he murmured, locking hand and arm together. "It is only a cat. Here, puss! puss! puss!"

A pair of yellow eyes glared out of the gloom forward and disappeared.

"Oh h h!" sighed Minna, with her hand upon her heart.

It was certainly a creepy place, to one unaccustomed to it, in that owl's light; and the ship cat was as wild as any Bengal tiger. She was supposed to visit the cook at a certain hour daily, but otherwise lived in solitude, under hatches, waging savage warfare with the rats. Disturbed and startled by the apparition of a lady, she moved about in the mysterious distance with stealthy creepings and scamperings, rending the silence at intervals with that sudden snarling "yowl," which is distressing to the human ear at the best of times, and now echoed through the ship's emptiness in a most dismal manner.

"Shoo!" cried Captain Spurling; and he pressed his left arm to his side. "We might have had a little more light upon the subject. However, I can see, if you can't. You trust to me."

"It is like a witch's cave," she laughed tremblingly, "with that creature mewing. How uncanny it sounds in this great hollow place! I had no idea the Seamew was so enormous."

He led her into the bows, and they stood invisible, looking back to where the light filtered down from above, dim with rain, on so small a portion of the enclosure. The girl's heart was beating fast, as the heart of seventeen is bound to do under such circumstances. The man felt it, like an electric thrill in the air.

"I suppose that is the mast?" she queried breathlessly.

"The foremast yes; and the main beyond it. You can't see the iron−work under the deck, bracin' it across and across? No, that's not a rat. Don' be alarmed; I will take care of you. By−and−by all this will be filled with bags of wheat, right up to the top "

He was interrupted by an agonized wail, as of soul in torment, and Minna's hand on his arm contracted for a moment. He laid his own right hand upon it soothingly.

"It is so dark!" she faltered. "Hadn't we better go back to the others?"

He drew her or rather, she drew him forward, where the light was better. There the sailmaker, since the lower deck was cleared of cargo, had been at work; his implements and a heap of weather−worn sails were spread upon the spacious floor, a bolt of new canvas near them.

"Sit here," said Captain Spurling, kicking the latter article to a safe distance from the yawning mouth of the hold and the feeble daylight; "sit and rest yourself a little before you go up. It is raining still; wait till it leaves off, so that you don't get wet."

She seated herself on the bundle, and he presently lowered himself into a nest of sail−cloth, whence he could see into her pretty face and watch the play of her innocent emotions as she listened and talked to him the stirrings of the young womanhood which had come into being so recently that he was the first man to recognise it.

It was a full half−hour before they climbed back into the world, and they were summoned by a hail from Captain Brent.

"It's hard lines," said Captain Spurling and from this remark the reader will infer the preceding conversation "it's awfully hard lines that I've got to go, just when I have begun to know you."

"Yes," she sighed, with her foot upon the ladder. "But you will come back again some day?"

"I hope so. One never knows. You will give a thought to me sometimes when I am away upon the sea?"

She looked at him eloquently, too deeply moved for speech, imagining the blissfulness of companionship with such a man in all the perils of his noble work and romantic solitude: the rapture of tropical cyclones and Cape Horn icebergs, which would have no terrors in such a case. Never had she loved the sea and all belonging to it as she loved it now.

They emerged upon the windy deck and entered the little saloon in silence. On a table by the rudder−trunk was spread the captain's equivalent for afternoon tea port wine, and almonds and raisins, dried figs, and English fancy biscuits and he sat beside it. Mrs. Atcheson lolled upon a red velvet sofa that curved with the curve of the ship's blunt stern, under a row of portholes, and she was too much absorbed in her companion and conversation to notice, as she ought to have done, the colour and expression of Miss Smith's face.

She lay awake all night, dreaming finer dreams than ever come in sleep; and in the morning her hostess gave her a commission.

"Oh, my dear, I am so frightfully busy!" Mrs. Atcheson explained. "You know that I have asked Captain Brent to come in to−night for a game of whist, and I must have two or three to meet him. That means supper. I have a fowl to dress, and oyster patties to make, and I don't know what else; otherwise I would go myself. But I really don't see how I can spare the time."

"What is it? Let me do it," urged Minna, anxious to be useful.

"Oh, my dear girl, would you? Oh, I should be so much obliged to you! It is just to go to the pier with this parcel for Captain Spurling. The Penguin is still there, I see, and I'm so afraid of being too late with it. He kindly offered to take anything for me to England, and I thought it a good opportunity to send some cast−off clothes for my sister's children."

Minna blushed from top to toe. Even Mrs. Atcheson could not fail to see it.

"Are you too shy?" she laughed. "But of course you need not go on board. And Jacky shall escort you. I would not ask you, Minna, to do anything that was improper, my dear. You have only to hand the parcel to Captain Spurling, and come away directly. I dare not trust Jacky alone with it, or I would not trouble you."

Terrified, but exulting, Miss Smith presently set forth upon this errand, Jacky, aged ten, accompanying her. He gathered a few friends by the way Saturday−morning schoolboys, loafing about the streets so that by the time she reached the Penguin she had four cavaliers; none too many for the support she needed. Jacky, who had the cheek of a dozen, shouted, "Skipper, ahoy!" for which she could have boxed his ears, and Captain Spurling responded in person, to her mingled mortification and delight.

"Give him the parcel, Jacky," she implored, in a frantic undertone. "Give it to him, with mother's message, and come away."

But no; this was not how Fate and Captain Spurling meant to deal with such a chance. Off went the skipper's cap, and his handsome face shone transfigured when he recognised the bashful girl, shrinking away from the group of brazen boys. But it was only a looking−glass to reflect the light in hers, which magenta blushes could not hide from him. He was down the gangway in two seconds.

"What, Miss Smith! And you have brought the parcel yourself? How kind of you! How good of you! Come up and have a little rest after your walk."

"Oh, no! oh, no!" she replied, with tragic gravity. "I must not stay, indeed. I should not have come, only there was no one else. We are very busy at home, and Mrs. Atcheson wants me."

"Just for five minutes just to have a look at my ship before we go. The boys will like to see it eh, boys? And you have no objection to gingerbread nuts, I suppose?"

Jacky jumped to the bait, and was over the side in a twinkling, his mates at his heels. It appeared to Minna that she could not stand on the pier by herself, nor seem ungracious to and suspicious of a man like this man. And, after all, she had an escort four escorts which made it all quite proper. So, with downcast eyes and fluttering heart, she ascended the wobbling plank that served for gangway, steadied by the strong hand; and she stood on the Penguin's deck in the morning sunlight, slim and sweet, with her hair shining, the prettiest young creature that had ever been seen there to Captain Spurling's mind.

And what became of the four escorts? Unlimited gingerbread was placed at their disposal, and then the bo'sun was called and instructed to show them round. He performed his duty thoroughly. He showed them everything. And they were too much taken up with the mysteries of pantry and store−room, with the medicine chest and the

flag−locker, with cutlasses and shark hooks, with harpoons and scientific instruments, to remember that Miss Smith existed. When they went forward, out of sight and sound, she forgot that they did.

The captain entertained her in his smart little cuddy. He showed her the two or three empty cabins available for chance passengers, with his own small suite on one side and the berths of officers and apprentices on the other; and that was all the sight−seeing they did on this occasion. She had not the zest of yesterday, and seemed afraid even to peep through the doors. The only apartment which her modesty permitted her to enter was his little sitting−room astern. He had cut off with a partition his red velvet sofa and private table, preferring the dignity of seclusion where Captain Brent preferred fresh air. Behind that partition, which made the outer cabin seem cramped and stuffy, he had not only his sofa and table and his arm−chair, but a number of fancy trifles pictures and Japanese storks, and brackets with little ornaments on them in the boudoir style; and the general effect was one of great elegance, to the taste of the bush girl. There were several photographic portraits one of a dark−eyed boy that she concluded was Captain Spurling's brother, it was so like him; but he did not tell her whose the faces were, and she thought it would be rude to ask him. The ports were open, and ripples of light played over the low ceiling, reflected from the rippling tide.

"I must not stay," she ejaculated, hurried and breathless, and yet she found herself sitting on the red velvet sofa, with a cushion at her back (Captain Brent would have despised a cushion even more than he would have scorned a paper fan). And presently she found Captain Spurling sitting beside her, with his arm around her waist. Had he been required to defend his conduct, he would have pleaded the irresistible circumstances for there are men who see a natural validity in this excuse, and a chaperon of thirty−nine has no business to ignore the fact; while as for Minna's conduct, she was a young thing, and knew no better. As young things do, when fine fellows provoke them to it, she had fallen frantically in love; and of course she took this particularly fine fellow for a god in human shape, a king who could do no wrong. If he put his arm round her waist, it was because oh, bliss unspeakable! because he loved her too. Such had been her bringing up strange as it may appear, in a land of precocious girls.

She fluttered in his embrace like a wild bird in a snare, and then yielded to it, dropping her head upon his shoulder.

