Sisters

Ada Cambridge

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CHAPTER I.

Guthrie Carey began life young. He was not a week over twenty−one when, between two voyages, he married Lily Harrison, simply because she was a poor, pretty, homeless little girl, who had to earn her living as a nondescript lady−help in hard situations, and never had a holiday. He saw her in a Sandridge boarding−house, slaving beyond her powers, and made up his mind that she should rest. With sailor zeal and promptitude, he got the consent of her father, who was glad to be rid of her out of the way of a new wife; took the trembling, clinging child to the nearest parson, and made her a pensioner on his small wages in a tiny lodging of her own. They honeymooned for a fortnight, off and on, as his ship could spare him—the happiest pair of mortals in the wide world—and then parted in tears and anguish unspeakable for the best part of a twelvemonth.

He came back to find himself a father. Wonderful experience for twenty−one! Never was such a heavenly mystery of a child! Never such an angelic young mother!—eighteen, and with the bloom of that most beautifying convalescence like a halo about her. He was first mate now, with a master's certificate and a raised salary; it was time to make a home. So while she nursed the baby in Sandridge—with the aid of a devoted friend, the landlady's cousin—Guthrie Carey busied himself across the way at Williamstown, fixing up a modest house. He also had a devoted friend, in the person of a Customs officer, whose experienced wife took charge of the operations. Lily was to see nothing until all was ready for her. It was to be a "pleasant surprise".

The last touches had been given—tea put in the caddy, meat and butter in the safe, flowers in the vases. Mrs Hardacre, in her best gown, spread a festive supper−table, and Bill, her spouse, stood by with a Government launch to take the proud young husband to his wife, and to bring them back together.

Lily awaited him, trembling, tearful, wild with the joy of going home. Her step−mother had come to Sandridge to see her off, and had brought her a present of a macintosh, on the merits of which she dilated with fervour as she twirled it round and round.

"Buttons right down to the feet," she urged persuasively, "and cape hanging below the waist"—the second Mrs Harrison was a big woman. "You might go through a deluge in it. And so stylish, my dear! You can wear it when you go out in threatening weather of an afternoon, and be quite smart."

"Well, it's pretty threatening now," said Guthrie uneasily. "I don't know that it wouldn't be wiser—"

"Oh, no, no!" Lily implored. "No trains tonight! No way but this, Guthrie. I can't get wet—in this nice waterproof. I don't care how it blows—the more the better—with you with me."

"But baby?"

"We can keep him safe. He is going to be rolled in your 'possum rug. We can take him inside if it is cold. Oh, we MUST go by sea, Guthrie!"

"Call this sea?" he mocked.

It was sea to her, who had never been beyond the Heads. She expected to concentrate in the fifteen−minutes' trip across the bay the interest of years of travel on land. There was nothing like blue water to this sailor's wife, whose heart had been upon it for so many anxious months; the extravagance of her partiality was the joke of husband and friends against her.

"All right," said Guthrie; "come along, then!"

He was impatient to get her away from these people, and under his own roof.

The second−hand macintosh was again pressed upon her.

"Oh, thanks—thanks! But I think I won't put it on just yet, as it is not raining. My dress is warm."

Her dress was the wedding dress—chosen for use as well as beauty—a delicate pink stuff, with a watered sash to match, in which she looked like a school−girl on breaking−up day. She had a fancy to go to her home in state, and also to make an appearance that would do her husband credit before Mr and Mrs Hardacre.

"Here is your fascinator, my dear," said the motherly landlady, offering the wisely−selected substitute for Lily's hat. "Let me tie it on for you—there!"

The fascinator of white wool, made and adjusted properly, accounts for its name; and Guthrie was sure that he had never seen a lovelier picture than his darling's face in that soft frame. She was ready now—as ready as she meant to be until the Customs launch had seen her—and turned to pick up the large bundle that had the little baby

in the middle of it.

"I'll carry him, Lily."

"No, no, Mr Carey, I'm going to carry him," said the landlady's cousin, a strapping young woman, whose arms were equal to the task—"as far as the boat, at any rate."

She did so, the elder ladies supporting her on either side. Guthrie and Lily led the procession, hand in hand.

Ah, how like another world it was, coming out upon that breezy platform from the gutter−smelling streets! And how royal a proceeding it seemed to Lily to be, the setting apart of a Government vessel solely and entirely to convey her to her new abode, as if she were a little queen going to her husband's kingdom. She could not help holding herself with dignity, if not with a trifle of vaingloriousness, as, between half−a−dozen eager hands and admiring eyes, she stepped down into it.

"Now, have you got everything?" the landlady called from the pier. "Oh, everything—everything in the world!" Guthrie shouted, in reply.

"Where's your waterproof, Lily?" screeched the step−mother. "Better put it on, my dear; and I'd advise you to sit under cover, both of you. You'll be drenched if you don't, in this wind. Why, Mr Hardacre, it's blowing a perfect gale!"

"A bit fresh, ma'am," Bill admitted; "just enough to keep us lively. All aboard, Mr Casey? Pass the word, sir, when you're ready."

"Ready!" called Guthrie. And then he said something to the men, Bill Hardacre and his mate Dugald Finlayson, about having everything on board—all his life and happiness, or something to that effect—at which they laughed and chaffed him as the launch backed from the pier, and started off in the tearing hurry characteristic of Customs boats.

Lily was in the cabin with the baby and the landlady's cousin, who had 'got round' Mr Hardacre to give her a return passage, after seeing the little family safe home. Husband and wife had frowned at the suggestion of having her with them on the launch, but when they had shut her in out of sight and hearing, and found themselves free to follow their own devices untrammelled by their child, they did not mind so much.

"Hadn't you better—?" Guthrie began, when his wife reappeared, clinging to the door−jamb; but she exclaimed again:

"No, no! Let me be outside with you!" She wanted to feel "at sea" with him, to bathe herself, under the shelter of his protection, in the magnificent, tempestuous, inspiring night. To her, cooped up all her life in streets and prosaic circumstances, there was something in the present situation too poetical for words. No bride who had married money, and was setting out by P. O. upon her luxurious European tour, could have been more keenly sensible of the romance of foreign travel than she, crossing Hobson's Bay in a borrowed Customs launch; while the squally darkness surrounding and isolating her and her mate immeasurably enhanced the charm. "I want to see it—to feel it!" she pleaded. "The air is so clean and fresh! The sea is so grand tonight! How beautiful it smells! Guthrie, I must have been born for a sailor's wife—I love it so!"

"Of course you were," the sailor assented heartily. "No manner of doubt about that. Well, sit here, if you prefer it, sweetheart"—on the stern grating—"only mind you don't catch cold. And don't let us get that pretty frock spoiled before the Williamstown folks have seen it."

He steadied her while she stood to have the big macintosh drawn closely about her—the round cape, flapping far and wide in the rough wind, was like an unmanageable sail, he said—and when she was again seated, he tucked it about her knees and feet. Buttons being hard to find and fasten, he pulled the two fronts of the garment one over the other across her lap, and she sat upon the outer one. Then he readjusted the white fascinator, winding the fluffy ends round her neck, and finally encircling all with his stalwart arm. There she sat, resting against him, her left hand in his left hand, her contented eyes shining like stars in the dark. They were practically alone in space, their deck companions having thoughtfully turned their backs and made themselves as remote as possible.

A long sigh fluttered through Lily's parted lips from her surcharged heart. Guthrie heard it through all the clamour of the gale—for it really was a gale—and the noise of the screw and fiercely snorting funnel. He stopped his face to hers.

"Tired, pet?"

"No," she murmured, "oh, no!"

"What, then?"

"Only happy—PERFECTLY happy."

"Same here," he said, careless how he tempted Fate—"only more so."

Their lips met, and were holding that sweetest kiss of lovers that are man and wife, when a wave, driven by the wind, flung a shower of spray at them, giving each a playful slap of the face as a hint not to be too confident.

"Hadn't you better get inside?" he urged, as he wiped her cheek.

"It'll be rougher still directly." "Oh, no, it's splendid! The rougher the better. I'm so glad it's rough. I can't take any harm, so well wrapped up, and with you, my husband."

"Ah, Lil!" The hug he gave her in acknowledgment of the word made her gasp for breath. He was so carried away that he had to use both arms, whereby a lurch of the boat nearly unseated him. "Never," he declared, in an intense whisper—"never shall you come to harm, my precious one, while you've got me to protect you; I can promise you that."

"Dear," she returned, in the same kind of tone, "I know I never shall."

And she cuddled closer up to him, and he took a firmer grip of her. There was no rail for either to hold to, and drawing out from the shelter of the pier, and meeting the force of the southerly swell, the launch had begun to dance like a cork on boiling water.

"Why, there's quite a sea on," remarked Guthrie, with a laugh. "I hope it won't make you sea−sick."

"Sea−sick!" she echoed, with fine scorn. "I am a sailor's wife, sir."

"Bless your little heart, I've been sea−sick myself many a time, and for not much more than this, either. However, it'll soon be over. There's home waiting for us, Lil—"

"Where? Where?" she interrupted him, with a tender eagerness. The launch was tossed high in the air, and the lights of Williamstown stretched across the darkness in front of them like a band of jewels.

"Oh, you can't distinguish it," said Guthrie, "but it's there—it's one of those lights; Mrs Hardacre said she was going to keep the blind up and the gas flaring, so that we might see it as we came over."

"That's what I shall do when you come back next time," said the girl, with a voice like a dove cooing. "Make a beacon to guide you home."

"No fear that I shall mistake the course, little woman."

He had an irresistible impulse to hug her with both arms again, and they happened to be on the verge of the river current. Hardacre and Finlayson both shouted, "Look out, sir!" but he was not looking out— his sailor eyes were otherwise occupied, and so he did not perceive the enemy of love making the spring to seize him. Just as he was folding his mate to his breast, he heard the warning cry for'ard, and it was then too late to avert the catastrophe. In the same instant a sudden wave struck the launch, and nearly turned her over, and the young wife and husband, holding to nothing but one another, and simply sitting upon an unprotected plank, were tipped out as easily as balls from a capsized basket.

"Oh, this is too absurd!"

That was Guthrie's mental ejaculation in the astonishing first moment. A deep−sea sailor, who had come through what he had come through, to let himself be caught unawares by such a paltry mischance as this! Then, what an unspeakable ass to have been so careless—to have shown himself incapable of protecting his wife, after all his boasts! Would he ever hear the last of it as long as he lived? Poor little woman! How cold the water felt when he thought of her tender skin. And her pretty dress, that she had set such store by, in which she had intended to go to church with him on Sunday—utterly destroyed, of course! Well, he must make shift to afford her another and smarter one, and get it made quickly. She should have her pick and choice. As the following wave soused his uprising head, slapping him full in the face, so as to confuse and blind him for a second or two, the fear that she might get "a dose of it" before they could pull her out made him sharply anxious. If she got a bad cold, a shock to her nerves, perhaps a serious illness, he would never forgive himself. And what a sell that would be—what waste of this precious holiday, this second honeymoon, so much sweeter than the first—after the weary waiting for it!

He cleared his eyes, and had a momentary view of the surroundings before another wave rushed upon him. Waves they were, by George! He would not have believed it possible that such a sea would be running right up here, in this little duck−pond of a bay. It had seemed rough on the boat, but viewed from the surface, it might have been the middle of Atlantic wastes. They were in the river channel—worse luck!—and the south wind was dead on to it, bringing up the swell from outside; and the swell, that had set that way for days, was so heavy as to drive him back faster than his powerful limbs could propel him in the other direction. At first the launch seemed

to want to dance over him, but when he rose on a swirl of water to take his bearings after the first bewilderment, she was a couple of lengths away, cutting the most extraordinary capers in her efforts to put about. Her own lights, and those of the beacons at the river mouth, showed him all her stern grating and bright deck fittings as she heeled over, hanging to the side of one of those ridiculous ocean rollers out of bounds; and he thought it no wonder that he—even he—had been tossed off under the circumstances. The crew, who were not sitting on a skimming dish, as it were, had their work cut out to hold on. As he looked, he measured his drift with serious disquietude, although the preposterous idea of anybody being drowned had not as yet occurred to him. Drowned HERE! A good joke, indeed! Why, they were within hail of Sandridge, and half−a−dozen ships—or they would have been, but for the noise of wind and water, which smothered lesser sounds; and the lights of Williamstown—amongst them that of the little home awaiting him— studded the shore on the other hand, near and clear, like the eyes of a host of watching friends. And in Hobson's Bay, which could hardly cover the body of a sunk yacht; and right up by the river, which had to be dredged all the time to keep it open!

But where was Lily? It scared him to find himself out of arm's reach of her, forced back by the swell, and not to see her immediately when he was able to look. He saw the launch—which of course was entirely occupied in her rescue—and saw two white buoys floating, and saw a line thrown, but nothing else, except the wild water that buffeted him, and the moonless night overhead. And he remembered that the river channel—indeed, Hobson's Bay in any part—was just as dangerous as mid−Atlantic to one who could not swim. The thought clutched him like a hand at his throat.

"Got her?" he yelled, in a fury of terror. "Got her? See her?"

He strained to make himself heard by the men on the launch in a way to burst his heart. They shouted something that he could not understand, and a line came whizzing past him. He caught it as it dropped, and soon lessened the distance between them. Then he perceived a long boat−hook stretching out into the darkness; it went up and down with the toss of the boat like the fishing−rod of an impatient school−boy, and a few yards beyond its reach, where it touched water, there was a dim smudge. He knew it for the full cape of Lily's macintosh, outspread upon the waves. They alternately rumpled and smoothed it, flapping it into all shapes as they tossed and toyed with it; but, by the mercy of Heaven, it had held her up. In the middle of the mass he could see her dear little head hanging forward and downward, just under the surface, out of which a larger or smaller speck of her white fascinator rose and gleamed as each roll swung her up into the light of the boat's lamp turned upon the spot. This told him that she was already helpless and unconscious, although ten seconds had not elapsed since she went over. God send that she had not struck anything—that her heart was not weak —that she was not subject to any of the mysterious consequences of shock peculiar to the more than ordinarily complex women! At any rate, she had not had time to drown. He had seen a man recovered after being under for forty minutes, and in less than one they would be taking her full speed to Williamstown, signalling for the doctor as they went. What would the fellows ashore make of the three whistles— three times there before they got across? They would know the launch that blew them, and her present errand, and think, perhaps, that the crew were on the spree. But no, they would have more sense than that; they would look at the wild night, and conclude that something had happened. So would the doctor, who would hear the summons from his bed. What would they all say to him, Guthrie Carey, with his good seaman's record behind him, when he brought his wife home in such a state of dilapidation? However, all's well that ends well. Let him only have her safely there, and he would not mind what anybody said; and he'd take precious good care not to run any risks with her again.

Water−logged as he was, and cramped in his overcoat, he made a violent bound towards the floating cape, lunged twice, caught it at the second try, and pulled it eagerly—alas! too eagerly. He felt the tug of Lily's weight only just long enough to be sure that she was there, and then—the fastenings gave way, and she slipped through! The empty garment swam up to him on the edge of a new wave, which clapped it over his face like a gigantic plaster.

Oh, this was dreadful! She would be rescued eventually, of course— amongst them they would not let her drown, not if skill and courage had any show at all—but the fact that she was in danger could no longer be ignored. She was a little delicate thing, already overcome, and precious time was wasting, when every second was of the most stupendous consequence. With a frenzied gesture, Guthrie shook off the cloak, spluttered, spat, and made a dive to intercept her as she went down, wondering as he did so whether breath and strength would hold out if he missed her and had to follow her to the bottom. The swing of the swell was awful, and the darkness of

the blind night too cruel for words.

"If only I had this cursed coat off!" he dumbly sobbed. "If only I could get rid of these damned laced boots!" Bad words would have been forgivable even had he not been a sailor.

He missed her, groped desperately, to the verge of suffocation, and came up to cough, and groan, and pump breath enough to take him down again. It would have cost five minutes to get his clothes off, and there was not a single second to spare—now.

"See her?" he shrieked.

"Ne'er a sign," Bill Hardacre shouted. "But we'll catch her when she rises. Take a turn o' the line round you, sir, so's we can haul you in—"

But there was not even time for that in the frightful race of these vital moments. She was gone, and she must be found, and there was but her husband to look for her. The two other men were few enough for the safety of the launch as she was then situated; and besides, Hardacre could be more useful to Lily above water than below. The neighbouring ships lay undisturbed, putting off no boats to help. In all that band of lights ringing the black welter of the bay, like stars out of the Infinite, shining calmly upon an abandoned world, not one was moving.

Guthrie Carey gave a last look round, identified the window of what was to have been his home, where the fire was burning brightly, the little supper spread, good Mrs Hardacre watching for them at the door—heard the landlady's cousin wailing, "Lil! Lil!"—and again plunged under, arms wide and eyes staring, and heart bursting with despair. Everything in him seemed bursting—an agonising sensation—as his overstrained lungs collapsed, and the power of his strong limbs failed him; then everything seemed to break away and let in the floods of Lethe with a rush—confusion and forgetfulness and a whirl of dreams, settling to a strange peace, an irresistible sleep, as if he had swallowed a magic opiate. The sea took him, as a nurse takes a helpless child, and floated him up from the place where he had been savagely groping; something met him half−way, floating down upon him, and his arms went round it of their own accord. But they were powerless to clasp or hold it. It passed him, sinking gently, and lay where it sank, under all the turmoil, as still as the rocking tide would let it.

The launch sounded her steam whistle furiously. From both sides of the bay it was heard, screeching through the windy night like a fiend possessed, and men got up hastily to ask what was the matter. Another launch put out from Williamstown, and a police boat from Sandridge, and the anchored ships awoke and hailed them. Soon half−a−dozen boats were tossing about the spot; they tossed for two hours, and Bill Hardacre dived seven times with a rope round his waist, while the widowed young husband lay on the cabin floor between two doctors, the baby and the landlady's cousin keening over him.

"Well," said Dugald Finlayson, as at last they headed for Williamstown through the now lessening storm, with a bundle in tarpaulin beside them, "it do seem as if the Powers above take a pleasure in tripping us up when we least expect it."

"Aye," said Bill Hardacre, sitting crying in his wet clothes, "he said as we were starting he'd got all he wanted now. I thinks to myself at the time, thinks I, 'That's an unlucky thing to say.'" But who is to judge luck in this world? Poor little Lily Harrison was a helpless creature, and had almost 'nothing in her' except vanity.

CHAPTER II.

Sincerely he believed, when he was on his feet again, that his life was wrecked for ever. He did suffer from insomnia, even with his splendid sea−seasoned constitution, for months, which proved the poignant insistency of his grief, making thinking a disease instead of a healthy function. He performed his duties mechanically, rigidly, like an engine stoked from the outside. He no longer had pleasure or interest in them. The flavour was gone from life; it had become a necessary burden, to be borne as best he could. At one time he even questioned the right of the Moral Law to ask him to bear it, under the circumstances. He used to look at the blue water beneath him, and long to be beneath it, sharing the fate of his loved and lost. He did not want to live without her— he wanted to die. At twenty−one!

At twenty−three he was a man again, physically and mentally sound, doing all reverence to the memory of his dead wife—a flawless angel in the retrospect—while finding natural solace in the company of living women who were also young and fair. The living women were much in evidence from the first; nothing but the sea could keep them from trying to comfort him. A big fellow, with a square, hard face, and a fist to fell an ox—that was just the kind of man to call for coddling, apart from the fact that he was a widower—had been married for as long as five weeks altogether—with his heart in his wife's grave, and with that pathetic adjunct, a baby. When he would consent to recognise the world of affairs again, and the claims of youth and manhood against it, he found—but of course there is no need to specify all the things he found.

One was a batch of invitations awaiting each arrival of his ship in port—first two, then four, then half−a−dozen women's notes, begging him to come to as many hospitable houses for change and rest, and to "bring the baby". He could not bring the baby, for reasons which he did not honestly present, as a rule, but which he reluctantly disclosed to Alice Urquhart one night at Five Creeks. Alice had written one of the six notes (they were six because it was Christmas time), for she was the sister of Jim Urquhart, who was the friend of an ex−squatter down on his luck through droughts, and reduced to balancing ledgers in a Melbourne office, who was the friend of one of those doctors of Williamstown whose skill had brought Guthrie Carey to life after he had been drowned. Jim, having made the acquaintance of the latter, took his sister to inspect the ship, and to have tea in the mate's cabin; hence the return visit, which the captain, who loved his chief officer, stretched a point to sanction.

There were at Five Creeks station, besides Jim, a Mrs Urquhart and several children; but Alice, the eldest of the family, was the general manager of her household, ever struggling with her brother, who maintained it, to lift it and herself out of the ruts in which her father had left it stuck. She was close on thirty, sad to say, and there were three girls below her; and nothing happened from year to year, and she was weary of the monotony. "Do come and see us," she wrote to Guthrie Carey—one of the finest−looking men she had ever known, not excepting the splendid Claud Dalzell—"do come and see us, and bring the baby. Country air will do it good, and the house is full of nurses for it."

He went himself, out of friendship for Jim, and after dinner sat in the verandah with Alice, and explained why he had not brought the baby. Jim had then gone off to doctor a sick horse, and Mrs Urquhart was putting children to bed.

"I believe," Alice rallied him, "that you thought it INFRA DIG."

He protested earnestly that she was wrong. No, it was not that—not THAT.

Ignorant of the details of the tragedy of his life, she scented a mystery about the child. Was it, perhaps, not right in its head, she wondered—or afflicted with a hare lip?

"Son or daughter?" she ventured cautiously. "A boy," said Guthrie Carey, still with that unfatherly air of discontent. "Sometimes I wish it was a girl. She could look after me by−and−by; I could have her trained to be my housekeeper, and sew my buttons on—that sort of thing, you know."

"You would have to wait a long time," said Alice, turning admiring eyes upon his comely person, noting with regret that he could not be within several years of her own age. "It is quite a young infant, isn't it?"

"Yes; that is—let me see—fifteen months and a little over. Yes, it will be fifteen months on Thursday since he lost his mother." Time had done so much for him that he could now speak of her to a stranger. "And he was then

only a few weeks old."

"Poor, poor little thing!" sighed Alice Urquhart.

It was, by the way, a particularly sympathetic night—soft, still, solitary, with a full moon. They both felt it. Besides, he had had an excellent dinner. Five Creeks was poor, but it lived well.

"Oh," laughed the guest, without merriment in his laugh, "you needn't waste pity on HIM, Miss Urquhart; he's all right. Rolls in fat—never ailed a thing in his life—might take the prize at a baby show. So they tell me. I have not seen him myself for a good while."

"What! Why, he's in Melbourne, isn't he?"

"Not far out."

"And you haven't been home to see him?"

"I haven't got a home. I gave it up when—you know. I knew I should never be there, and you can't leave a house and a young child to servants. The little time that I did try to carry on by myself, I made a dismal mess of it. The woman I trusted to'—he meant Mrs Hardacre— 'started feeding it with thick arrowroot. She'd have killed it to a certainty."

"Indeed, yes. The idea! But it is incredible what some fools of women can do in the way of mismanaging a baby." The remark implied expert knowledge on the speaker's part.

"A mother of children herself, too," said Guthrie reflectively, "and looking it, if ever a woman did. While a girl, who'd never had any, took to the job like a duck to water—knew just what to do and how to do it. I will say that for her." "Instinct," Miss Urquhart remarked to the man in the moon, who seemed to survey the couple with his tongue in his cheek. "I'm sure, though I say it, that I could give many a mother points myself."

"I've no doubt you could. I heard somebody say, the other day, that mothers are born, not made. Very true, too. You see it in the little girls nursing their dolls. I don't think anything of a she−child that doesn't want a doll as soon as it can speak." "I always loved them," declared Alice casually.

He leaned forward to look at a spider's web that the silver light had just touched, making it shine out from its background of dark leaves and verandah post; and there was danger of rupture to the delicate thread of the topic that was weaving so charming a conversation. Wherefore the young lady hastened to inquire what had become of his little son.

"I suppose," she said, "he is with his mother's people?"

Slowly resuming his attitude of repose, the guest considered the question.

"No−o—not exactly. With a friend of his mother's, not her family. Unfortunately, she had no family to speak of—and mine is in England. Neither of us had a soul here who really belonged to us. That was just the difficulty."

"It must have been a great difficulty," murmured Alice, in a feeling tone.

"I believe you," assented Guthrie, with emphasis. "In fact, it put me into the most ridiculous hole, the most confounded fix—one that I can't for the life of me see my way out of; one that—However, I mustn't talk about it to you. It's not a thing that one ought to talk about to anybody."

And yet he yearned to talk about it, and now, and to this particularly sympathetic woman, who was not young and giddy, but, like himself, experienced in the troubles of life, such as weighed him down. There was "something about her" that irresistibly appealed to him, and he did not know what; but an author, who knows everything, knows exactly what it was. It was the moonlight night.

A few words from her, backed by the nameless influences of the hour, unloosed his tongue.

"You mustn't think me an unnatural parent," he said. "It's not that at all. I'm awfully fond of him. I've got his photograph in my pocket— I'll show it to you when we go in—the last one for the time being. I get a new one about every other mail, in all sorts of get−up, clothes and no clothes; but all as fat as butter, and grinning from ear to ear with the joy of life. You never saw such a fetching little cuss. I'd give anything to get hold of him—if I could."

"But surely—his own father—"

"No. It sounds absurd to you, naturally; but that's because you don't understand the situation."

"I can't conceive of any situation—"

"Of course not. It's a preposterous situation. And I just drifted into it—I don't know how. Oh, I do know—it was for the child's own sake; so that you really mustn't call me a heartless parent any more, Miss Urquhart. Nobody would do that who knew what I'd suffered for him." Mr Carey made a gesture, and sighed deeply. "Even

in the beginning it would have been difficult to get out of it, having once got in," he continued, after a pause; "but it has been going on so long, getting worse and worse every day and every hour, till now I'm all tangled up like that moth in that spider's web"—pointing to a little insect tragedy going on beside them.

Miss Urquhart leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees, and spreading her hands in the enchanting moonlight, which made them look white as pearls—and made her rather worn face look as if finely carved in ivory. It was a graceful, thoughtful, confidential pose, and her eyes, uplifted, soft and kind, gleamed just under his eyes.