"Oh," she wailed in tears, "when when shall I ever see you again?"

At noon the Penguin was towed out. At night Miss Smith's headache was so bad that she could not join the whist party. A few days later she went home to her mother, who thought her very little benefited by her seaside trip. She was pale and absent−minded; she shunned companionship; she confessed to sleeping poorly. When asked what was the matter, or whether anything was the matter, she, of course, said, "Nothing." Mrs. Smith, who had a family of ten, every one of which was cherished as if an only child, knew better, but would not force the confidence that was not freely given. A girl growing up does not realize that her mother is far more accustomed to being young than she is, and shuts her out as one who cannot possibly understand. So Minna's parent, homely and hard−working, erroneously supposed to have no soul above poultry and butter, could only watch her pretty first−born, of whom she was so fond and proud, with an aching heart, and contrive little treats and outings, beaten−up eggs and cups of beef−tea, to cheer her. The instinct that is so rarely at fault in such a case divined a love affair at once, and Mrs. Atcheson, in strict confidence, was written to. Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Atcheson had been at school together.

The reply of the latter was emphatic.

"Certainly not. She met nobody at my house, and even if she had, she is too much of a child to think of such things at present. Do not, my dear Eliza, put ideas of love and marriage into her head; she will grow up and have her woman's troubles quite soon enough. Keep her innocent as long as you can. I daresay she has a little indigestion, or some irregularity of that sort. I should consult a doctor if I were you."

Mrs. Smith did not consult a doctor. She knew a nice young squatter, a good son and an excellent man of business, with an honest eye for a pretty girl; and she asked him to come and see them. He came, nothing loth, and came again, and yet again until the expected result ensued. And then Minna refused him. As it would have been an excellent match, Mr. Smith reasoned and remonstrated; in fact, he wanted to lock her up on a diet of bread and water until she repented of her contumacy. But Mrs. Smith drew the Jovian lightning upon her own head. She would not have the child worried, she declared, and threw over her candidate without hesitation, though with many inward pangs.

Other young men were beckoned to good, clean, solid bush fellows and responded readily; for Mrs. Smith, who was said to be a drudge and a slave to her own family, could think of no better cure for her girl's complaint than the old−fashioned "comfortable home" and contingent babies. Not every young woman, by a long way, has a choice of husbands in this so−called favoured land; a vast number do not get the chance of one; but Minna was so exceptionally sweet and pretty that it would have been an easy matter to "settle" her satisfactorily had she been inclined to settle. But she would not hear of it. She refused her third offer as resolutely as she had done the first. And the third, from a father's point of view, was the best of them all.

"What in the name of fortune do you want?" roared Mr. Smith, justifiably exasperated nay, fit to dance with rage at this childish folly and the placid obstinacy of the culprit's face.

"Don't be angry with me, father," she returned, with a pale smile. "I don't wish to be married. And if I did, I don't want a man of that sort."

"Of that sort!" he shouted. "Of that sort! The only fault he has is that he's a thousand times too good for you."

And then the mother interposed.

"Let her alone, Jimmy. She is over−young for husbands yet, and I'm sure we are in no hurry to get rid of her, bless her!" And she paused in her search for a son−in−law, and reproached herself for having, perhaps, "put ideas" into her child's head before it was old enough to receive them.

Meanwhile, Minna's heart was away upon the sea. She thought of the sea all day and dreamed of it all night, and read of it in as many of Clark Russell's novels as the local Mechanics' Institute could supply; and of course she had made up her young mind that only a sailor could satisfy her. Also that her love for the particular sailor responsible for this state of things was "that love which only comes once in a lifetime" peculiar, as we know, to young people in their teens.

She looked in many newspapers for tidings of the Penguin, but found none. At long intervals she would come upon the name of the Seamew, and of the Albatross, and the Petrel, and other boats of that line in the columns of shipping news, but she never happened to discover the whereabouts of the most precious of all vessels after the sad Saturday when she stood alone on the back beach of Williamstown to watch it fade upon the horizon, homeward bound. She had fits of fever over this matter, alternating with fits of cold despair when she convinced herself that the Penguin had gone down with all hands, leaving none to tell the tale.

At last she saw that the Seamew had returned to Melbourne. Immediately she resolved to repair thither in order to question Captain Brent about his friend. She confessed for the first time that she was out of health, and said that only sea air could restore her.

"Sea air did not do you much good when you tried it before," Mrs. Smith remarked, but allowed the child to have her own way, as usual. Maria Atcheson was written to, and Minna was consigned to her, with an equivalent for her "keep" in the shape of a noble hamper of farm produce.

The chaperon expressed herself as quite shocked by the girl's appearance when they met on the Spencer Street platform.

"Why, how thin you've got!" she exclaimed. "I should hardly have known you. I expect you've just been moped to death up there. How people can stand the bush year in and year out I can't conceive, especially a girl of your age. I know it would kill me in no time. But you'll soon get all right now you are in my hands, Minna. It is not beef−tea that you want, with all due deference to your mother, but a few theatres and parties, and things of that sort."

"Like we had last time," said Minna, with averted face. "Do you remember our afternoon on board the Seamew? By the way, the Seamew is in again, isn't she?"

"I believe so. Is this your portmanteau?"

"Yes; that's all. I suppose you have seen Captain Brent?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet? The ship has been here for more than a week!"

"Oh, I am sick of ships! Come along; let us get home. I am going to take you to a chrysanthemum show this afternoon, and we shall only just have time to lunch and dress."

The fervour of Mrs. Atcheson's friendships was only equalled by their brevity, and, as Minna presently discovered, Captain Brent had had his day.

So it was a little while before she found an opportunity to get sight and speech of him. Three days of passionate anxiety intervened. Then she excused herself from certain calls, caught Jacky on his return from school, bribed him to go for a walk with her, and flattered his pride as escort by asking him to show her the ships at the railway pier.

"Do you remember the gingerbread nuts that Captain Spurling gave you, Jacky?"

"Oh, yes; he wasn't a bad sort, was he?"

"I wonder where he is now? I suppose you don't know?"

"Never heard a word of him from that day to this. But I'll tell you who is here, Miss Smith old Captain Brent and he's worth a dozen Spurlings any day."

"Why?" asked Miss Smith, indignant and concerned.

"Oh, he's awfully kind, you know. Since he's been in this time he's given us boys the best tuck−out we ever had in our lives."

Minna laughed, and her step grew brisk.

"Perhaps we might pay him a little call now, Jacky. What do you say?"

Jacky said, in all sincerity, that he was "on."

It was a late call. The distance from the Strand at Williamstown to the railway pier is much longer than it looks, and this was a time of year when the shades of evening fell early soon after five o'clock, in fact. The ships, when they were reached, loomed vast and vague, infinitely majestic and imposing, in the brooding hush of a sea−foggy night that had quite closed in. All work for the day was over, and the old pier was deserted, the few yellow gleams on its rail metals and the hulls that lined it serving but to deepen its air of solitude and make darkness visible. Nevertheless, Captain Brent was at home contrary to the custom of captains in port and he welcomed his visitors cordially. He wanted them to stay and dine with him, and was much disappointed when Miss Smith reluctantly refused, on the ground that Mrs. Atcheson did not know where they were. "We were just having a little walk," she explained, "and being so near we thought we might as well say 'How d'ye do.'" Which, Captain Brent declared, was a most friendly act on their part. And he brought out his port wine, and the bush girl, not to hurt his feelings, sipped a little of it, not at all understanding how good it was.

Over the nauseous glass she found an opportunity to mention Captain Spurling.

"I hope he is quite well," she said, in a casual way. "I have not seen his ship mentioned in the papers. I hope he reached home safely after leaving here?"

"Oh, yes," said Captain Brent. "He got home all right. Found a new baby added to the family circle."

"A baby!" gasped Minna, petrified.

"Three weeks old. And, what was a great deal worse, found that his daughter had run away and got married. Eloped with a music−master."

"His daughter! Do you mean his daughter?"

"The eldest. Nothing but a child, of course. But that's the worst of being a sailor, Miss Smith. You can't take care of the young girls when they want protection most, and they won't mind their mothers these times. Why, she couldn't have been a day older than you are. Not nineteen till May, I think they said. Young hussy! And as for that music−master, I believe Spurling pretty nearly killed him, and serve him right."

"I," said Minna, in a dazed way, as if talking in her sleep "I shall be nineteen in May."

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A SWEET DAY

Lord Thomas De Bohun had been married twice and more. In fact, he was sick and tired of womenkind. And that is why he came out to Australia. He thought a year or two of travel in a savage country, free of all the trammels of civilization, would give him a rest. Besides, the second Lady Thomas had been rather nice to him, and she had died pathetically, and he missed her. Wherefore he loathed the British matchmaker for the present, and was glad to get as far away from her as possible. He was not a roué and a reprobate, such as this introduction might imply. Nothing of the sort. A better−natured or more charming young man he was on the right side of forty still was not to be found in London. But he was the son of a duke, poor fellow, with a great deal of money, and no work to do misfortunes for which the fair−minded reader will make a large allowance.