"I'm so sorry!" she murmured. "But if I don't know what the trouble is —oh, don't tell me if you'd rather not!—I can't help you, can I? And I do wish I could!"

"So do I. But I'm afraid nobody can help me. And yet, perhaps a fresh eye—a woman's clearer insight—" He paused irresolute, then succumbed to temptation. "Look here, Miss Urquhart, I'll just tell you how it is, if you'll promise not to speak of it again. You are no gossip, I know"—how did he know?—"and it will be such a blessed relief to tell somebody. And perhaps you could advise me, after all—"

"Let me try," she broke in encouragingly. For an instant her pearly hand touched his sleeve. "You may trust me," she said.

"I'm sure of it—I'm sure of it," he responded warmly. He drew his chair closer, took a moment to collect himself, and plunged headlong.

"You see, she was related to the people my poor wife lived with when we were first married, and she was a lot with her—it was lonesome for her, with me away at sea—and they got to be sort of chums. She was with us the night I lost my poor girl—I can't talk about that now, but some day I'll tell you—and I know she was awfully fond of her. That was just the difficulty."

"You are speaking," queried Alice gently, "of the person who has the baby?"

"Exactly. I see you begin to understand."

"I think so," said Alice, with a smile broad enough to be visible in moonlight. "But what was the difficulty?"

"Well, you know, being so really fond of her, and all that—wishing to do it for the sake of her dear friend—what could I say, especially as those women were killing the unfortunate brat between them? She was not so very young, and was evidently clever at managing—"

"Yes," interposed Alice, smiling still.

"And peculiarly situated for undertaking the job, having a good home, and only an old mother, who let her do what she liked. And awfully set on the baby from the first, and wanting an object in life, as she said. But chiefly it was for Lily's sake. To see Lily's child messed about by just anybody, and killed with arrowroot and stuff, was more than she could stand—to tell the truth, I couldn't stand it either—and she begged me to let her have it to look after, as there was no female friend or relative nearer to it than she was. What COULD I do? She lived in a nice, healthy spot, and there was the old mother with her experience, and I was obliged to go to sea; and—and—well, I just had to say "yes", and be thankful to say it. We got the—the doctor found a—we engaged the sort of nurse that does everything, you know— a fine, strapping young woman, in the pink of condition; and—and— well, there it was. And at the first blush the worst of the trouble seemed over, instead of just beginning. I gave up my house, and went off to sea, miserable enough, as you may suppose, but at least with an easy mind about the boy. As far as he was concerned—as far as my poor Lily was concerned, I felt I had acted for the best. Indeed, I don't for the life of me understand how any man could have acted otherwise, under the circumstances."

The listener, listening intently, here put a quiet question—"Did you pay her?"—which caused the narrator to wince like a galled horse.

"Ah, there you hit the weak spot, Miss Urquhart, right in the bull's−eye," he declared, sighing furiously. "If I could have paid her, of course there'd have been no difficulty at all. But she wouldn't be paid."

"You ought to have insisted on it," said Alice severely.

"I did insist. I insisted all I knew. But she said it was a labour of love for her friend, and seemed so hurt at the idea of money being brought into the question, that I was ashamed to press her beyond a certain point. She let me pay for the nurse's board, and that was all. The baby didn't eat anything, you see, and they were comfortably off, with lots of spare room in their house, and I just looked on it as a sort of temporary visit—until I came back—until I should be able to turn round a bit. But"—with another sigh—"he's there yet."

Miss Urquhart nodded, with an air of utter wisdom.

"Of course you went to see the child?"

"Three times—whenever I was in port. And found him always the same— so beautifully cared for that, upon my soul, I never saw a baby in my life so sweet and clean and wholesome−looking; jolly as a little sandboy all the time, too."

"That means that he had a perfect constitution—inherited from you evidently—and that you were fortunate in the nurse."

"Very fortunate. But it appeared that beyond—beyond running the commissariat department, so to speak, she did next to nothing for him. Miss—the lady I spoke of—did everything. Made herself a perfect slave to him."

"Bought his clothes?"

"Oh," groaned the wretched man, "I suppose so. What did I know about a baby's clothes? And she wouldn't answer my questions—said he was all right, and didn't want for anything, as I could see with my own eyes. I tried making presents—used to bring her curios and things—found out her birthday, and sent her a jewel—took every chance I could see to work off the obligation. But it was no use. She gave ME a birthday present after I'd given her one."

"Well, if moths will go into spiders' webs," laughed his companion, "they must take the consequences."

"Sometimes they get helped out," he replied. "Some beneficent, godlike being puts out an omnipotent finger—"

He looked at her, and she looked at him. At this moment they seemed to have known one another intimately for years. The moon again.

"Tell me everything," she said, "and I'll help you out."

So then he told her that he had not "this time" visited his son. He might have added that he had come to Five Creeks partly to avoid being visited by him. Cowardly and weak he frankly confessed himself. "But the thing was too confoundedly awkward—too embarrassing altogether."

"But she writes—she writes continually. Tells me what he weighs, and when he's got a fresh tooth, and how he crawls about the carpet and into her bed of a morning, and imitates the cat mewing, and drinks I don't know how many pints of new milk a day, and all that sort of thing. I believe the rascal has the appetite of a young tiger—and yet I can't pay for what he eats! The nurse was long ago dispensed with, so that I've not even her board to send a cheque for, that they might by chance make a trifle of profit out of. It seems too late now to simply take the child away, and there leave it. I haven't the shabby courage to do such a thing; and besides, he might come to any sort of grief, poor little chap, in that case. There's no doubt in the world that her taking of him and doing for him have been the salvation of his health, and perhaps his life. And I know, by what she tells me, that he regularly dotes on her—as so he ought—and would howl his very head off if I took him from her. What could I do with him if I did take him? I've no home, and nobody to look after it if I had; and hired servants are the deuce with a lone man at their mercy. It would be worse now than it was at first. And so'—with another heavy sigh—'you see the situation. I'm just swallowed up, body and bones, drowned fathoms deep in a sea of debt and obligation that I can never by any possibility struggle out of, except—"

"Except," continued Alice, with the candid air of a kind and sensible sister—"except by marrying her, you mean? Yes, I see the situation. I appreciate your point of view. I should understand it if it were not that she unquestionably laid the trap for you deliberately—just as that spider laid his for moths and flies. And marriage by capture has gone out."

"Oh, don't say that!" the man protested, in haste. "I would not for a moment accuse her of that. She was Lily's friend; it was for her —it was out of pure womanly compassion for the motherless child; at any rate, in the beginning. And even now I have no right whatever to suppose—"

"But you know it, all the same. Every word you have said to me tells me that you know it. You may as well be frank."

He squirmed a little in his chair, but confessed as required.

"Well—but it's a caddish thing to say—I think she does expect it. And hasn't she the right to expect it? However, that's neither here nor there. The point is that, in common honesty and manliness, I should repay her if I can; and there's no other way—at least, I can't see any other way. It is my fault, and not hers, that I don't take to the notion; for a better woman never walked, nor one that would make a better mother to the boy. But, somehow, you DO like to have your free choice, don't you?" He had come as far as this—that he could entertain the idea of

choice, which meant a second choice.

"It would be utterly wrong, absolutely immoral, downright wicked, to forego it," Alice declaimed, with energy. "It would be nothing short of criminal, Mr Carey."

She argued the point with eloquence, even excitedly; and when she had brought him to reason—very willing to be brought—leaned back in her chair with a joyous air.

"Oh, we will arrange it!" she reassured him. "There are plenty of ways. I'll tell you"—bending forward again and gazing earnestly into eyes from which something that had been looking out of them seemed to have drawn back hastily—"you shall introduce me to her, and I will bring him away up here for a visit. He ought to be in the country in summer, and he will come with me, I know, and won't miss her after a couple of days. I can get you a nurse cheap from some of the selectors, and one more or less makes not the slightest difference in a house like this; and I will take care of him for you until you come back next voyage, or for just as long as you will trust him to me. So the difficulty will solve itself without any fuss. Do you see?"

Guthrie Carey felt unable to reply. He could only murmur again and again: "You are awfully good, Miss Urquhart. 'Pon my word, you are too good altogether." Later, he declared more firmly that he could not think of troubling her.

"Nonsense!" she returned lightly. "It is all settled."

CHAPTER III.

Decidedly he was a coward, with all his brawn and inches; for he dared not protest straight−forwardly that all was not settled. He certainly told himself that he did not know what to do, but he also told himself that he would be a fool to do practically the same thing that he had done before. He passed a sleepless night, poor fellow, cogitating the matter; and in the morning, when the moon was gone, saw clearly himself where the path of prudence lay. Still he lacked courage to make it clear to Miss Urquhart, even while he saw her laying out, with enthusiasm, that road of her own which his terrified imagination pictured her marching along presently, bearing the baby aloft in her arms, and dragging him on a dog−chain behind her. It was not until mid−day that he suddenly became a brave man—about five minutes after the arrival of Deborah Pennycuick.

She rode over from Redford, all by herself, as her frequent custom was, to see how Five Creeks was getting on, and to talk over plans for Christmas. She wore a brown holland habit over the most beautifully moulded form, and, entering the house, tossed aside a shady hat from the most beautiful face that ever delighted eyes of man and virile heart of three−and−twenty. It is in such plain terms that one must describe this noble creature; words in half−tones are unworthy of the theme. Being introduced by Alice Urquhart, Guthrie Carey, in a sense, expanded on the spot into a fresh stage, a larger scope of being, with his unleaping recognition of her inspiring greatness. It seemed to him that he had never looked upon a woman before. Lily, of course, had been an angel. "I thought I should just strike lunch," she said, as she came like a sunbeam into the dim, low−ceiled, threadbare, comfortable room where the meal was ready. "I'm as hungry as a hunter, Mrs Urquhart."

The homely old woman uttered a cry of joy, and spread her arms. The visitor, incarnate dignity, bent to the maternal caress with willing affection, yet with the tolerant air of good−nature that does not run to gush. The children gathered round her, and hung upon her, undeterred by the fact that she had no kisses or fondlings for them. Jim stood motionless, glowing at the back of his fixed eyes.

When the family had done greeting her, Guthrie was brought forward.

"This is Mr Carey, Deb, who—"

"Oh, yes, I know"—and the frank hand, large, strong and beautiful, like every bit of her, went out to him as if she had really known him— "it is on Mr Carey's account that I have come, to tell you that you must bring him over to Redford at once."

"We were going to," said Alice; for it was the natural thing to take every Five Creeks visitor to Redford as soon as possible. "I was writing to you only this morning."

"Well, we just wanted to make sure. My father—you will excuse him for not calling on you; he is not able to get about as he used, poor old man—hears that you belong to a family at home which was very intimate with his family when he was young. Do you come from Norfolk?"

"No," replied the sailor, still in his dream.

"Oh, dear, what a pity! He will be so disappointed. We have been hearing about the Careys of Wellwood all our lives—never were such people, apparently—and when he heard your name, and got the idea that you were of the clan, nothing would do but that you must be fetched at once, to talk to him about them. Aren't you even a second cousin, or something?"

"My grandfather was born at Wellwood—"

"Ah, that's right! That's all we want. That makes you a Carey of Wellwood, of course. I hope you know the place?" "I have seen it. But my grandfather was a younger son and a ne'er−do−weel; he was kicked out —he quite broke off—"

"Never mind. You needn't go into inconvenient particulars. Try and remember all you know that's nice about the Hall and the family. Did you ever hear of a Mary Carey? But no—she would be before your time, of course."

"There was an old Mary Carey; she married a Spencer. She was pointed out to me last time I was at home—the nut−cracker type, nose and chin together—"

"Goodness! Keep that dark too, for mercy's sake! She is his ideal woman. It is for her sake he wants you to talk Wellwood with. If you spoil his pleasure with that hint of nut−crackers, I'll never forgive you."

"I hope I know better," Guthrie smiled, coming to himself a little.

"I am sure you do," said she, and turned from him to take her chair at table.

"Then we'll bring him tomorrow," Alice said, seating herself.

"This afternoon," said the visitor commandingly.

Alice wanted another moonlight talk about the baby, and knew the small chance of getting it where Deborah Pennycuick was, and she raised obstacles, fighting for delay. Deborah calmly turned to Jim.

"Anything to hinder your coming this afternoon, Jim?"

"Nothing," said Mr Urquhart promptly.

The matter was evidently settled.

They sat down to lunch, and the talk was brisk. It was almost confined to the visitor and Alice, although the former carefully avoided the shutting out of the hostess from the conversation, in which she was incapable of taking a brilliant part. Jim, in the host's place, sat dumb and still, except for his alertness in anticipating his guest's little wants. Guthrie Carey, on her other hand, was equally silent. Neither of the two men heard what she talked about for listening to the mere notes of her charming voice.

After luncheon she put on her sensible straw hat.

"You must drive Mr Carey," she said to Jim. "I'll just ride ahead, and let them know you are coming."

"Let us all go together," said Alice. "I'll drive Mr Carey, and Jim can escort you."

But there was no gainsaying Deborah Pennycuick when she had expressed her views.

"You have to get ready," she pointed out, "and you'll do it quicker if I'm not here. Besides, I can't wait."

They all went out with her to the gate, where her superb, high−tempered horse pawed the gravel, and champed upon his bit. Jim sent her springing to the saddle from his horny palm like a bird let out of it, and they watched in silence while she crossed two paddocks, leaped two sets of slip−rails, and disappeared as a small dot of white handkerchief from the sun−suffused landscape.

"What riding!" Guthrie Carey ejaculated, under his breath.

"She's the best horsewoman in the country," Jim Urquhart commented slowly, after a still pause.

He was a slow—to some people a dull and heavy—man, who talked little, and less of Deborah Pennycuick than of any subject in the world —his world.

"And what a howling beauty!" the sailor added, in the same whisper of awe.

Again the bushman spoke, muttering deeply in his beard: "She is as good as she is beautiful."

Mrs Urquhart took her levelled hand from her eyes, and turned to contribute her testimony.

"There, Mr Carey, goes the flower of the Western District. You won't find her match amongst the best in England. I was with her mother when she was born—not a soul else—and put her into her first clothes, that I helped to make; and a bonny one she was, even then, with her black eyes, that stared up at me as much as to say: 'Who are you, I'd like to know?' Dear, it seems like yesterday, and it's nigh twenty years ago. All poor Sally Pennycuick's girls are good girls, and the youngest is going to be handsome too. Rose, the third, is not at all bad−looking; poor Mary—I don't know who she takes after. The father was the one with the good looks; but Sally was a fine woman too. Poor dear old Sally! I wish she was here to see that girl."

Mrs Urquhart and Mrs Pennycuick, plain, brave, working women of the rough old times, wives of high−born husbands, incapable of companioning them as they companioned each other, had been great friends. On them had devolved the drudgery of the pioneer home−making without its romance; they had had, year in, year out, the task of 'shepherding' two headstrong and unthrifty men, who neither owned their help nor thanked them for it—the inglorious life−work of so many obscure women—and had strengthened each other's hands and hearts that had had so little other support.

"Mrs. Pennycuick—she is not living, I presume?" Guthrie enticed the garrulous lady to proceed.

"Dear, no. She died when Francie was a baby," and Mrs Urquhart gave the details of her friend's last illness in full. "Deb was just a little trot of a thing—her father's idol; he wouldn't allow her mother to correct her the least bit, though she was a wilful puss, with a temper of her own; ruled the house, she did, just as she does now. If she hadn't had such a good heart, she'd have grown up unbearable. There never was a child in this world so spoiled. But spoiling's good for her, she says. It's to be hoped so, for spoiling she'll have to the end of the chapter. She's born to get the best of everything, is Debbie Pennycuick. Fortunately, her father's rich, though not so rich as he used to be; and when she leaves her beautiful home, it'll be to go to another as good, or better. She's got to marry

well, that girl; she'd never get along as a poor woman, with her extravagant ways. It'd never do"—Mrs Urquhart's voice had, subtly changed, and something in it made the blood rise to the cheeks of the listeners "it'd never do to put her into an ordinary bush−house, where often she couldn't get servants for love or money, because of the dull life, and might have to cook for station hands herself, and even do the washing at a pinch—"

Jim wheeled round suddenly, and strode back to the house—the house, as he was quite aware, which his mother alluded to. She, agitated by the movement, and without completing her sentence, turned and trotted after him. Alice was left leaning over the gate, at Guthrie Carey's side.

"You will enjoy this visit," she remarked calmly, ignoring the little scene. "Redford is a beautiful place—quite one of the show−places of the district—and they do things very well there. Mary is ostensibly the housekeeper; she really does all the hard work, but it is Deb who makes the house what it is. After she came home from school she got her father to build the new part. Since then they have had much more company than they used to have. Mary, who had been out for some years, didn't care for gaieties. She is a dear girl—we are all awfully fond of her—but she has a most curious complexion—quite bright red, as if her skin had something the matter with it, although it hasn't. Of course, that goes against her."

"Miss Deborah's complexion is wonderful."

"Yes. But oh, Deb isn't to be compared with Mary in anything except looks. She is eaten up with vanity—one can't be surprised—and is very dictatorial and overbearing; you could see that at lunch. But Mary is so gentle, so unselfish—her father's right hand, and everybody's stand−by."

"I don't think Miss Deborah seemed—"

"Because you don't know her. I do. She simply loathes children, while Mary would mother all the orphan asylums in the world, if she could. I always tell her that her mission in life is to run a creche—or should be. Lawks! How she will envy me when I get that boy of yours to look after!"

Guthrie's feet seemed to take tight hold of the ground. "Really, Miss Urquhart—er—I can't thank you for your goodness in—in asking him up here—but I've been thinking—I've made up my mind that the best thing I can do is to take him home to my own people." The idea was an inspiration of the desperate moment. How to put it into practice he knew not, and she tried to show him that it was impracticable; but he stuck to it as to a life−buoy. He would write to his sister—all the 'people' he owned apparently—and find somebody who was going home; and "Isn't it time to be putting our things together? Miss Pennycuick told us we were to be there for tea at four o'clock, if possible."

CHAPTER IV

Behold him at Redford, with his tea−cup in his hand. He was safe now from talk about the baby; but he was also cut off from the lovely Deborah, now wandering about her extensive grounds with another young man. Old Father Pennycuick had him fast. They sat together under a verandah of the great house.

"There were no pilots then," said the old man, puffing comfortably at his pipe—"there were no pilots then, and we had to feel our way along with the cast 'o the lead. We got ashore at Williamstown, on sailors' backs, and walked to Melbourne. Crossed the Yarra on a punt, not far from where Prince's Bridge now is—"

"Yes," said Guthrie Carey.

He seemed to be listening attentively, his strong, square face set like a mask; but his eyes roamed here and there.

"Bread two−and−six the small loaf," Mr Pennycuick dribbled into his dreaming ears. "Eggs sixpence apiece. Cheap enough, too, compared with the gold prices. But gold was not thought of for ten years after that. I tell you, sir, those were the times—before the gold brought all the riff−raff in."

The sailor murmured something to the effect that he supposed they were.

"We'd got our club, and a couple of branch banks, and a post−office, and Governor La Trobe, and Bishop Perry, and the nicest lot of fellows that ever came together to make a new country. We were as happy as kings. All young men. I was barely twenty−three when I took up Redford—named after our place at home. You know our place at home, of course?"

"I have seen it from the road," answered the guest, arrested in his mental wanderings by the mention of his own age.

"You must have seen it often, living so close."

"I never lived close myself; I am a Londoner."

"It's all the same—your people do. The Pennycuicks and the Careys have been neighbours for generations."

"I am only distantly related to that family."

"A Carey is a Carey," persisted the old man, who had determined to have it so from the first, and he would listen to no disclaimers.

He had already referred darkly to that Mary Carey of the hooked nose and pointed chin. His eldest daughter, he said, had been named after her. This eldest daughter, with her too−ruddy face, had shyly drawn near, and taken a chair at her father's elbow, where she sat very quietly, busily tatting. Plain though her face was, she had beautiful hands. Her play with thread and shuttle, just under Guthrie's eyes, held them watchful for a time—the time during which no sign of Deborah's white gown was to be perceived upon the landscape.

"My brother and I, we never hit it off, somehow. So when my father died I cleared. You don't remember his funeral, I suppose? No, no—that was before your time. They hung the church all over with black broadcloth of the best. That was the way in those days, and the cloth was the parson's perquisite. The funeral hangings used to keep him in coats and trousers. And they used to deal out long silk hat−scarves to all the mourners—silk that would stand alone, as they say—and the wives made mantles and aprons of them. They went down from mother to daughter, like the best china and family spoons. That's how women took care of their clothes when I was young. They didn't want new frocks and fallals every week, like some folks I could name." And he pinched his daughter's ear.

"Talk to Deb, father," said Mary. "I have not had a new frock for a great many weeks."

"Aye, Deb's the one! That girl's got to marry a millionaire, or I don't know where she'll be."

Almost Mrs Urquhart's words! And, like hers, they pricked sharply into the feelings of our young man. His eyes went a−roaming once more, to discover the white gown afar off, trailing unheeded along a dusty garden path. The old man saw it too, and his genial countenance clouded over.

"Well," he continued, after a thoughtful pause, "poor old Billy Dalzell and I, we emigrated together. He had a devil of a stepfather, and no home to speak of. We were mates at school, and we made up our minds to start out for ourselves. You remember the Dalzells of the Grange, of course?"

"I can't say that I do, sir."

"Well, they're gone now. Billy's father went the pace, and the mortgagees sold him up; and if his mother hadn't given him a bit when we started, Billy wouldn't have had a penny. She pawned all she could lay her hands on for him, we found out afterwards—Billy was cut up about that—and got ill−used by Heggarty for it when he found it out. She was a fool, that woman. Everybody could see what Heggarty was, except her. Old Dalzell was a gentleman, anyhow, with all his faults."

The white dress drew nearer, and its grey tweed companion. The host was once more wasting his story on deaf ears. "So we started off; and when we got here we went in together. He had enough to buy a mob of cattle and a dray and team, and so had I. We loaded up with all the necessaries, and hired three good men, and travelled till we found country. Took us about five months. At last we came here, and put our pegs in, and I started off to Melbourne for the license—ten pounds, and leave to renew at the end of the year—and here I've stuck ever since. Billy, he took up other land, and got married, and died, poor chap! And that's his boy over there," pointing with his pipe—"and he'll never be the man his father was, if he lives to a hundred."

The person referred to was he in the grey tweed, who sauntered with such assurance at white−robed Deborah's side. He was a tall, graceful and most distinguished−looking young fellow; but Guthrie Carey was prepared to believe heartily the statement that Dalzell junior would never be the man his father was.

"You shall see the identical hut," Mr Pennycuick kindly promised. "Down by the creek, where those big willows are—I planted them myself. Not good enough for a dog−kennel, my daughters say; but the best thing I can wish for them is that they may be as happy in their good houses as I was in that old shanty—aye, in spite of many a hard time I had there, with blacks and what not. We cut the stuff, Billy and I, and set the whole thing up; and all our furniture was our sleeping−bunks and a few stools and a table. We washed in a tin bowl on a block outside the door. Not so particular about tubbing and clean shirts in those days. Our windows were holes of a handy size for gun barrels, and the shutters we put up o' nights were squares of bark hung on to nails by strips of green hide. Many's the time I've woke to see one of 'em tilted up, and a pair of eyes looking in—sometimes friends, sometimes foes; we were ready for either. When Billy went, and I thought I'd get married too, then I built a better house—brick this time, and workmen from Melbourne to do it; that's it over there, now the kitchens and store−rooms—and imported furniture—er—I am not boring you, I hope?"

"Oh, dear, no! I am deeply interested."

"Well, Billy and I"—the tale seemed interminable—"Billy and I, we gave sixty pounds apiece for our stock horses, and the same for a ton of flour; and went right over Ballarat without knowing it. Camped there, sir, and didn't see the gold we must actually have crunched under our boot heels. And Billy had misfortunes, and died poor as a rat. It was in the family. Mrs D. was all right, though. She used to send a brother of hers to Melbourne market with her cattle, and cash being scarce, he would sometimes have to take land deeds for them, and she'd be wild with him for it. But what was the consequence? Those bits of paper that she thought so worthless that it's a wonder she took the trouble to save them, gave her city lots that turned out as good as gold mines. She sold too soon, or she'd have made millions— and died of a broken heart, they say, when she found out that mistake. Still, she left a lot more than it's good for a young fellow to start life with. That boy has been to Cambridge, and now he loafs about the club, pretends to be a judge of wine, gets every stitch of clothes from London—pah!" Mr Pennycuick spat neatly and with precision over the verandah floor into a flower−bed. "But these mother's darlings—you know them. If Mrs Dalzell could see him now, I daresay she'd be bursting with pride, for there's no denying that he's a smart−looking chap. But his father would be ashamed of him."

"Daddy dear!" Mary gently expostulated.

"So he would. An idle, finicking scamp, that'll never do an honest stroke of work as long as he lives. And I wish Deb wouldn't waste her time listening to his nonsense. Isn't it about time to be getting ready for dinner, Moll?"

Mary looked through a window at a clock indoors, and said it was. Guthrie hailed the news, and rose to his feet.

But not yet did he escape. His host, hoisting himself heavily out of his big cane chair, hollowed like a basin under his vast weight, extended a detaining hand.

"Come with me to my office a minute," he half whispered. "I'd like to show you something."

With apparent alertness, but sighing inwardly, Guthrie followed his host to the room in the old part of the

house which he called his office. Mr Pennycuick carefully shut the door, opened a desk full of drawers and pigeon−holes, and brought forth a bit of cardboard with a shy air. He had never shown it to his family, and doubtless would not have shown it now if he had not been growing old and soft and sentimental. It was a prim and niggling little water−colour drawing of English Redford—a flat facade, with swallows as big as condors flying over the roofs, and dogs that could never have got through any doorway gambolling on the lawn in front. A tiny 'Mary Carey' in one corner was just, and only just, visible to the naked eye.

"This was done for me, when we were both young, by her—your aunt," said Mr Pennycuick, gloating upon his treasure over Guthrie's shoulder.

"Not my aunt," explained Guthrie. "I don't know what relation, but a long way farther off than that. I am only a very small Carey, you know, sir."

Mr Pennycuick testily intimated, as before, that to be a Carey at all was enough for him. It was his excuse for these confidences, of which he was half ashamed.