In the beginning, Australia did not quite answer his expectations. Whereas he had imagined a dress−suit to be a thing unknown, he found himself obliged to wear one nightly, and he was just as ducal in our city clubs and drawing−rooms as he would have been at home indeed, a great deal more so. But as soon as he escaped into the country he was all right. Clad in moleskins and a Crimean shirt, with a soft felt hat on his head, and big spurs on

his heels, he galloped about at kangaroo hunts and cattle musters, a simple bushman of the bush (while his servant played the gentleman in Melbourne), enjoying health and happiness and the unrivalled charm of novelty to a degree unknown before. Anybody could get him who had no right to get him. The great country houses, flattering themselves that they alone could entertain him suitably, found it a most difficult matter to drop salt on his elusive tail.

He was at a bush hotel one evening, spending a convivial hour with perfect strangers, who did not know he was Lord Thomas. Having heard his name was De Bohun, they called him Mr. Bone, and were quite satisfied with that. So was he. The talk turned upon agricultural machinery, as used by English and Australian farmers respectively; and a member of the latter class, as Lord Thomas supposed, was most anxious to show him a five−furrow plough and various modern implements American "notions" of the labour−saving kind.

"You come home with me," said the jolly old man, "and you shall see 'em working. Now do, Mr. Bone. Pot−luck, you know, but a hearty welcome."

Lord Thomas jumped at the chance, for, amongst other delightfully novel pursuits, he had set himself to the improvement of his mind in these matters, as a responsible landlord and potential duke.

"But your family?" he objected. "Would it not inconvenience them to receive a stranger without warning, and at so late an hour?"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Bone. There's always a bed ready for anybody that may turn up. Mrs. Kemp will be charmed to see you."

"In that case," said Lord Thomas, "I accept with pleasure."

A pair of rough horses, in a ramshackle American wagon, were brought round, and they set forth on a ten−mile voyage through the bush, with neither lamps nor moon to steer by. At a long, swinging trot, never hastening and never loitering, the shabby animals did it in an hour without making a false step, and were as fresh at the end as at the beginning. The mysterious, illimitable gloom and the romantic solitude were very refreshing to the London man, and so was his host, who was full of merry tales and valuable information. Lord Thomas, in short, enjoyed his adventure thoroughly.

But he was taken aback by the sight of Mr. Kemp's house. Instead of the shanty of his anticipations, he beheld a tall and imposing structure, cutting a great block out of the starry midnight sky. A sweet place by daylight ivied, virginia−creepered, grape−vined all over its mellow brick walls and decaying verandahs, with a great garden and magnificent trees around it.

"Built by my father in the early days," said Mr. Kemp. "The first big house in this district, and the only one for nigh twenty years. We've been rich folks in our time, Mr. Bone, but the ups and downs, you know, things ain't what they used to be, especially since the Boom. However, we've still got a roof over us, thank God, and a crust to share with a friend."

The family had retired, and the guest, having been warmed with whisky, was escorted to his bedroom by the host. It was a kind of bedroom to make him feel slightly nervous about meeting the hostess next morning. The bed creaked with age, and so did the carpetless floor beneath it; but the linen was fine and the pillows soft, the handsome old rosewood furniture shone like glass, and there was an impalpable air about everything that bespoke the house of a lady.

"I don't know whether you like the windows shut?" said Mr. Kemp, hospitably bustling about. "We always keep them open, and the blinds up. Nobody to overlook us here, you know." He tried to pull down a sash which stuck

in the frame, but at Lord Thomas's request desisted.

"Leave it as it is," said the guest. "I like them open. It's so Australian!"

And he presently lay down on his lavender−perfumed couch, feeling after his experience of bush inns that it was the nicest bed he had ever occupied. And that scent of the earth and of the night, coming in through open windows, how exquisite it was! He blew out his candle a home−made candle in an old chased silver candlestick and slept like a baby.

Not for long, however. Voices called him through those open windows, and before six o'clock he was leaning out of one of them, awake and alive as he had rarely been at such an hour.

What an Arcadian world was this, in which he felt like a man new born! Air as clear as crystal, and dew shining on shrubs and trees; giant acacias and native white cedars, and pink and white oleanders that could have swallowed an ordinary bush house; the morning moon still gleaming like a jewel over the saffron sunrise and the intensely dark−blue hills. He had heard curlews in the night and frogs at the break of dawn; now the magpies were fluting all over the place, cheerful fowls were crowing, laughing jackasses shouting "Ha−ha−ha!" and "Hoo−hoo−hoo!" to one another. Delicious sounds! But none so acutely audible as the immense silence at the back of them.

"This," said he to himself, "is the real bush, that we have heard so much about, at last."

He looked down from his window, and saw the sparrows at the ripe grapes now loading the eaves of the verandah; saw a hare limping along the gravelled paths, where no hare should be. He looked over the garden hedges to the peaceful fields outside, where cows were feeding quietly, throwing shadows on the wet grass; flocks of cockatoos were screaming amongst them, and sprinkling themselves like white flowers over the fresh−ploughed land; and an army of dusky jays held the vineyard on the hill, whence their joyous gabble rose continuously. It was not his property they were destroying, and he saw and heard them with delight those denizens of the wild bush that was healing him, body and soul, of the ills of excessive civilization.

The pink dawn spread and glowed, quenching the horned moon and dimming the sapphire hues of the distant ranges. Then some white bee boxes gleamed conspicuously to the right of the flower garden an orderly encampment, like tents on a field of battle and he could see the busy swarms going forth to their day's labour. He could even hear them humming, they were in such myriads. And another thing he heard a faint, muffled clatter which he traced to a little building near the gate of the bees' enclosure; a shed made of reeds, with two windows and a door in it doubtless the honey−house, in which some one was early at work. As he listened to the noise within, he watched the door, which faced his view, and presently he saw a girl come out of it. She wore a pink cotton sun−bonnet, veiled with a bushman's fly net, and an all−embracing tight apron, which made her look like the toy figures of a Noah's ark. In each hand she carried a long tin box, one heavier than the other, by rough loops of fencing wire; and she marched with them down an alley between the bee hives. Mr. Kemp had casually mentioned his daughter, who, at the time, Lord Thomas had not regarded as affecting him in any way. Evidently this was she, and the circumstances of the house disposed him to take another view of her.

He saw her put the boxes on the grass and set the lids open, then lift the roof from one of the wooden hives. A cloud of angry insects rose to her stooping face and buzzed about her; it made him tingle to see them, but she heeded them no more than if they had been motes in the sun−rays that now lighted up her figure so effectively. She puffed something that smoked into the open hive from a sort of little bellows arrangement, and then lifted out the frames of comb, held them dangling in the air while she brushed black masses of bees off them, and placed them edgewise in one of the boxes on the grass until she had quite filled it. Out of the other she took similar frames, which she dropped into the emptied chamber, and shut down there. Then he saw her labouring towards the honey house with the weighted box, and was exasperated to note how it dragged her down. She passed it from

hand to hand to ease the strain, but could not carry it without a twist of her supple body, a staggering gait, and pantings that he seemed to hear, though of course he could not.

"What a shame!" he inwardly ejaculated. And he withdrew into his room, emptied a can of water into a battered old bath, and dressed in haste. The clatter in the honey−house, which had ceased while she was amongst the bees, showing that she worked single−handed, began again.

"I wonder," quoth Lord Thomas, "what she's doing in there?"

He thought he would go down to see, and went, stepping softly, so as not to disturb the rest of the family, who did not seem to rise so early as she. As usual in the bush, no locks or bolts impeded him; he turned the handle of the hall door, and noiselessly slipped out.

What a morning indeed! Freshly autumnal for it was the end of March though the day would be all summer until the sun was low again; cool almost to coldness, with an air that washed the lungs and invigorated the heart in a manner to make mere living an ecstasy, even to a lord the air of the spacious, untainted bush, and of nowhere else in the wide world. He stood a moment on the steps of the verandah to drink it in to sniff the wholesome odour of gum trees and the richer scent of the perennial orange flower starring the thick green walls of the orchard paths. Then he strolled down one of those perfumed lanes the one that divided the back garden from the front and presented himself at the gate of the bee enclosure just as Miss Kemp, with one of her tin boxes, dashed out of the honey−house and slammed the door behind her, disappointing the expectations of a cloud of besieging bees.

She saw him and stopped short, evidently taken aback, and conscious of her coarse apron and limp sun−bonnet, not worn for company. He hesitated for a moment in sympathetic confusion, but, being immediately aware that the form thus plainly outlined was a charming one, as also the pink face in the frame of pink calico, stood his ground and modestly accosted her. He lifted his cap gracefully, and a bee got under it.

"Good morning you brute!" was what he said.

"Don't come," she cried in answer, waving him back. Then she pulled off a sticky glove and held a bare hand over the gate, regardless of bees, expressing a polite astonishment at his being up so soon.

"I heard of your arrival, Mr. Bone," said she. "I hope you slept well. I hope you like Australia, as far as you have seen it."

They chatted conventionally for some minutes. He apologised for his presence, and she reassured him, on behalf of the family, with an easy frankness that seemed to say he was but one of dozens of Mr. Bones flowing in a continuous stream through the house, like tramps through a casual ward. And then he begged to be allowed to help her in her work. "I am sure," said he, "you must want somebody to carry that heavy box oh, conf ! They knew I am a stranger, evidently."

"Go away," she laughed. "You have no business here. I don't want help I am quite used to doing it all and you'd better go and sit on the verandah, where you can be at peace. Or wouldn't you like a stroll round? With a pipe, perhaps?"

"Will you show me round?"

"I'm sorry I can't; I must be busy here. The honey is coming in so fast this weather which may break at any moment that I can't gather it quickly enough. I get on an average nearly a quarter of a ton per day."

She looked at him with an air of professional pride, forgetting her costume; and he looked at her. The closer view showed freckles and a retroussé nose, without at all detracting from her charm. He could gaze full into her face without being rude, because her eyes were continually following the movements of the bees that buzzed about him. Every now and then her fingers skirmished round his head like a flight of butterflies.

Five minutes more, and she was tying a large apron round his waist, over a very old coat that did not fit him, and he was planting on his aristocratic head an aged straw hat, flounced with mosquito netting. In this costume, finished off with a pair of good gloves of his own, cheerfully sacrificed, he was allowed to pass through the gate and take up the box by its handles of fencing−wire. The sun was well above the ranges now, and every dewy leaf and blade of grass glittering.

"What a heavenly morning!" he sighed ecstatically.

"Isn't it?" she assented, and then fell to work again with an energy interesting to contemplate in a person of her sex and years. She walked between the rows of hives till she came to the one to be operated on; he walked after her, inwardly nervous, but with an air of utmost valour.

"Now be careful," said she, as she seized her little bellows. "Tuck that net into your waistcoat in front, and then lift the lid off for me."

He did as she bade him, and gasped at the spectacle presented. How all those bees managed to breathe and move, let alone work, in the space they occupied, was more than he could understand. She had no time to explain just now. While he stood rigid, and imagined bees under the hems of his trousers for they were thick in the grass he stood on she rapidly smoked the hive and drew out the frames of comb, heavy with honey, brushed thousands of stinging things off them, and placed them in the empty tin. From the full one she took the frames, filled only with hollow cells, which she had brought from the honey house; and these she dropped into the hive amid the masses of bees, leaving less than an inch between one wall of comb and another.

"And you make the same wax do again?" he inquired, thirsting for knowledge.

"Many times," she replied, pleased to inform his ignorance. "That comb will be refilled in about ten days. Put the lid on again, please. Gently don't crush more than you can help. Now "

She straightened her back and looked at him.

"Now what?" he inquired eagerly.

"Well, if you would, you might be filling the other box while I extracted."

But this was rather more than his courage was equal to. He said he was afraid he did not know enough about it yet.

"Very well; we will go and extract the lot we have."

They went to the honey−house together, and she quickly shut the door as soon as both were in. He smiled to himself as he saw her do it. The situation to him was well, noticeable; to her it was absolutely without sentimental suggestions. The honey−house was the place for work, not for play.

It was a stuffy and a sticky place, for its little windows, as well as the door, had to be closed to keep the bees out. Ventilation depended on the loosely−woven canvas lining the reed−thatched walls. Half of the floor was raised above the other half, so that the honey from the extractor, pouring from the spout upon a fine sieve, could flow

downwards to the great tank, and from that into the tins which conveyed it to market. Five tons' weight of these tins were stacked on the lower floor, all filled and soldered up; and many more, Miss Kemp stated, were stored in the house.

"I used to get sixpence a pound for it," she informed him, with an anxious, business look in her pretty grey eyes; "but now the stores won't give more than threepence. It really doesn't seem worth while, at that price, taking railway charges and all do you think it does?"

Lord Thomas did not, emphatically.

"So I am going to try exporting. I have the regulation boxes and tins fifty−six pounds in a tin, and two tins in a case and, as soon as I can get my hands free here, I shall prepare a consignment for the London market. I do hope that will pay! You are an Englishman, Mr. Bone what is your opinion of the chances of a trade in Australian honey?"

With the confidence of utter ignorance, Lord Thomas assured her that there was a splendid opening. He knew people heaps of people who would snap it up gladly; and proposed to himself to be her purveyor to those people, comprising all the De Bohuns and his numerous lady friends.

"Oh, I am so thankful to hear you say that!" Miss Kemp ejaculated, with a heave of the chest. "You see wool is down, and cattle selling for nothing and the value of places like this dropped to less than what they are mortgaged for; therefore something must be done. I've begun with honey, so I want to go on with it. I can increase to any extent, if I can only get a regular and paying market."

He was oddly touched, and more interested and amused than he had ever been in his life, to see a pretty girl regarding her destiny from such a point of view. It was something quite out of his experience. She really wanted to work, and not to flirt to do something for men, instead of being done for by them. And yet there was nothing of the new woman about her. She was sweetly old−fashioned.

For instance, it gave her a visible shock to learn, in the course of miscellaneous conversation, that he had a baby ten months old and had left it behind in England.

"What!" she exclaimed tragically, "without either father or mother to look after it?"

"Oh," said he, "there are plenty of people to look after it."

"Who will who could like its own parents?"

"Well, you wouldn't have a fellow travel about the world with a nursery in his train now would you?"

"I don't know how you can travel, under such circumstances."

He thought this very funny. And yet he liked it. Lady Thomas the first had detested children; Lady Thomas the second, a mother for a day, had shown no feeling for them. This girl's evident concern for his virtual orphan who, as she said, might die of croup or convulsions without his knowing it, while he idly gadded about like an irresponsible bachelor struck him as very interesting. She asked questions about it in an earnest way, and made him feel quite fatherly and serious. He wondered if the poor little brat was really being cared for properly, and determined to make strict inquiries by the next mail.

Conversation was not allowed to hinder business. While she talked in this friendly, human fashion, Miss Kemp worked as he had never seen a lady work before, as he had never worked himself since he was born. With a frame

of comb in one hand, and in the other a big knife, kept hot in a tin of water standing on an oil−fed flame, she sheared off the capsules from the cells that had been filled and closed, leaving those that had bees in them, with the rapidity and dexterity of a performing conjuror. Then she dropped the frames into the wheel arrangement inside the extractor, and turned the handle violently no, he turned it for her while she prepared more frames, full ones for the machine and empty ones for the tin box, and cleared up the shreds of wax, and so on. She had no regard for attitudes, nor for the state of her complexion, and it was clearly evident that she valued Lord Thomas for his services and not for himself. He had never been in such a position since he was a fag at school; in relation to a woman, never. It chagrined him a little, but pleased him much. He determined to remain Mr. Bone for the present.

Called to breakfast, he made the acquaintance of just such a hostess as he had expected a faded woman, with a refined face and voice, English born, and homesick for her own country. He exercised upon her that art of pleasing, of which he was a master, and she was so charmed with him that she begged him to stay a little, not to run away immediately, unless bored by the dulness of the place. Her husband abetted her, with the unquestioning hospitality of the bush, which asks no more of a guest than that he shall know how to behave himself.

"And I'll show you all my improvements," said Mr. Kemp. "A good deal more than you could run through in an hour or two, or even in a day."

"Thanks, thanks," Lord Thomas murmured. "Just at present I am more interested in the honey industry than in anything else. I intend to keep bees myself when I get back, and it is a great chance for me to see all the working of the thing as it is done here. Er er how clear and beautiful that is!" He looked at a dish containing a square block of honey in the comb, neatly removed from the wooden frame it was made in. Letty hastened to pass it to him.

"Isn't it?" she crooned, surveying it with a maternal air. "And this is what I get only threepence for in the local market! I can't but think there must be ways of exporting it in sections, with careful packing. Don't you think if it could be brought on English breakfast tables in the comb like this there would be a great demand for it? I am sure they haven't honey to surpass our honey."

Lord Thomas was equally sure of it convinced, indeed, that benighted England never tasted anything like it in its life. Mrs. Kemp smiled a superior British smile. Mr. Kemp pooh−poohed the fuss his daughter made over comparative trifles. What was honey, as a topic of interest for an Englishman anxious to improve his mind, compared with ensilage, and irrigation, and six−furrow ploughs?

For two precious hours Lord Thomas found himself obliged to attend to these latter subjects with what interest he could muster, and he only got away from them so soon by force of misleading insinuations to the effect that bees were his natural hobby and bee−keeping his proposed profession. At eleven o'clock he resumed his sticky apron and gloves, his old coat and his veiled old hat, with more delight than he had ever taken in clothes before ridiculous as it seemed, even to himself and rushed to the heated and messy honey−house as he had never rushed to a royal garden party.