While Guthrie studied the poor picture, trying to look as interested as he was expected to be, his host turned and stared down into the drawer that had held it for so many years. Other things were there—the usual dead flowers, still holding together, still fusty to the nose; the usual yellowing ball glove, the usual dance and invitation cards, and faded letters, with their edges frayed; a book−marker with an embroidered 'Friendship', mixed up with forget−me−nots, in coloured silks upon perforated card, backed by a still gleaming red satin ribbon looped at one end and fringed out at the other; the book that it was tucked into ("The Language of Flowers"), a large valentine in a wrapper with many broken seals, some newspaper cuttings, half a sixpence, with a hole in it, and a daguerreotype in a leather case.

This last he took up, opened and gazed at steadily, until his companion was compelled to interrupt him with an inquiring eye. Then he passed it over, and Guthrie turned it this way and that, until he caught the outlines of a long aquiline face between bunched ringlets, and a long bodice with a deep point, which he understood to have belonged to his distant relative at some period before he was born.

"And this?" he murmured politely.

"Yes," said Mr Pennycuick; "that's her. And I've never shown it to a soul before—not even to my wife."

"A—a sweet expression. Fair, was she?"

"Fair as a lily, and as pure, and as beautiful. Gentle as a dove. With blue eyes."

Guthrie did not care for this type just now. He liked them dark and flashing and spirited, like Miss Deborah. But he murmured "Hm−m−m" sympathetically.

"The loveliest woman in England," the old man maundered on. "Surely you must have heard of her, in the family?"

Guthrie had not only heard of her, as we know, he had seen her; but he shook a denying head, and dropped another hint of his own position in the family—outside the royal enclosure, as it were.

"Well, now, I'll just tell you what happened," said Mr Pennycuick, turning to the open drawer again. "Strictly between ourselves, of course—and only because you are a Carey, you understand— somehow you bring it all back—"

He was fumbling with the big valentine, getting it out of its case.

"Yes?" Guthrie encouraged him, while inwardly chafing to be gone.

"You see this?" It was an exquisite structure of foamy paper lace, silver doves, gauzed−winged Cupids, transfixed hearts and wreaths of flowers, miraculously delicate. How it had kept its frail form intact for the many years of its age was a wonder to behold. "You see this?" said the old man. "Well, when I was a young fellow, the 14th of February was a time, I can tell you! You fellows nowadays, you don't know what fun is, nor how to go a−courting, nor anything. . . .I was at old Redford that year, and she was at Wellwood, and all through the sleet and snow I rode there after dark, tied my horse to a tree, crept up that nut−walk—you know it?—and round by the east terrace to the porch, and laid my valentine on the door−step, and clanged the bell, and hid behind the yew−fence till the man came out to get it. Then I went home. And last thing at night there was a clatter−clatter at the door at Redford, and I dashed out to catch whoever it was—her brother she sent—but wasn't quite smart enough. If only I'd seen him. I should have known—as I ought to have, without that; but I didn't. It never occurred to me that she'd send the answer so soon, and she had disguised her writing in the address, and there was another girl—name of Myrtle Vining—who used to have myrtle on her note−paper, and all over the place—and here these

flowers looked to me as if they were meant for myrtle, and these two crossed arrows are like capital V—and how I came to be such an egregious dolt, Lord only knows! Well, I've paid for it—that I have—I've paid for it. Look here—don't touch! I'll show you what I found out when it was too late—after she'd played shy with me till I got angry and left her, and it was all over—my eyes aren't good enough to see it now, but I suppose it's there still—"

With infinite care and the small blade of his pocket−knife, he lifted the tiny tip of a tiny Cupid's wing. With bent head and puckered eyelids, Guthrie peered under, and read: "Yours, M. C.," written on a space of paper hardly larger than a pin's head.

"In my valentine that night," said Mr Pennycuick, "I'd asked her to have me. I didn't hide it up in this way; I knew, while I wondered that she took no notice, that she must have seen it. This was her answer. And I never got it, sir, till she was married to another man—and then by the merest accident. Then I couldn't even have the satisfaction of telling her that I'd got it, and how it was I hadn't got it before. Of course, I wasn't going to upset her after she was married to another man. I've had to let her think what she liked of me."

Guthrie was certainly interested now, but not as interested as he would have been the day before. The day before, this story would have moved him to pour out the tale of his own untimely and irreparable loss. He and old Mr Pennycuick would—metaphorically speaking—have mingled their tears together.

"You forget, off and on," said Mr Pennycuick, as he wrapped up his treasure with shaking hands and excessive care—"perhaps for years at a time, while you are at work and full of affairs; but it comes back—especially when you are old and lonely, and you think how different your life might have been. You don't know anything about these things yet. Perhaps, when you are an old man like me, you will."

Guthrie did know—no one better, he believed. But he did not say. Unknown to himself, he had reached that stage which Mr Pennycuick came to when he began courting Sally Dimsdale, who had made him such a good and faithful (and uninteresting) wife.

"It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," says the old proverb. True enough. But one might write it this way, with even more truth: "It is better to love and lose than to love and gain." One means by love, romantic love, of course.

CHAPTER V.

Dinner was over. They had all gone up to the big drawing−room, which was the feature of the 'new part'—the third house of the series which now made one. The new part was incongruously solid and modern, with a storey (comprising the drawing−room and its staircase only) which overtopped the adjacent roofs. Below it was a corresponding dining−room, and both apartments were furnished richly in the fashion of the time—tons of solid mahogany in the latter, and a pasture of grass−green carpet and brocade upholsterings in the former, lit up with gilded wall−paper and curtain−cornices as by rays of a pale sun. Curly rosewood sofas and arm−chairs, and marbled and mirrored chiffonniers, and the like, were in such profusion upstairs as to do away with the air of bleakness common to a right−angled chamber of large size and middle−class arrangement. A fine grand piano stood open in a prominent place. Four large shaded lamps and four piano candles pleasantly irradiated the whole; while three French windows, opening on a balcony, still stood wide to the summer night.

By the great white marble mantelpiece, under the great gilt−framed pier−glass, filling the huge chair specially dedicated to his use, Father Pennycuick sat in comfortable gossip with his old friend, Thornycroft of Bundaboo. It irked him to separate himself from pipe and newspaper, baggy coat and slouchy slippers, and his corpulent frame objected to stairs; but when he had guests he considered it his duty to toil up after them, in patent shoes and dining costume, and sit amongst them until music or card games were on the way, when he would retire as unobtrusively as his size and heavy footstep permitted. It was the custom to pretend not to see or hear him go, and it would have annoyed him exceedingly had anyone bidden him good−night.

The pair talked shop, after the manner of old squatters when they sit apart; but the tall, spare, grey man with the thoughtful face—more like a soldier than a sheep−farmer—was not thinking much of his flocks and herds. His thoughts followed the direction of his quiet eyes, focussed upon an amber silk gown and its immediate surroundings. Mr Thornycroft was Deborah's godfather, and at forty−seven was to all the sisters quite an elderly man, a sort of bachelor uncle to the family, one with no concern in such youthful pastimes as love−making and marrying, except as a benevolent onlooker and present−giver; and so the veiled vigilance of his regard was not noticed, as it would not have been understood, by anybody.

But other eyes, similarly occupied, were plainer to read.

Jim Urquhart's, of course. Jim—as ineligible for the most coveted post in the Western District as he well could be, by reason of the family already depending upon him, together with the load of debt left along with it by his deceased father, a "pal" of Mr Pennycuick's in the gay and good old times—still contrived to bring himself within the radius of Deborah's observation whenever occasion served. And being there, although silent and keeping to the background, his gaze followed her as the gaze of an opossum follows a light on a dark night, with the same still absorption. Nothing but her returning gaze could divert it from its mark. It was so natural, so calmly customary, so unobtrusive, that nobody cared to attach importance to it.

He sat now, far back against the green brocade hangings of a corner window, where he could see the beloved profile in the middle of the room. His big, work−roughened hands clasped his big, bony knees, and his long, loose body hung forward out of the little chair that was never built for such as he; and he seemed given over to Rose Pennycuick's tale of the pony that had corns, and the cat that had been mangled in a cruel rabbit trap. He gave her wise counsel regarding the treatment of these poor things, his deep, drawling voice an unnoticed instrument in the orchestra of tongues; but his crude−featured, sunburnt face held itself steadily in the one direction. From the day that he came to manhood his soul had kept the same attitude towards the woman to whom the profile belonged. But he never alluded to the fact, save in this silent way.

Then there was the Reverend Bennet Goldsworthy, "Church of England minister", as his style and title ran. Privately, Mr Pennycuick did not like him; but for the sake of the priestly office, and as being a parishioner, he gave him the freedom of the house, and much besides. The parson's buggy never went empty away. Redford hams, vegetables, poultry, butter and eggs, etc., kept his larder supplied. His horse−feed was derived therefrom; also his horse; also his cow. When his cow began to fail, he promptly mentioned the fact—he was mentioning it now to Mary Pennycuick. "Yes," he was saying, A PROPOS of his motherless little girl—whom he often brought

to Redford for change of air, leaving her to the care of the sisters until convenient to him to reclaim her—"yes, it will mean much to my child in after life to have had the refining influences of this house at the most impressionable age." Truth was, that Ruby was growing a little old for her Kindergarten, and he wanted Redford to offer her (gratis, of course) a share in Francie's governess. "I could not endure to see her grow up like the daughters of so many of my brother clergy, ignorant of the very rudiments of decent life"—meaning not decent life in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but the life that included evening dress and finger−glasses. "She has caught the colonial accent already at that horrid school. 'When is the new keeow coming?' says she. And, by the way, that reminds me—your good father promised me the cow a fortnight ago. The one we have gives us hardly enough milk for the table; we have had no butter from her for months."

"I am so sorry," grieved Mary, as if Redford had failed in its sacred duty of hospitality. "I will tell him about it. The men have all been so busy with the shearing."

She was also distressed that she could not definitely invite Ruby for the impending holidays. But Deb had issued her commands that Redford was not to be saddled with a nurseless child at Christmas, when everybody's hands would be full.

Mary was Ruby's willing foster−mother when Redford had her in charge; she was also the kindest hostess of them all to Ruby's father. To her was left the task of entertaining him, and she never neglected it. Naturally, he gave her no thanks. When he said that what Ruby needed was a mother's tender care, it was at Deborah he looked, who never turned a hair's−breadth in his direction at any time, except when good manners obliged her, and who was not tender to Ruby, whom she called "that brat", and had smartly spanked on several occasions.

A beautiful woman cannot help having objectionable lovers any more than a king can help a cat looking at him. This man—a most well−meaning, good−hearted, useful little underbred person, typical of so large a class in the Colonial Church—was Deb's pet aversion, and did not know it. He was not made to see his own deficiencies as she saw them. When first she flashed upon his dazzled vision, splendid in a scarlet dinner gown, and carrying her regal head as if the earth belonged to her, he really saw no reason why he, with his qualifications of comparative youth, good looks (his sort of good looks), and notorious pulpit eloquence, should not aspire to rush in where so many feared to tread. His rush had been checked at the outset, but he was still unaware of the nature of the barrier that Deb held rigid between them. He continued to gaze at her with his ardent little black eyes as if no barrier were there. And it was because he did so that Deb, who could not slap him for it, slapped Ruby sometimes, and called her a brat, and would not have her asked to Redford for the holidays; thereby giving occasion to envious Alice Urquhart for that warning to Guthrie Carey not to trust his baby to her.

There was still another lover present—the favoured lover. He sat with Alice near the piano where Francie and her governess were playing duets, listening without listening to his companion's jerky talk— those pathetic attempts to attract him which so many second−rate girls were not too proud to make obvious to his keen apprehension. Claud Dalzell's distinction was that he was the most polished young man of his social circle. He had had all the advantages that money could give and in addition, was naturally refined and handsome. To hear Claud Dalzell read poetry, or sing German folk−songs to his own graceful accompaniment, was to make a poet of the listener; to dance with him was pure enchantment (to another good dancer); he was the best horseman in the land; and if his present host could not appreciate his many charms—except perhaps the last named—others did. The whole race of girls, more or less, fell down and worshipped him.

He sat with Alice Urquhart because he could not sit with Deborah; or rather, because he would not condescend to share her with that "t'penny−ha'penny mate of a tramp cargo boat", as he styled Guthrie Carey, whom she had made happy at last. She had rescued him from her father's clutches; she had called him to a chair beside her, where there was no room for a third chair. Her glistening skirt flowed over his modest toes. Her firm, round arm, flung along the chair arm between them, made him feel like Peter Ibbotson before the Venus of Milo—it was so perfect a piece of human sculpture. She lay back, slowly fanning herself, and smiling, her eyes wandering all the time in Dalzell's neighbourhood, without actually touching him—a tall, deep−bosomed, dark−eyed, dignified as well as beautiful young woman, knowing herself to be such, and unspoiled by the knowledge. She wore her crown with the air of feeling herself entitled to it; but it was an unconscious air, without a trace of petty vanity behind it. Everything about her was large and generous and incorruptibly wholesome, even her undoubted high temper. And this was her charm to every man who knew her —not less than her lovely face.

Guthrie Carey—and who shall blame him?—basked in his good luck. But every now and then he looked up

and met the glower of Claud Dalzell with a steely eye. These two men, each so fine of his kind, met with the sentiments of rival stags in the mating season; the impulse to fight 'on sight' and assure the non−survival of the unfittest came just as naturally to them as to the less civilised animals. Each recognised in the other not merely a personal rival, but an opposing type.