Letty's hot face lighted up at sight of him. Beads of perspiration lay like dew under her clear eyes and over her pretty lips, but she cared not, neither did he. This sort of thing did not spoil the effect, as usual.

"Oh, how good of you!" she exclaimed. And at once she set him to work. He buckled to with might and main, as if his life and hers depended on the amount of honey they could extract in a given time. They had two hours together, talking while they worked, growing better friends every minute.

"Labour−saving machines," said she, still harping on the one string, "are splendid, I know; but they run away with money when there isn't any money. My plan is just the opposite of father's. It mightn't be such good economy in

other circumstances, but as things are it is my idea of economy. I don't know what you think."

He told her what he thought, and she told him it was beside the point. So it was. So he wanted it to be. Hard as he worked at the handle of the extractor, he worked still harder at trying to change the subject. But, though she might be led aside a step or two, she could not be wholly drawn from it.

It was worse after lunch. She said to him, with the firm air of a general directing military manoeuvres, "Now you know all that is to be done in the house, so you can attend to that while I am changing the frames in the hives. Oh, never mind the box; I can carry it quite easily. And we shall get on twice as fast."

He found he had to do it the uncapping with the hot knife, and all the rest of it while she went back and forth outside. It was a long afternoon, and the little shed was stifling. The perspiration poured from his brow and trickled down his neck as he strained every nerve to be ready for her each time she brought the full box in. And his wages were next to nothing.

But at last the sun went down, and his long struggle to get the better of his rivals seemed over. They came straggling home in the golden twilight to their well−earned rest, and Letty Kemp prepared to follow their example when it was too dark to work any more.

"There," said she, with a sigh of utter weariness and satisfaction, "we have done well, haven't we? I can't tell you how much obliged to you I am, Mr. Bone."

Suddenly he felt tired of being Mr. Bone and a casual labourer, so he said awkwardly, "Er er I think you haven't got my name quite correctly. It is De Bohun Thomas de Bohun."

"Oh, I beg pardon," she returned, in an airy manner; and he perceived that she was not enlightened. "You know, Mr. de Bohun, there is a little talk and movement about eucalyptus honey just now. Some chemist people at home have been praising its medicinal properties. And it is everything in these cases to strike while the iron is hot."

"Ye es," drawled Lord Thomas absent−mindedly. Actually she had been so absorbed in those blessed bees as not to have heard of him in his proper character.

They took off their sticky overalls and returned to the house to prepare for the evening meal. And when Miss Kemp came downstairs, washed and brushed, in a pale−blue frock, a white muslin fichu, and a rose, Lord Thomas thought her beautiful. Yes, in spite of freckles and a turned−up nose. Never had he seen in woman's shape such pure health and such an absence of self−consciousness. Of all the charming novelties surrounding him, these were the most charming.

"I suppose she's too busy to notice what a sweet creature she is," he thought, as he sat down to the juicy slice of mutton for which he had earned so keen an appetite. And he anticipated with joy the leisure hours he now expected to spend with her, undisturbed by bees, in the somewhat threadbare drawing−room.

All went thither together at the conclusion of the meal the comfortable tea−dinner of the bush. Mr. Kemp, desiring to talk ploughs and ensilage, proposed a smoke. His guest, yearning for tobacco, aching in every limb, declined. Mrs. Kemp sent her daughter to the piano, and Letty played admirably Lord Thomas thought the intermezzo from Cavalleria, and a few things of that sort; and while he tried to listen, and to feed his sense of the girl's many−sided excellence, his hostess babbled about London as she remembered it, and wanted a thousand and one details of the dear city as it was now. During a laborious description of the Thames Embankment, Letty rose from the music−stool, and softly moved about the room. Her admirer flattered himself that she was listening to him, but was shortly undeceived. She vanished at a moment when his face was turned from the door, and never came back.

"Does she actually leave me!" he dumbly groaned. "Is she so lost to all the feelings of her sex as to imagine that I won't miss her while I have this old woman to talk to?" It was enough to drive any titled gentleman to extremities.

Soon he was hunting the dim verandahs round and round, in search of the fugitive. He explored the passages of the house; he walked about the garden, smelling so strongly of orange blossom, in the pure night air; and he used bad language under his breath. At last he was drawn to a light shining like a thread of incandescent wire through a certain outhouse door. He lifted the latch and looked in.

There she was. Kneeling on a piece of sacking in the middle of the floor, with her blue skirt pinned up round her waist under a large apron, and with all the mess of a station workshop and lumber−shed around her, she was busily engaged in painting her brand on honey tins. A kerosene lamp shed effective rays on her dainty figure, her fair, clear skin, her shining chestnut hair. In short, Lord Thomas stood and looked at her, fascinated. Of the thousands of pretty women that he had admired in his time, not one had ever appeared to such advantage in the matter of background and grouping. Yet he protested at the sight.

"Oh, I say! Haven't you done enough work for one day, Miss Kemp? Are you trying to kill yourself?"

She looked up at him with a laugh; and her eyes, focussing the light, were like stars in the grubby gloom.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. de Bohun! I thought as you were talking to mother, you would not notice if I slipped away for half an hour."

"Did you?" said Lord Thomas, entering and shutting the door behind him.

"I want so badly to get my consignment away next week. And I thought if I painted the tins to−night, they would be dry for packing in the morning."

She continued to dab her black brush upon a slip of perforated zinc, but her quick hand became slightly unsteady, and she blushed visibly, even in that bad light. The fact was that Lord Thomas not as Lord Thomas, but as a man was a delightful fellow, and it was not in nature that a healthy, heart−whole girl could spend a long and intimate day with him without being more or less affected in the usual way. As yet her bees were of more consequence than lovers he was resentfully aware of it but that did not prevent her feeling hourly more conscious that toil was sweetened by his participation therein. She was pleased that he had found her. She was more pleased when he took the black brush from her, asked leave to remove his coat, turned up his cuffs, and began to paint honey tins himself.

"I am not a very practised hand at this sort of thing," he confessed. "You must tell me if I don't do it right."

"You are quite as practised at that as I am at looking on while others do my work," she replied.

"So I suppose," he rejoined thoughtfully.

They had a happy hour, unmolested by the parents, who never supposed that their practical Letty could lend herself to foolishness. Lord Thomas painted all the tins successfully. He could not well go wrong while she held the lettered label straight. Their two heads were within an inch of touching as they bent over their job; a handkerchief might have covered their four hands while the branding was in process. They looked at each other's fingers continually.

"Mine," said Letty, "are quite rough compared with yours. I don't think I ever saw such beautiful nails. It's my belief you never did a stroke of work in your life until you came here."

"Well," said Lord Thomas, colouring a little, "I am afraid I haven't done much. You make me awfully ashamed of myself, Miss Kemp."

They fell into serious talk at this stage the first serious talk Lord Thomas had ever had with a young lady, all his experiences notwithstanding.

"I wish," he abruptly remarked, "you'd teach me to be as useful as you are." There was much feeling in his voice.

She seemed to think the matter over. Then she asked him when he intended to return home. He said he was not sure.

"Soon, I suppose?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"You must go soon," she urged. "You must, for the sake of that poor baby, left to the tender mercies of hired people."

"Well," he said, "I will."

"Then you will have an opportunity to be very, very useful. You can look after my honey for me in London oh!"

He flung the paint−brush into the pot.

"I suppose it is useless," he exclaimed, through grinding teeth, "to expect you to care a straw for anything except honey and bees!"

There were but two courses open to a self−respecting man, titled or otherwise to make her do it, or die in the attempt.

She is Her Grace the Duchess now. And an excellent duchess into the bargain. The smart folks laugh at her for not "knowing her way about," but the duke does not. He thoroughly realizes that she knows it better than they do. When, as a surprise present to her, he established a magnificent apiary in the castle grounds, and then found she did not care for it, he was a little disappointed; but he soon woke to the fact that bees had been merely the make−shift of circumstance until worthier objects for the exercise of her splendid abilities were provided. With great households to administer and young dukes to rear not to speak of a thousand matters of more public moment she advisedly transferred her interest in honey to the wives of her husband's tenants.

"But they will never make honey like mine," she says, shaking her coroneted head. "It wants the taste of the eucalyptus in it."

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THE WIND OF DESTINY

The yachtsmen of the bay had been jubilant for months: this morning they were simply in ecstasies. Aha! it was their turn now. The sporting landsmen, magnates of the Melbourne Club and the great stations, who had had all the fun of the fair hitherto, were out of it this time. Oh, no doubt the new Governor was fond of his "bike," and of a good horse, and of golf and polo, and the usual things; and, of course, he would be pleased with the triumphal arches and many gorgeous demonstrations of civic welcome and goodwill. But it was here that his heart would

be here, on the blue water, with the brethren of his craft. The country might not know it, but they knew it mariners all, with their own freemasonry they and he. Every yacht of any consequence had been on the slips quite lately as lately as was compatible with having paint and varnish dry. One or two of the newer models, wanting extra depth for their bulbous keels, were all but too late in their desire to be spick and span for the great occasion, but happily got a west−wind tide to float them up in time. And here they all were, scores and scores of them, as smart as they could be, with their beautiful sails going up, burgee and ensign flying in the breeze of the loveliest morning that could possibly have been provided for a national festival depending wholly on the weather for success. Yesterday it had been cloudy and gloomy, threatening rain; and to−morrow the north wind was to blow a sultry hurricane, opaque with dust; but to−day was heavenly. No other adjective, as Fanny Pleydell remarked, could describe its all−round perfection.

She was putting on her new white drill with the blue sailor collar, and her new straw hat with Kittiwake in gold letters on its new blue ribbon, and joyously addressed her brother through a passage and two open doors. He shouted back that it the day was "ripping," which meant the same thing. The only doubt about it was whether there would be wind enough. There is always that doubt in yachting forecasts that and the lesser fear of having too much; without which, however, yachting would be no fun at all. The Kittiwake (once the property of Adam Drewe, Esq.) was one of the crack boats, and Herbert Lawson familiarly "Bert" was skipper and owner; and he had no mind to make himself a mere St. Kilda decoration, as the land−lubbers in authority desired. Let the others tug at moorings if they chose, like wild birds tied by the legs, for hours and hours; the Kittiwake intended to fly when she opened her wings weather permitting and not submit to be treated as a slab in a canvas wall. She was going to meet the Sunbeam on free water, half−way down the bay, which, with any sort of wind, she could easily do, and still be back in time for the landing ceremony. And so Captain Bert kept an eye on tree branches and the set of anchored craft, while giving keen attention to his toilet, arraying himself in ducks like the driven snow and flannels like milk, waxing the curly points of his moustache till they tapered smoothly as a ram's horns, trimming his nails, and choosing a silk handkerchief to foam out of his breast pocket, as with a view to being inspected at close quarters through a strong telescope from the Sunbeam's deck.

But he was not dressing himself for the eyes of his vice−sovereign lady. It was for the sake of Lena Pickersgill and Myra Salter that he took such pains to render his handsome person as attractive as possible and he did not quite know which.

Let me briefly explain. Old Lawson had died not long ago, leaving Herbert master of a good business in Melbourne, a good old family house at Williamstown (with the Kittiwake attached), and a most comfortable and even luxurious income for these post−boom days. Sister and brothers were sufficiently provided for the former married, the latter studying for professions and there was no widowed mother to take care of and defer to. Herbert was a man of domestic instincts, and turned thirty, and an arbitrary housekeeper bullied him. In short, every circumstance of the case cried aloud to him to take a wife, and he was as ready as possible to do so. But, of course, he wished to be a lover before becoming a husband, and fate had not yet clearly indicated the object he sought. He was a particular young man, as he had every right to be, and much in dread of making a mistake.

To−day he had arrived at the stage of choosing Lena and Myra, out of all the girls he knew, as the only possibles. Before night he hoped to have made up a distracted mind as to which of the two was the right one. Chaperoned by young Mrs. Pleydell, both were to be guests of the Kittiwake for a long, fine day; and surely no better opportunity for the purpose could possibly have been devised.

Miss Salter was a Williamstown young lady, a schoolmate of Fanny Pleydell's, and was to embark with her hostess early. She was Fanny's candidate for the vacancy in the family, and rather suffered as such from the advocacy of her friend. Miss Pickersgill, belonging to a somewhat higher rank of life, lived in town, and was to be taken off from the St. Kilda pier. Fanny had not wanted to have Lena asked, and for that reason Bert had firmly insisted on it. For that reason also he was inclined to promote her to the place of honour, rather than a girl whom he felt was being thrust down his throat.

But when he presently met the latter, and helped her into his dinghy with the tenderest air of strong protection, he thought her very sweet. She was a fair, slim thing, shy, unaffected, and amiable, and looked delicious in her white garb. All the ladies on board had to wear white to−day, to harmonize with the pearly enamel of the boat and her snowy new Lapthorn sails; and Myra had the neatest frock, and the prettiest figure to set it off. And, moreover, as he very well knew, she did not run after him when she was let alone.

He rowed her and his sister to the yacht, on which a numerous white−uniformed crew had made all ready for the start, and he sent the dinghy back in charge of his brother to pick up three more lady guests. These three were nobodies as regards this story a homely aunt and two plain cousins, who had a family right to the suddenly valuable favours at their kinsman's disposal. They made up the number he thought would fill the cockpit comfortably three on each side.

Mrs. Pleydell, as soon as she had gained the deck, plunged below to investigate the matter of supplies; Miss Salter sat down to survey the scene, and the skipper sat down beside her. They had quite twenty minutes of quiet tête−à−tête, and to that extent placed Miss Pickersgill at a disadvantage.

"Isn't it a heavenly morning?" or "a ripping day," as the case might be was what they said; and "I wonder will the breeze hold?" and "Didn't you feel certain last night that it was changing for rain?" conversation that had no literary value to make it worth reporting. However, it is not in words that incipient lovers explain themselves, but in the accompaniment to words played by furtive eyes and the corners of lips, and other instruments of nature inaudible to the outward ear. Myra's varying complexion confessed a lot of things, and the amount of intelligence in the horns of that moustache which had been waxed so carefully was wonderful. Indeed, it really seemed, thus early in the day, as if the die were cast. Both looked so handsome and felt so happy, and the weather and all the circumstances were so specially favourable to the development of kindly sentiments.

"I am so glad you were able to come," the young man remarked, whenever they fell upon a pause, changing the emphasis to a fresh word each time. And the young woman put it in all sorts of modest but convincing ways that he was not more glad than she was. Oh, it was a heavenly morning, truly! And Mrs. Pleydell and the crew were more and more careful to do nothing to mar the prospect.

But soon the fat aunt and excited cousins arrived, all in white, and as conscious of it as if dressed for a fancy ball, and it was time to make for the rendezvous across the bay. Thither were the yachts of all clubs converging in dozens and scores, like an immense flock of seabirds skimming the azure water, their sails like silver and white satin in the sun. As Bert Lawson steered his own, proudly convinced that she was queen of the company, he named his would−be rivals to his guest, keeping her so close to him that he had to apologise for touching her elbow with the tiller now and then. Occasionally he exchanged an opinion with the crew that the old so−and−so didn't look so bad, and they continually cocked their eyes aloft to where the blue ensign waved in the languid breeze. It wasn't every boat that could dip that flag to the new Governor no, indeed!

"Isn't it a pretty sight?" the ladies cried to one another and it certainly was. Even the prosaic shore was transfigured and glorious in one place, at least. The St. Kilda pier and the hotel, and the steep slope connecting them, smothered all over in green stuff and bunting, and packed with what appeared to be the whole population of the colony, was a striking spectacle as viewed from the sea. The most bigoted Englishman must acknowledge it.

"Oh," exclaimed Fanny Pleydell, staring through a strong pair of glasses, "I wouldn't have had you miss it for the world, Myra dear."

"And yet I nearly did," the girl replied, glancing at Bert from under her hat brim as he stood over her, intent on business "If mother had not been so much better this morning, I could not possibly have left her."

The skipper ceased shouting to his too numerous men not to crowd the boat's nose so that he could not see it, and dropped soft eyes on his sister's friend. "Dear, dutiful, unselfish little soul!" he thought. "That's the sort of woman to make a good wife. That's the girl for me." It was still not more than twenty minutes to eleven, and he had got as far as that.

But now Miss Pickersgill intervened. She put off from the gorgeous pier, which was not yet closed to the public, in the dinghy of a local friend, in order that the Kittiwake should not be burdened with its own. It afterwards transpired that she had engaged to grace the yacht of the local friend, and had thrown him over for Bert Lawson, having no scruples of pride against making use of him, nevertheless. She was a radiant vision in tailor−made cream serge, a full−blooded, full−bosomed, high−coloured, self−confident young beauty, with bold eyes and a vivacious manner, calculated to make any picnic party lively. As she approached, like a queen enthroned, all the male creatures hung forward to gaze and smile, Bert springing to the side to help her over which was only what she expected and was accustomed to. And she jumped into the midst of the group around the cockpit, four humble−minded admirers and one firm adversary, chose her place and settled herself, nodding and waving salutations around, as if she were Mrs. Bert already.

Myra's heart sank in presence of so formidable a rival. Myra was the daughter of a retired sea−captain in rather narrow circumstances; Lena's father was a stock−broker, and reputed to roll in money. She had fat gold bangles on her wrists, and a diamond in each ear. She lifted her smart skirt from a lace−frilled petticoat, and the serge was lined with silk. The dejected observer moved to make way for so unquestionable a superior. But Bert detained her with a quiet hand.

"Sit still," he said. "There is plenty of room."