It amused Deborah, who grasped the situation as surely as they did, to note the bristling antipathy behind the careful politeness of their mutual regard. If it did not bristle under her immediate eye, it crawled.

"Look out for the articles of virtue," Claud had warned her earlier in the evening. "That big sailor of yours is rather like a bull in a china shop; he nearly had the carved table over just now. He doesn't know just how to judge distance in relation to his bulk. I'd like to know his fighting weight. When he plants his hoof you can feel the floor shake."

"He IS a fine figure of a man," Deb commented, with a smile.

"I can't," yawned Mr Dalzell casually, "stand a person who eats curry with a knife and fork."

"It was pretty tough, that curry. I expect he couldn't get it to pieces with a spoon."

"He did not try to."

"I never noticed. I shouldn't remember to notice a little trifle like that."

"My dear girl, it is the little trifle that marks the man."

"Oh!" said Deb. And then she sought Guthrie Carey, and brought him to sit beside her.

"That gentleman sings well," remarked Guthrie tepidly, at the conclusion of a finely rendered song. "I often wish I could do those ornamental things. Unfortunately, a man who has his work—if he sticks to it properly—gets no time to qualify. I'm afraid I shall never shine at drawing−room tricks."

"Tell me about your work," said clever Deb, smiling behind her waving fan.

At once she had him quite happy, talking about himself. No effort was necessary to draw him out; that she deigned to listen to him was enough. His struggles as boy—blue−nose boy; his tough battle for the first certificate; his complicated trials as second mate, holding theoretically an authority that was practically none; his rise to be qualified master and actual mate—no "t'penny−ha'penny" position in his eyes evidently; his anticipation of the "master extra" and the pass in steam, which might lead to anything—the whole tale was told her in terse, straightforward fashion, but with an art new to the modest sailor−man, who hated brag as much as cowardice. He bragged in self−defence, in challenge of the formidable equipment of his rival. And how interested she was! How well she understood his case—that it was better than the swellest training−ship to make your own way by your own exertions, and splendid to have done so much while still on the right side of thirty.

So much! He had done more than that—he had been a husband and father at twenty−one. But this, his most distinguished exploit, was not mentioned.

CHAPTER VI.

He mentioned it next day, however. He had to; for after breakfast a letter, forwarded from Five Creeks, reached him from the baby's caretaker—the lady of whom he stood in such undignified dread. The sight of her handwriting paled his brown face and set his stout heart fluttering. What did she want of him? He kept the letter unopened for some time, because he was afraid to know, although convinced beforehand that he did know—that, of course, it was the visit he should have paid before coming up country. When at last he drew the sheet from its envelope, as if it had come from an infected house, and had not been fumigated, and cast a hurried glance over the contents, he found that the unexpected had happened once more—the wildly unexpected.

She was going to be married. He was a "general merchant" in prosperous business, and there was nothing to wait for—except Mr Carey's instructions as to what was to be done with the dear little boy. She would feel acutely the parting from him, after he had been from his birth like a child of her own, but Mr Carey would understand that she could not now continue her labour of love on his behalf—that she had others to consider. But she knew of a most excellent substitute—a dear friend of her own, who had long taken the deepest interest in darling Harry, and with whom she was sure he would be as safe and happy as with herself. She had expected to see Mr Carey when he arrived, to arrange matters; she hoped he would come as soon as possible.

In the bewilderment of his mingled elation and anxieties, the young father did not know what to do for the moment, while recognising the urgent need for action. He must go as soon as possible, of course; but he could not depart suddenly without a reason, and to give the reason would be to give himself away to Alice Urquhart. Besides, a day's outing had been planned on purpose for him; the possibilities in connection with it were enormous; and five days of his leave were unexpended still. He must think it over. He must have advice. So, as a first instalment of duty, he scrawled a recklessly affectionate letter, full of gratitude to her who had been his good genius and the guardian angel of his boy. He did not disguise his envy of the general merchant, whose vows of love could not have excelled in fervent expression the good wishes of the writer for the happiness of the betrothed pair. He hoped to have the pleasure of seeing his dear old friend on the following day, or the day after that at latest; and he promised himself the satisfaction of squandering his saved pay on such a wedding present as would at least cover the cost of the bread and milk the boy had devoured at her expense. Guthrie dropped his letter in the post−bag while they were calling to him that it was time to start. And he turned the key of silence upon his secret until he could pour it into the right ear.

It was a wonder he did not pour it into Mary's, for she drove him to Bundaboo, and nobody could have been more sympathetic than she. She was the virtual mother of the family, who loved children, and she was not—she could not be—a husband−hunter; a sensible man in domestic difficulties could not have sought a wiser confidante. Yet he resisted stubbornly all her gentle invitations to confide. In the first place, he did not want to go with her in the pony−carriage, while Deb and Dalzell rode. He did not like to see it taken for granted, as it seemed to be by all, that a sailor on horseback must necessarily make a fool of himself; the slight to his self−respect was enough to dull the edge of his joy in the general merchant's proceedings—for, as the reader will remember, he was still but three−and−twenty.

He had to weigh down the springs of a little basket thing no better than an invalid's wheel−chair, and see the young exquisite, whom he could have tossed over his shoulder with one hand, show off feats of fancy horsemanship to make Deb's dark eyes kindle. Mr Pennycuick had carelessly asked Billy's degenerate son to "school a bit" a creature which for weeks had not allowed a man upon his back, and had had no exercise beyond his voluntary scamperings about the paddock from which he had been brought, dancing with excitement and indignation. All the stablemen had been required to get his bridle and saddle on; he now wheeled round and round in the large space left for him, while Claud Dalzell, in his London riding clothes, and with his air of a reigning prince, warily turned with him. Guthrie Carey, in the waiting pony−carriage, had but one interest in the performance—his hopeful anticipation of a fatal, or at least a ridiculous, result.

But there was no fear of that, and evidently Deb knew it. Sitting her own dancing chestnut, how her beautiful eyes glowed! She gloried in the ring of breathless witnesses to the prowess of her knight. Many a time did she

scoff and scowl at the dandyisms which she deemed effeminate; this was one of the moments which showed the man as she desired him. Through those fine fingers, with the polished filbert nails, the shortened reins were drawn and held as by clamps of steel; so was the wild−eyed head by the lock of mane in the same hand. When no one was looking—although every eye believed itself fixed upon him— his left foot found its stirrup, his right gave a hop, and like lightning he had sprung up and round, without touching the horse until fairly down in the saddle; so that the animal was robbed of his best chance of getting the rider off, which is at the moment before he is quite on. No other chance was offered to the baffled one, although he kicked like a demon for nearly ten minutes.

"I wish," Guthrie Carey ground through his strong teeth, "that the cranky beast would break his neck." It was not the beast's neck he meant.

But Deb called: "Bravo! Well done, indeed!" and when the battle was over called the victor to her with her lovely face of pride and joy. Right willingly he went, and they sailed away together like the wind, and were lost to view. Yes, this was Dalzell's hour. She knew nothing of the brave deeds of sailor−men—common and constant as eating and drinking, and performed to no audience and for no reward.

Alice Urquhart and Rose Pennycuick, also on horseback, followed the flying pair; then a buggy containing Jim and schoolgirl Francie (her governess gone home for holidays today), and a load of ironwork for a blacksmith on the route; last of all, Mary and the sailor, for all the world like the old father and mother of the party. Mr Pennycuick excused himself from excursions nowadays, and so did Miss Keene, the elderly and quite uninfluential duenna of the house, when one was needed (she "did the flowers" and knitted singlets for everybody).

The Shetlands pattered along at a great rate, but did not come up with the riders until they were nearly at Bundaboo. And all the way—a long way—Guthrie Carey had to make efforts not to bore his hostess. They talked about the clear air and the dun−coloured land—the richest sheep−country in the colony, but now without a blade of green upon it— and made comments upon three bullock drays piled with wool bales, and two camping sundowners, and one Chinaman hawker's cart, which they encountered on the way. And that was about all.

The home−coming was a different affair.

Tea had been served in Mr Thornycroft's cool drawing−room, hats and gloves had been collected, orders sent to the stables; and the young sailor, panting to emulate the prowess of his rival, and thereby compel Miss Deborah to respect him, was asking one and another what were the arrangements for the return journey.

"I," said Rose, who hugged a puppy in her arms—a puppy long possessed, but only now old enough to leave its mother—"I am going in the buggy with Jim."

"Wouldn't you rather go in the pony−carriage?" inquired Carey anxiously. "You could make a better lap on the lower seat. I could ride your horse home for you if they'll lend me a saddle; yours could be put in the buggy—"

Even as he spoke, Deb came round the corner from somewhere, with swift steps and a brilliant complexion, Dalzell hurrying after her.

"Mr Carey," she called, while the sailor was still yards away from her, "Molly and I are going to change skirts. I am tired with my ride this morning, and am going to drive home. Will you trust your neck to me?"

Would he not, indeed? He was but a pawn in the game, but what did that matter? Eighteen miles absolutely alone with her! And possibly half of them in the dark! No saddle horse in the world could have tempted him now. He could hardly speak his gratitude and joy.

"Delighted, Miss Deborah!—delighted!—delighted!"

But Dalzell, black as thunder, swung aside, muttering in his teeth.

"Oh, oh!" Francie's loud whisper followed. "DID you hear what he said? He said 'damn'. That's because—"

"You cut along," Jim's drawl broke in, "and get ready if you want to ride."

Mr Thornycroft tucked Deb into the pony−carriage with the solicitude of a mother fixing up a young baby going out with its nurse. He insisted that she should wear a shawl over her linen jacket, and brought forth an armful of softest WOOL, Indian wove.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, fondling it, for she loved fine fabrics.

"Never mind," said he. "Put it on."

"I am suspicious of these shawls and fallals that Bundaboo seems full of. Who is the hidden lady?"

He only smiled at her.

"Ah, godpapa, you spoil me!"

She drew the wrap about her, and he assisted to adjust it, with gentle skill. Then he turned abruptly to Carey, as to a groom.

"See that she doesn't throw that off. It will be chilly presently. No, she'd better drive—she knows the road. But take care of her. Good−night."

"Isn't he an old dear?" said Deb to Carey, as they drove off. "He has been a second father to me ever since I was a child."

She did not hurry the ponies, being anxious not to appear to be tearing after her offended swain.

"The evening is the pleasantest time to be out, this weather," she said, lolling back in her seat. "And I'm sure I don't want to look at dinner after such a lunch as I have eaten. I don't know how you feel."

"I feel the same," he assured her, with truth.

So, for her own purposes, she made their drive half as long again as it need have been. And was so friendly, so free, so intimate!—leading that poor innocent to the belief that his great rival was already virtually out of his way. He was an unsophisticated sailor−lad, who, with that rival's help, had reached a certain stage and crisis— another one—of his man's life; and—let us be honest in our diagnosis—the bubbles of Mr Thornycroft's fine champagne still ran in his blood and brightened his brain, lifting him above the prosaic ground−level where a craven timidity would have smothered him. Not touching the balance of his wits, be it understood; just heartening him—no more.

Twice and thrice she branched off from the road to show him something that could well have waited for another day. She was imprudent enough to introduce him to so sentimental a spot as the family cemetery—established at a time when there were only Dalzells and Pennycuicks to feed it. "Their shepherds were killed by the blacks," said Deb, as she pushed the ponies up to the wall, and he rose in the carriage to look over the top, "and they buried them here, marking the place with a pile of stones. There were other deaths, and they enclosed the piece of land. Then a brother of Mr Dalzell's, and a girl; and Mr Dalzell himself wished to be put here, beside his brother. Not his wife, she wouldn't; she lies in the Melbourne cemetery. Then some of our babies, then mother. She was the last. I don't suppose there will be any more now. The State will insist on taking charge of us."

Real English churchyard elms crowded about the wall and blightingly overshadowed the lonely group of graves. English ivy, instead of neatly clothing the wall, as it had been meant to do, straggled wildly over the part of the enclosure which had once been a garden around them. Out of it, like sea−stripped wrecks, dead sticks of rose−bushes poked up, and ragged things that had gone to seed. The turf was parched away, like the grass of the surrounding paddocks; the mounds were cracked; the head−stones—several of them ornate and costly—stained with the drip from the trees and birds, and some distinctly out of the perpendicular.

"It ought not to look like this," Deb apologised for it. "It ought to have been seen to. We used to come often, and bring water from the dam. But one forgets as time goes on; one doesn't think—or care. Poor dead people! How out of it they are! And we shall be the same some day—neglected and abandoned, just like this."

"DON'T!" muttered Guthrie Carey, shivering. The ghost of his sweet Lily seemed to reproach him with Deb's voice. But the ghost−woman fifteen months old had no chance with the glowing live woman born into his life but yesterday; and no blame to him either, and no wrong to the dead, if one can look at the thing dispassionately and with an unbiased mind.

"Let us go and see the dam," Deb cheered him, as she turned the ponies' heads. "You haven't seen our big dam, have you? Everybody that comes to Redford must see that, or father will want to know the reason why. 'Pennycuick's Folly' some people call it, because he spent so much money on it; but father is not one to spoil the ship for a pen'orth of paint. He likes to do things thoroughly. So do I."