To her surprise and joy, she found he still preferred her near him. It was not money and gold bracelets that could quench her gentle charm.

And now the fun began. The yacht, with every stitch of canvas spread, set out upon her course, determined to be the first to salute her future commodore. There was just enough wind to waft her along with a motion as soft as feathers, as airy as a dream, and the heavenly morning, on the now wider waters, was more heavenly than ever.

"It's our day out, and no mistake," quoth Miss Pickersgill, in her hearty way. "Let's have a song, old chap" to Bert "or do some thing or other to improve the occasion. What do you say, Mrs. Pleydell?"

"I," said the hostess cheerfully, but with tightened lips, "am going to get you all something to eat."

"And I'll go and help you," said Myra, rising hastily.

"Oh, all right go on; I'll keep 'em alive till you come back. Now then, tune up, everybody! I'll begin. What shall I sing, Mr. Lawson?" with a languishing glance at him over her shoulder. "You shall choose."

"I think you'd better whistle," said Bert, whose eyes were on his sails, and his nose sniffing anxiously.

"All serene. I can do that too. But why had I better whistle?"

"Wind's dying away to nothing, I grieve to say."

"By George, it is!" his young men echoed, in sympathetic concern. "If we don't mind, we shall fall between two stools, and be out of everything."

"What's the odds, so long as you're happy?" was Miss Lena's philosophic response. And they adopted that view. With every prospect of being ignominiously becalmed, out of the track of events in which they had expected to take a leading and historic part, they lolled about the deck and sang songs with rousing choruses popular ditties from the comic operas of the day and professed themselves as jolly as jolly could be.

"How fascinating she is!" sighed Myra Salter, listening from the little cabin to the voice of the prima donna overhead. "I don't wonder they all admire her so much!"

"I am quite sure my brother does not admire her," said Mrs. Pleydell with decision. "He thinks, as I do, that she is a forward minx he must." Bert's laugh just then came ringing down the stairs. In an interval between two songs, he and Miss Pickersgill were enjoying a bout of "chaff" rough wit that crackled like fireworks. "Of course she amuses him," said Fanny grudgingly.

"And isn't it lovely to be able to amuse people?" the girl ejaculated, envious still. "She charms them so that they forget about thee wind and everything. She is just the life and soul of the party, Fanny."

"I think she spoils it, Myra. If we don't look out, we shall be having her serenading the Governor with 'He's a jolly good fellow,' or something of that sort. If she attempts to disgrace us with her vulgarity before him, clap your hand over her mouth, my dear. I shall."

Myra laughed, and was somewhat comforted. But she still thought how lovely it would be to be able to amuse people and take them out of themselves. "He would never be dull with her," she thought sadly. "I am so stupid that I should bore him to death."

One of Miss Salter's unusual charms, perfectly appreciated by sensible Mrs. Pleydell, and not overlooked by Bert, was a sweet humble−mindedness a rare virtue in these days.

The first of several light luncheons was served on deck, without interrupting the concert. Between gulps of wine and mouthfuls of sandwich, Miss Pickersgill continued to raise fresh tunes, and the crew to shout the choruses, and the audience of fat aunt and simpering cousins to applaud admiringly. It was a case of youth at the prow and pleasure at the helm, and an abandonment of all responsibility. A dear little catspaw came stealing along, and hardly excited anybody. The yacht gathered way, and began to make knots again, faster and faster, but even that did not draw the light−hearted young folks from their frivolous pastime. Thanks to the syren of St. Kilda, they had almost forgotten the errand they were on. It really did not seem to matter much to any one whether he or she met Lord Brassey or not; he had become an incident of the day, rather than its main feature.

Still, the eyes of the crew continually searched the horizon, and presently one man saw smoke where no one else saw anything, and out of that spot a faint blur grew which resolved itself into the Aramac with the Governor on board, and the Ozone and Hygeia, its consorts. The three boats in a row advancing steadily, under all the steam they could make, were not unimpressive in their way, but the only thing the Kittiwake cared to look at was the lovely pillar of white cloud, shining like a pearl, which was recognised as the Sunbeam with all sail set. She was bearing off from the Government flotilla, dismissed from their company, superseded and discarded; but to yachtsmen's eyes she was a sort of winged angel, a spirit of the sea, and they but grubby mortals by comparison, common and gross.

"Why, why," they exclaimed, with groans of regret, gazing on the fairy column as if that were all the picture, "why didn't they let him come up in her, and let us bring him? What does he want with a lot of cheap−jack politicians here? They just spoil it all."

"It wouldn't be them if they didn't," some one said, voicing a rather prevalent opinion. And in fact they were spoiling it rather badly on the Aramac just then, if all tales be true. They had not wanted Miss Pickersgill to show

them how to do it.

It was past the hour fixed for the landing ceremonies and the poor sun−baked crowds ashore would have been dropping with fatigue if there had been room to fall in when Bert Lawson shouted "Dip! dip!" to his brother, who held the ensign halliards, and was confused by the excitement of the moment. After all, the Kittiwake was first, and proud was every heart aboard when the cocked−hatted figure on the Aramac's bridge saluted her and the flag as if he had known and loved the one as long as the other. Every man and woman was convinced that he stood lost in admiration of her beauty and the way she was manoeuvred. Bert brought her as close as was compatible with proper respect, and they all posed to the best advantage for the Governor's eye, Miss Pickersgill in front.

"Now, you fellows," she panted breathlessly. "All at once 'See−ee the conq−'ring he−e−e−ero' "

But Mrs. Pleydell's hand was up like a flash, and there was a "Hsh−sh−sh!" like the protest of a flock of geese. The fair Lena was so taken aback that she nearly fell into the captain's arms. The captain did not seem to mind; his arm went round her waist for a moment almost as if it had the habit of doing it; and he whispered an apology that restored her self−control. At the same instant he signalled to the crew, and they burst into three great solid British cheers. Another signal stopped them from further performances, and the steamers swept by. The crisis of the day was over.

Then the Kittiwake turned and followed the fleet, and realized her remaining ambitions. She was back at St. Kilda, with the yachts that had been lying there all the morning, by the time his great excellency, transhipped once more, arrived there. Through their glasses the ladies could see the procession of little figures along the pier, and the departure of the carriages after the guns had fired the salute; and they could hear the school children singing. When all was over, a sigh of vast contentment expressed the common thought, "What a day we're having!" The turn of the landsmen had come, but no one at sea could envy them.

"Now we'll have a look at the Sunbeam as she lies," said Bert, and then headed back for Williamstown.

"And we want some refreshment after what we have gone through," said the hospitable hostess.

Luncheon was served for the third time, and subsequently two afternoon teas. The yachts, dissolving all formation, swam aimlessly about the bay, more like seabirds than ever, and took snap−shots at each other with their kodak cameras. Miss Pickersgill's singing powers failed somewhat, but she continued to chaff and chatter with the young men, breaking off at intervals to hail her friends on passing boats. Good−natured Fanny Pleydell laughed with the rest at the fun she made; the admiring aunt and cousins could not remember when they had been so entertained; and Myra Salter was satisfied at heart because Bert had never allowed her to feel "out of it." And so the happy day wore through. They had had seven hours together when they began to look for Lena's dinghy, and before separating they testified with one consent that they had never had a more delightful holiday, or, as Lena neatly phrased it, "such a jolly high old time."

"Then I'll tell you what we must do," said the gratified host. "Go out together the same party, since we suit each other so well on the sixteenth of next month. That's our opening day, Miss Pickersgill, as of course you know; and, with the Governor for commodore, it ought to be the best we've ever had."

"All who are in favour of this motion," chanted Lena, "hold up your hands!"

Every hand went up at once, except Myra's. The shy girl looked to Fanny for an endorsement of the free and easy invitation, and Mrs. Pleydell was knitting her brows. But soon she smiled consent, to please her brother, who, stealing behind Miss Salter unobserved, seized her two hands and lifted them into the air.

They imagined they were going to have their good time over again. They even anticipated a better one, though only of half the length. For whereas the wind had been too light on the 25th of October, it blew like business on the 16th of November, when it was of the last importance that it should do so. No more auspicious opening day had ever dawned upon Victorian yachtsmen. The Governor, who was their Governor for the first time in history, had consented to direct their evolutions in person. This alone this and a good wind assured laurels to the clubs of Hobson's Bay which all other clubs would envy them. The Sunbeam had been towed to the chosen anchorage; Government House was on board. All the swells, as Miss Pickersgill termed them, indigenous to the soil, would be lone and lorn at the races, because their Lord and Lady were away. If they offered their ears for a place in viceregal company, they could not get it. "Aha!" said the yachtsmen one to another, "it is our turn now."

This time the Kittiwake took her own dinghy to St. Kilda. She towed it along with her all the afternoon, as a brake upon the pace, which threatened to carry her beyond the position assigned to her in the wheeling line, for she was faster than the boats before and behind her. And so the services of local friends were not required on Miss Lena's behalf. Bert himself, in a very ruffled sea indeed, went off to the pier to fetch her. But not altogether for the sake of paying her special honour; rather, because it was most difficult to bring anything alongside to−day without bumping off fenders and on to new paint. He had had the kindest feeling for both girls during the past three weeks, but what little love he had fallen into was love for Myra Salter. He had just left her deeply in love with him. He had given her the card of sailing directions, taught her how to read the commodore's signals, and told her she was to be his captain for the day, as he was to be the crew's. Down in the small cabin, picking pecks of strawberries, with the assistance of the aunt and cousins, Mrs. Pleydell's prophetic eye saw visions of an ideal home and family that comfortable and prosperous domestic life which is the better and not the worse for having no wildfire passions to inflame and ravage it and a congenial sister−in−law for all time. Myra lingered on deck to follow the movements of the tossing dinghy through the captain's strong field−glasses, also assigned to her exclusive use for this occasion. He had another pair not quite so strong for Miss Pickersgill.

Little did that young lady suppose that she was to play second fiddle for a moment. She wore another new dress and a ravishing peaked cap, much more becoming than the sailor straw. She smiled upon the skipper, struggling to hold the dinghy to the pier, as at a faithful bond−slave merely doing his bounden duty.

"It is our opening day!" she sang, as she flourished a hand to him. "It is our opening da−ay!"

"It is, indeed," he shouted back. "Made on purpose. Only I think we shall have too much of a good thing this time, instead of not enough. Wind keeps getting up, and we've reefed already."

"Oh, it's stunning!" she rejoined, gaily skipping into the boat; she was a heavy weight, and nearly tipped it over. "Let it get up! The more the merrier."

"Yes, if there were going to be racing. I wish there was! We should just run away from everything."

"Then let's race," quoth Miss Pickersgill, as if commanding it to be done. "Let's show the old buffer" I grieve to say it was his sacred lordship she referred to "what the Kittiwake can do."

Bert had to explain. It took him until they reached the yacht to make the young lady who looked so nautical understand what she was talking about. And after all she was inclined to be sentimentally hurt because he would not do such a little thing to please her.

The wind got up, more and more, showing that there was to be no monotonous repetition of the former circumstances. The Kittiwake danced and pranced as if the real sea were under her, and half a dozen dinghies trailed astern would hardly have made any difference. There was no sitting round the cockpit, as on drawing−room chairs, to flirt and sing; one side was always in the air, and the other all but under water, see−sawing sharply at uncertain intervals; and the ladies had to give their attention to holding on and keeping

their heads out of the way of the swinging boom. Lena shouted to the men, who had to stick to business in spite of her, that it was the jolliest state of things imaginable, and said "Go it!" to rude Boreas when he smacked her face, to encourage him to further efforts. But her five companions were more or less of the opinion that they had liked the first cruise better. The poor fat aunt was particularly disconcerted by the new conditions; she said she couldn't get used to the feeling of having no floor under her, and the sensation of the sea climbing up her back.

She was the first to say, "No, thank you," to strawberries and cream, and "Yes, please," to whisky.

Is there anything funny in having the toothache that people should laugh at the victim as at some inexhaustible joke? Ask the poor soul whose nerves are thus exquisitely tortured what his opinion is. He will tell you that it is one of the gravest elements in the tragedy of human pain; also that the heartless brute who sniggers at it ought to have thumbscrews put on him and twisted tight. Is there anything disgraceful in being sea−sick in rough weather, that those who don't happen to feel so at the moment should turn up their noses at the sufferers in contemptuous disgust? Emphatically not. It is a misfortune that may befall the best of us, and does, instead of being, as one would suppose, the penalty of a degrading vice, like delirium tremens. Why, even the Sunbeam was ill that afternoon the first folks of the land, fresh from the discipline of a long and stormy voyage which sufficiently proves the fact.

But when Myra Salter was observed to sit silent and rigid, with bleached lips and a corpse−like skin, it was with eyes that slightly hardened at the sight. Yes, even the captain's eyes! It is true he smiled at her, and said, "Poor child!" and peremptorily ordered the useless stimulant, and was generally concerned and kind; but the traditional ignominy of her case affected him; her charm and dignity were impaired vulgarized; and the flavour of his incipient romance began to go. Of course young men are fools we all are, for that matter and young love, just out of the ground, as it were, is like a baby lettuce in a garden full of slugs. And it is no use pretending that things are different from what they are. And if you want to be an artist, and not a fashionable photographer, you must not paint poor human nature, and leave the moles and wrinkles out. It is a pity that an estimable young man cannot be quite perfect, and that an admirable young woman should be unjustly despised; but so it is, and there's no more to be said.

Myra shook her head at the suggestion of whisky; only to imagine the smell of it was to feel worse at once to feel an instant necessity to hide herself below. But Fanny Pleydell, coming upstairs at the moment when she was beginning to stagger down, caught her in her arms and held her back a fatal blunder on Fanny's part.

"No, my dear, no!" she cried, on the spur of a humane impulse; "you must not go into that horrible hole; it would finish you off at once. Besides, there isn't room for you; aunt and the girls are sprawling all over the place. Have a little spirits, darling yes, you must; and keep in the fresh air if you want to feel better."

She pressed whisky and water on the shuddering girl, and cruel consequences ensued. Bert turned his head away, and tried to shut his ears. Lena smiled at him in an arch and confidential manner. She was as bright and pretty as ever more so, indeed, for the wind exhilarated her and deepened her bloom.

"I think," she said, "it is a great mistake for people who are not good sailors to go to sea in rough weather, don't you?"

Well, Bert almost thought it was. He was a very enthusiastic yachtsman, especially to−day, when he wanted the Kittiwake and all her appurtenances to be as correct as possible.

The drill was over, and the regiment of yachts disbanded. The Sunbeam had gone to a pier at Williamstown, and the commodore was receiving his new colleagues and entertaining them. The Kittiwake was off St. Kilda, with her freight of sick on board. The aunt filled up one tiny cabin, the cousins another, and they groaned and wailed and made other unpleasant noises, to the amusement of a callous crew. Myra Salter, too helplessly ill to sit up

without support while the boat rushed through the water with a slice of deck submerged, had sagged down to the floor of the cockpit, and now lay there in a limp heap, propped against Fanny's knees. She had not spoken for an hour, and during that time Bert had hardly noticed her. He had been devoting himself to Miss Pickersgill, so far as the duties of his official post allowed, as was only natural when she had become practically his sole companion, and when, as a lover of a good breeze and proper sailoring, she had proved herself so sympathetic.

Now he was rowing her home from the yacht to the shore. She sat facing him in the dinghy, with the yoke lines round her waist, and he could not keep his eyes from her brilliant person, nor keep himself from mentally comparing it with that sad wisp on the cockpit floor. She met his glance, and held it. They were both excited by the wind, the inspiring flight of the yacht, the varied interests of the opening day.

"Oh, it was splendid!" she exclaimed. "Whatever the others may think about it, I know I never enjoyed myself so much in my life. And I am so much obliged to you for taking me, Mr. Lawson."

"You are the right sort to take," replied Bert with enthusiasm; and he imagined a wife who would enter into his favourite pursuits like a true comrade. "And I hope we shall have many a good cruise together."

"It won't be my fault if we don't," she said promptly.

"It won't be mine," he returned. "Consider yourself asked for every day that you'll deign to come."

"What, for ever?"

"For ever."

She looked at him archly, pensively, meaningly, with her head on one side. She was really very handsome in her coquettish peaked cap, and he reflected that she was evidently healthy and probably rich.

"You don't mean that, Mr. Lawson?"

"I do mean it, literally and absolutely."

"For every yachting day as long as I live?"

"For every yachting day, and every day that isn't a yachting day."

She was so joyously flustered that she ran the dinghy into the pier. He had to catch her in his arms to prevent her going overboard. As there were people watching them from above, he could not kiss her, but he gave an earnest of his intention to do so at the first opportunity.

Of course she was the wrong one. He knew it no later than the next day, in his heart of hearts, though never permitting himself to acknowledge it, because he flatters himself that he is a gentleman. Equally, of course, he will go on to render his mistake irrevocable, and be miserable ever after, and make her so, from the highest motives. Already the wedding gown is bought, and they go together to ironmongers and upholsterers to choose new drawing−room furniture and pots and kettles for the kitchen. The marriage will surely take place when the bride has made her preparations, and anybody can foretell what the consequences will be. They will pull against each other by force of nature, and tear their little shred of romance to bits in no time. And then they will sink together to that sordid and common matrimonial state which is the despair and disgrace of civilization. She will grow fat and frowsy as she gets into years a coarse woman, selfish and petty, and full of legitimate grievances; and he will hate her first, and then cease to care one way or the other, which is infinitely worse than hating. And so two lives will be utterly spoiled, and possibly three or four not counting the children, who will have no sort of

fair start.

And all because there was a bit of a breeze on the opening day of the season!

But such is life.