And soon they halted on the embankment of a mile−wide sheet of water, shining like a mirror in a setting of soft−bosomed hills, their dun day colour changed to a heavenly rose−purple under the poetic evening sky.

"Why, it is a lake," said Guthrie Carey. "You could hold regattas on it." "We do, now and then, with our little boats. We have three over there"—pointing with her whip to a white shed on the farther shore. "And swimming matches. We used sometimes, when we were younger, to come down on hot nights and be mermaids. Once we moored ourselves out in the middle, away from the mosquitoes, and slept in the bottom of the boat, under the stars."

"How charming!"

"It was holiday time, and our parents were away. We took cushions and things, and it was great fun; but

Keziah reported us, and we were never allowed to do it again."

They sat in the pony−carriage on the dam embankment, gazing silently. A flock of wildfowl had been scared away by their approach, and now not a wing, not an eye was near. At a great distance curlews wailed, only to make the stillness and solitude more exquisite, more profound. The purple of the hills grew deeper and softer, the lake a mere pulseless shimmer through the twilight haze. And then, last touch of magic, the moon swam up—the same moon that had transfigured Five Creeks garden and Alice Urquhart last night.

He poured out his soul to Deborah Pennycuick.

First, it was only the story of the baby—the story he had told Alice, with some omissions and additions. He took advantage of the opportunity to ask Deb's invaluable advice.

Deb, well aware of the influence of a summer night and certain accessories, tried her best to be practical. She asked straight questions about the baby.

"Where have you got him? Where does this friend live who has been recommended to you?"

"In Sandridge—all at Sandridge—"

"That dirty, low part! That's no place to rear a boy in. Bring him into the bush, to clean air, if you want to make a man of him. I know a dear, nice woman—she is our overseer's wife—who has no children, and is dying to get hold of one somehow or other. We might make some arrangement with her, I am sure; and, if so, the little fellow would be in clover. We'd all look after him, of course, while you were at sea—"

"Oh! oh! oh!" The young father's heart simply exhaled itself in gratitude too vast for words. Ah! there was no hanging back now! Not the baby only, but the dog−chain, was laid at Deborah's feet.

"You go and fetch him tomorrow," said she, "and I'll talk to Mrs Kelsey while you are away. Then I'll meet you at the station on your return, to help you with him, and tell you what Mrs Kelsey says—though I have no doubt of what it will be. But we'll keep him at Redford for a bit, till he gets used to everybody; and you must stay with him all you can until your ship sails. . . ."

His eyes were full of tears. He laid his hand on her shawl again. He leaned to her. It was no use—the moon and his feelings were too much for him. They were talking of the baby, and the word "love" had not been, and was not going to be, mentioned; but there the thing was, unmistakable to her keen intelligence, looming like a frontier custom−house on the road ahead.

She grasped his big, trembling hand, and with it held him back, meeting his adoring gaze with steady eyes and mouth.

"My dear boy, don't—don't! Don't spoil this nice evening—"

It was all that was necessary. And still so kind, so gentle with him! No scorn, no offended dignity, no displeasure even. She, who could punish insolence with anybody, was never hard upon the humble admirer—only too soft, in fact, with all her basic firmness, and incapable of the hard−hearted coquetry that so commonly makes beauty vile. "Face of waxen angel, with paw of desert beast"—that was not Deborah Pennycuick.

A sob broke from him.

"I am a damned fool!" he muttered savagely, and by a violent effort collected himself. "I beg your pardon."

"That's all right," she said, turning the ponies from the embankment and whipping them to a gallop.

CHAPTER VII.

There was a moon the next night also. It did not appreciably affect him this time—down in dirty Sandridge, hobnobbing with the baby's caretaker and the general merchant, who, shutting his shop at six, was free to make the sailor's acquaintance, and help him to spend a pleasant evening. But it turned Redford garden, with its fine old trees and lawns, into the usual bit of fairyland for those who strayed therein.

Redford was packed with Christmas guests. The waggonette that had taken Guthrie Carey to the train had returned full of them, and batches had been arriving at intervals through the day. At bed−time the sisters were sharing rooms; Rose had come to Deb's, Frances to Mary's; and the unmarried men were all at the bachelors' quarters.

It was a hot night, and Deb, under the circumstances, was disinclined for sleep. She paid visits to one guest chamber and another, for private gossips and good−nights; when she returned to her own, where placid Rose had long composed herself, she roamed the floor like a caged animal.

"It is no use my coming to bed yet," she addressed her sister. "I could not sleep. I should only kick about and disturb you. I'll sit down and read a bit."

She found a novel and an easy−chair, and made deliberate efforts to tranquillise herself. Soon Rose heard sighs and phews, and sudden rustlings and slappings, and then the bang of a book upon the floor.

"I can't read! and the light brings the mosquitoes. It's too hot in here. I'm going out to get cool, Rosie."

"A'right," mumbled drowsy Rose. And the light was extinguished, and the blind of the French window rattled up.

Deb flung both leaves wide—like all the Redford doors, they were never locked or barred—and drifting over the verandah, sat down on the edge of it, with her feet on the gravel. She had tossed off her pearl necklace and a breast−knot of wilted roses; otherwise, she sat in full evening dress, and the night air bathed her bare neck and arms. Also the mosquitoes found them—a delicious morsel!—so that she had to turn her lacy skirt up over her head to be quite comfortable. From under this hood the dark lamps of her eyes shone forth, gazing steadily into the dim world—into the bit of future that she thought she saw unveiled. The loom of the trees, the glimmer of flowering bushes, the open spaces of lawn and pallid pathways, the translucent blue−green sky, the rising moon—these things made the picture, but were to all intents invisible to the inward sight. She really saw nothing, until suddenly a pin−point spark appeared out of the shadows, moved along a hedge of laurels, and fixed itself in the neighbourhood of a distant garden−seat. Then at once she stiffened like a cat that has heard a mouse squeak or a bird's wing rustle; she was alert on the instant, concentrated upon the phenomenon. Instinct recognised the tip of a cigar which had the handsome face of Claud Dalzell behind it.

"What is he doing out of doors at this time of night?" she wondered; and the little star began to draw her like a magnet. The world becomes another world in these mystic hours; it has new rulers and new laws— or rather, it has none. The moon sways more than ocean tides. In broad day Deb would no more have stalked a man than she would a crocodile; in this soft, free, empty, irresponsible night the primal woman was out of her husk, one with the desert−prowling animal that calls through the moonlit silence for its mate. Twenty times had she snubbed an ardent lover at the behest of all sorts of reasons and so−called instincts cultivated for her guidance by generations of wise men, now, all in a moment, came this moon−born impulse to give herself to him unasked. She could not resist it.

Like Deb, Claud had not been inclined to sleep, and for much the same reason. The guest chamber usually allotted to him being needed for a lady, he had been sent to the bachelors' quarters—a barrack−like dormitory amongst the outbuildings, very useful for the accommodation of the occasional 'vet' or cattle−buyer, and to take the overflow of company on festive occasions. Jim Urquhart, when at Redford, always slept there; he preferred it, particularly when he had companions with whom to smoke and talk sheep, and perhaps play cards, at liberty; for the bachelors' quarters had its own wood−stack and supplies, and one could sit by a blazing hearth all night, if so disposed, without incommoding anybody.

Generally four bachelor beds were made up, and a screened end of the room stacked with the material for

twice as many more. At Christmas all were in use, and lined the two long walls—which Dalzell called "herding", and disliked extremely, while recognising that it was a necessary arrangement to which it was his duty to conform.

The herd was undressing itself in a miscellaneous manner—yawning, chaffing, cutting stupid jokes, some of them at his expense; until the process was at an end, and he could reasonably assume the fellows to be asleep, he preferred the gardens to the bachelors' quarters.

And the free night enfolded him—the rising moon uplifted him—in the usual way, he being, like Deb, like Guthrie Carey, an instrument fitted to respond to their mute appeals. Perhaps even more finely fitted than Guthrie or Deb; for he had what are called "gifts" of intellect and imagination transcending theirs—faculties of mind which, lacking worthy use, bred in him a sort of chronic melancholy, the poetic discontent of the unappreciated and misunderstood—a mood to which moonlight ministers as wine to the drinking fever, at once an exquisite exasperation and a divine appeasement. He was a poet, a painter, a musician—possibly a soldier, or a king—possibly anything—spoiled, blighted by that misnamed good fortune which the lucky workers who had to work so naturally and stupidly envied him. The proper stimulus to the worthy development of the manhood latent in him had been taken from him at the start. And now he wandered amongst his dilettantisms, dissatisfied and ineffectual. He lived beneath himself in his common intercourse with others; he ate his heart when he was alone.

Unconsciously, by force of habit, he selected the most comfortable and cleanly of the garden−seats, and made sure that the best of cigars was drawing perfectly, before he gave himself to his meditations on this particular moonlight night. Then he began to think of Deb—in the same new way that Carey had begun to think of her after discovering a dangerous rival in the field. To Claud, Guthrie was dangerous in his rude bulk and strength, the knitted brute power that the sea and his hard life had given him; to Guthrie, Claud was dangerous in the highbred beauty and finish of his person, clothes and manners, and in the astounding "cleverness" that he displayed. Each man feared the force of those qualities which he lacked himself, and was secretly ashamed of lacking.

Claud Dalzell considered this matter of the rival—not a probable but a possible rival—seriously, for the first time. Hitherto he had had an easy mind in his relations with the beauty of the countryside. She was his for all he wanted of her. And feeling this, he had taken no steps to register his claim; he had not even yet proposed to her. Matrimony was not a fashionable institution—it was, indeed, a jest— in his set. A young man with a heap of money was not expected to tie himself down as if he were a poor clerk on a hundred a year. The conditions of club life, with as many domestic hearths to visit as he wished, and to stay away from when he chose, the luxury and freedom of pampered bachelorhood, had not only been deemed appropriate, but necessary to his peculiar needs and organisation. He had not considered himself a marrying man. But now the new idea came to him—to make his rights in Deb secure.

Certainly he could not contemplate the possibility of doing without her. He had loved her that much for years. Within the last day or two he had loved her twice that much. And now the moonlight showed him his love enthroned above all his lesser loves—a thing of heaven, where they were of the earth—consecrated a great passion, to lift him out of himself. He sat and smoked, spiritually bemused, his brain running like a fountain with melodies of music and poetry, notes and words that sang in his ears and murmured on his lips without his hearing them. So a distant curlew thrilled him to a more ecstatic melancholy with its call through the moon−transfigured world, and he did not notice it. All the influences of the gentle night contributed to his inspired mood, but Love was the first violin in that orchestra under Nature's conductorship—Nature, whose hour it was, walking, a god, in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day.

And here came Deb, gliding towards him by a path that he could not see, holding her lace skirts tightly bunched in her nervous hands. Youth to youth, beauty to beauty, man to woman, woman to man, the magnet to the steel—they were just elements of the elements, for once in their lives.

"How fortunate that I put on black tonight," thought Deb, as she pursued her stealthy way at the back of bushes—"and something that does not rustle!"

"How beautiful she was tonight!" thought Claud. "How a dark dress throws up that superb neck of hers! I'll take her to Europe, and show her to the sculptors and painters; but where's the hand that could carve that shape, or the paint that could give her colour? I'll have a London season with her, and see her snuff out the milk−and−water debutantes. No milk−and−water about Deb—wine and fire!—and withal so proud and unapproachable. That hulking brute imagines—but he'll find his mistake if he attempts to cross the line. Beauty, passion, purity—what a

blend! She's a woman alone—the blue rose of women— and she is mine." He murmured, to some cadence of a Schubert serenade: "My Deb! My love! My love! My queen!" and suddenly stopped short in his musings.

Her foot crunched the gravel behind him. Without turning his head, he sat alertly motionless for several minutes, listening, holding his breath. Then he dropped his cigar gently.

"Fine night, Deb," he remarked aloud.

There was no immediate answer, but presently a low chuckle from the laurel bushes.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked, imitating his casual tone.

"Couldn't explain, I'm sure. It was borne in on me, somehow."

"You did not see me."

"I don't want to see, in your case. I feel you."

There was another brief silence, and then she rustled off a step or two.

"Well, good−night! I just came out to look for a book I left here somewhere."

"What book?" "It doesn't matter. It is too late to read tonight, anyhow."

"It spoils books to leave them out all night. I will help you to find it." He got up, and pretended to look about. "It is not on this seat—"

"Perhaps Miss Keene has taken it in. She is always after me to pick up my litters. It won't rain, anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"No, it won't rain tonight. Awfully nice night, isn't it? I came over here to get a quiet smoke and let those fellows subside a bit. I could not stand their noise, and the place is stifling."

"I'm afraid so. I'm so sorry we have to put you there; but you know—"

"Oh, of course! I don't mind a bit. It is hot indoors, wherever you are. If it were not for the mosquitoes, it would be nice to sleep in hammocks under the trees this weather." "I have often thought so. I can't breathe shut up. Rose is in my room tonight, and she seems like a whole crowd. I had to come out to cool myself." "And to get your book. What book was it?" "The—er—Clough's poems." "How many copies have you?—because one of them has been in my pocket for two days."

"Well, I don't want it. Good−night!"

She put out her hand. He took it and held it. The moonlight now was very bright, but not bright enough to reveal his smile or her blush. However, neither could be hidden from the second sight of love. "Don't go yet, Debbie. I never get a word with you these days, you are so taken up with all sorts of people. And you haven't had time to get cool yet. I know you haven't—by the feel of your hand."

She tried to withdraw it, but did not try very hard.

"My dear boy," she trembled, "do you know what time it is? It must be simply ALL hours."

"What does that matter? We are not keeping anybody up." "And there's tomorrow to be considered. Christmas Eve is always such a busy, tiring—"

"Sufficient for the day. Let us take things as we can get them. Besides, you will sleep all the better for it. Five minutes more or less—"

He pulled gently but firmly at the imprisoned hand. "Well, just five minutes—although it's really—"

She was drawn down to the bench beside him, and the man in the moon, as he looked into their shining, happy eyes, seemed to wink knowingly.

"Oh, Debbie, isn't it a heavenly night? Oh, Debbie!" His arms went round her, and she simply melted into them. "Oh, my love!..."

Five minutes! It ran to an hour and a half before she scudded across the lawn to bed.

And it was Mary, the busy housekeeper, who, on her busiest day, drove to the station to meet Guthrie Carey and the baby, and the baby's cheap and temporary child−nurse.

Mary, though she was not Deb, was too sweet and good for words. She put the little hired girl on the front seat with the groom, and sat in the body of the waggonette to talk to Guthrie and to take care of his child. There was no awkward shyness on her part now, and no boredom on his. Little Harry fused them. She had remembered to bring fresh milk and rusks for a possibly hungry baby, and he sat on her lap as she fed him, and cooed to her when his mouth was not too full, and seemed to forget that any other foster−mother had ever existed. His father's relieved and astonished pleasure in the sight was only equalled by Mary's pleasure in seeing his pleasure. "Isn't he a jolly little cuss, Miss Pennycuick?" "He is a perfect darling," crooned Mary, kissing him.

And, in fact, Harry Carey was a fine, clean, wholesome child, as worthy of his old family as any born under the ancestral roof.

Mary shouldered him as if he belonged to her when they arrived at Redford, shortly before the dinner hour.

"Now, Mr Carey, you must go to the bachelors' quarters, I am sorry to say; but he will not miss you, since you have been away from him for so long. He knows me now," said Mary proudly, "and I will take charge of him. You may safely leave him to us now."

"Indeed, yes, I know that," said the thankful parent, and hastened to his new quarters to receive the greetings and chaffings of the young bachelors, and to dress himself for dinner, while Mary carried the baby into the house, calling on Keziah Moon to come to her, the inadequate nurse−girl trailing at her heels.

The house party gathered in the glazed corridor of the "middle part"— a long, narrow room, that had once been a verandah, and that led to the new big dining−room—to await the summons to the meal. Here Deb, beautiful in limp white silk that showed up the lovely carmine of her cheeks, came forward to welcome the returned guest with an eager warmth that sadly misled him. He sat down to his dinner a few minutes later with his head in a whirl and his appetite nowhere, as an effect of that cordial pressure of the hand, those tender eyes, and that deep−hued blush upon him.

Then, as he came to himself, there crept into his mind a sense that things had been happening while he was away. All the eyes around the table seemed continually to turn either towards Deb, who, still flushed, and bestowing absent−minded smiles upon anybody and anything, was certainly different from her usual stately self; or upon Claud Dalzell, who sat beside her, and seemed to have appropriated some of her lost dignity; or upon Mr Pennycuick, who fumbled oddly with carving knife and gravy spoon, and gave other evidences, Guthrie thought, of having been upset and shaken. The young man was still fumbling himself for light upon these mysteries, when they were dispelled by a shock that for the moment stunned him.

Mr Pennycuick called for a certain brand of wine long famous at his board. When it came, and the bottles were being sent round, he stood up, with a trembling goblet in his hand. The eyes round the table dropped—all but Guthrie's, which stared at the old man.

"There's no time like the present," began the host, "if a thing has to be done." He repeated this strange and embarrassing introductory remark, and then spent some time in clearing his throat and blowing his nose, and trying to wipe up the wine he was shaking over. When the fidgets had seized upon the whole company, he rushed his fence. "Ahem! I must ask you, my friends, to fill your glasses in honour of an event —an event—that has just transpired in our midst—that—that I am sure will interest you all—that—in short, my dear daughter Deborah —and the man of her choice—who knows, I hope, what a lucky dog he is—"

"He does!" Claud interjected; and there was eager dumb−show all round the table, everyone—again excepting Guthrie—leaning forward to cast wreathed smiles at the seated couple. "I have given my consent," said Mr Pennycuick—"I have given my consent. My daughter shall be happy in her own way—and I hope he'll see to it that she gets all she bargains for. He is the son of my oldest friend, a man that was better than a brother to me—the whitest, straightest—But there's no words to say what he was. Only, the son of such a man— anybody with Billy Dalzell's blood in him—ought to be—if he isn't—"

"He is!" sang Deb, in her rich, ringing voice. "Oh, please, don't say any more, father!"

"Well, my dear, I know I am no hand at speech−making, but I can wish you luck, both of you, and I do. And I want our friends here—old friends of the family—to do the same. Good wishes mayn't bring good fortune, but for all we know they may do something towards it; and anyway, she may as well have all her chances. Ladies and gentlemen, long life and happiness to Deborah Pennycuick and her husband that is to be!"

A general turmoil broke out, glass−clinkings, cheers, handshakings; kissings, with a sob or two from the overwrought. And Guthrie, with no heart upon his sleeve, bowed and drank with the rest. When the demonstration was over, and the company back in its chairs, Dalzell was left standing. His bride−elect sat beside him, her elbow on the table, her face shaded by her hand.

"On behalf of my dear wife that is to be," said Claud, with a quiet mastery of himself that was in striking contrast to the old man's agitation, "and as a grateful duty of my own, I beg to thank you all, and especially Mr Pennycuick, for this great kindness—for your generous sympathy with us in our present happiness. Mr Pennycuick seems to have a doubt—natural to anyone in the circumstances, but inevitable in a father—the father of such a daughter—as to my being qualified to appreciate the gift he has just bestowed upon me; I can assure

him, and all of you, that I am overwhelmed with the sense of my good fortune, and of my unworthiness of it. I am unworthy—I admit it; but it shall be the business of my life to correct that fault—if it is a fault, and not merely a misfortune that I cannot help. To the best of my power I will prove—by deeds, not words—that I do know her value." Deb's hand under the table here stole towards his that hung at his side, and he stood holding it until he finished speaking. "Fortune has been kind in granting me the means to surround her with material comfort—to give so rare a jewel the setting appropriate to it; for the rest, I must trust to her generosity. I feel quite safe in trusting to it. We have known each other—I believe we have loved each other— from childhood; I hope Mr Pennycuick will take that as some guarantee that his little misgivings are unnecessary." The orator twisted his moustache, and glanced down at the bowed head beside him. "She seems to be a little taken aback by the suddenness of this public announcement, but I can say that it does not come a moment too soon for me. Mr Pennycuick has made me a proud man. I glory in my position as his daughter's affianced husband; I wish to parade it as openly as possible. However, to spare her, I will say no more just now. Ladies and gentlemen"—bowing to right and left—"I thank you again."

He sat down amid thunders of applause; and leaning back in his chair, he looked straight and full at Guthrie Carey. Guthrie Carey, erect, calm as a stone image, returned the look steadily. There was absolutely no expression in his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

Carey junior joined the Christmas party after breakfast, and was handed round. Mary introduced him. He was spick−and−span, with shining cheeks and a damp and glossy top−knot, and his blue eyes stared at the strange crowd stolidly for several minutes before he suddenly crumpled up his face and uttered a howl of terror.

"What is it?" queried Dalzell, with raised brows, pretending that he had never seen such a thing before.

"It's a baby," Frances explained, dancing round it. "Baby! Baby!"— shaking the new rattle that was one of its Christmas gifts—"look at me, baby! It is Mr Carey's baby. Oh, come and speak to him, Mr Carey! He is frightened of so many strangers."

The stalwart father in the background glowered upon the son disgracing him. Red as beetroot, embarrassed and annoyed, he strode forward. The yelling infant cast one glance at him, and yelled louder than before. "I shouldn't have let him come," the sailor growled. He had got up from the wrong side of the bed that morning, and was in the mood to regret everything, even that he had been born. "I don't know what possessed me to let you be bothered with the brat. I'll ring for his nurse."

This was unanimously objected to. The ladies gathered round, with honeyed words and tinkling baubles to pacify the little guest. Deborah snatched him from her sister's arms, and ran with him into the garden, where she tossed him, still writhing and wailing, up and down, and dipped his face into flowers, and played other pranks calculated to enchant the average baby. This baby turned on her for her pains, and having slapped her cheeks, grabbed her beautiful hair and tore it down about her ears. The next instant he felt the weight of the hand from which his own had derived its strength.

"You brute!" cried Deb, shielding the offending little arm from a second blow. "A great big man like you, to strike a tender mite like this!"

"'Tender' is hardly the word," the irate parent sneered. "And mite as he is, he is not to do things of that sort." Guthrie glared at her sacred locks, dishevelled. "I'm awfully sorry. He shan't do it again. I'll take him away tomorrow."

"You will do nothing of the sort," flashed Deb. "You are not fit to have the care of him. He shall stay here, where he will be treated as a baby ought to be—not smacked and knocked about for nothing at all."

"I admire his pluck," quoth Dalzell, sauntering up.

"So do I," said Deb; but she handed her sobbing burden to Mary. "Here, take him, Moll, while I put my hair up. POOR little fellow!"

She need not have been so severe. She might have known that it was because the cheeks and hair were hers that the baby had been punished for his assault on them. She could have seen that she was wringing the culprit's heart. Perhaps she did, and had no room in her own to care. She stood on the sunny garden path and lifted her hands to her head—a lovely pose.

"Here, let me," said Claud Dalzell.

She let him—which was cruellest of all. Guthrie turned his murderous eyes from the group and sauntered away, out of the garden, out of their sight, unrecalled, apparently unnoticed. Mary carried the crying child into the house.

Then for an hour the silly fellow walked alone in the most solitary places that he could find, revelling in the thought that it was Christmas Day, and he singled out by Fate to have no share in its happy circumstances: no home, no friends, no love, like other men—nothing to make life worth living, save only the baby son that he had ill−used. Apart from the sting of Deb's comment on it, he repented him of that blow. A great big man like him, to strike a tender mite like this—a motherless babe, his precious Lily's bequest to him—aye, indeed! It was the act of a brute, whatever the provocation. The mite was a waif too, alone in the world when his father was at sea, pathetically helpless, with no defence against blows and unkindness. The reflection brought dimness to the man's hard blue eyes, and turned his steps houseward.

He arrived to find a large four−horsed brake at the door. The body was filling with other persons—the sailor knew not, cared not whom. He looked up at the radiant figure in front. She looked down on him with

heart−melting kindness, as if nothing had happened.

"Why, Mr Carey, aren't you coming to church?" she called to him. "Not—not today, I think," he answered, without premeditation.

"Christmas Day," she hinted invitingly. "You don't always get the chance, you know."

"I know. But—thanks—I'd rather not," he bluntly persisted, hating himself for the churlish response, and all the time wanting to go— certain to have gone if he had given himself time to think. Soldiers and sailors, with their habit of unquestioning obedience to authority, are almost always "good" churchmen, and, as she had pointed out, this offer of Christian privileges did not come to him every year. He had not anticipated it on this occasion, knowing Redford to be situated at least ten miles from a church.

"Oh, well," said Deborah, scenting spite, "I daresay it IS more comfortable in the cool house."

And then she left him, in the position of a self−indulgent idler, preferring comfort to duty, a foil to his more conscientious rival. When the dust of the departure had cleared away, he sat on, not in the cool house, but on the hot verandah, nursing his griefs in solitude. He seemed the only person left behind, or else he seemed forgotten, as a guest of no account. "What a Christmas Day!" was again his thought, while he dragged before his mind's eye old pictures of his English home, his dead mother, Santa Claus stockings, and all sorts of pathetic things. He resolved to quit Redford on the morrow, and spend the last hours of his leave in establishing his son elsewhere.

Then Mary Pennycuick came out to him, with that son in her arms. Her face was redeemed from its plainness by the tender motherliness and the no less tender friendliness of its expression; that of little Harry was cherubic. The heart of the lonely man warmed to both.

"He has come to tell daddy that he is a good boy now," explained Mary proudly. Guthrie ejaculated "Sonny boy!" and held out his arms. The baby, bearing no malice, tumbled into them, and was at once occupied with his father's watch−chain. The three subsided upon two cane chairs, looking, as Mary keenly comprehended, like a self−contained family.

"You have stayed at home because of him!" the man complained fretfully.

But the girl hastened to perjure herself with the assertion that she had done nothing of the kind. She then persuaded him to the half−belief that his child was not only no nuisance to the house, but its positive delight; and she earnestly talked him out of his cruel resolve to return it to bad air and all sorts of domestic risks. "How can he be any burden on us?" she pleaded. "We need never see him unless we like— only, of course, we shall like. It is entirely an arrangement between you and Mrs Kelsey. Unless," she bethought herself—"unless you'd like to consider an idea of Alice Urquhart's—"

"Oh, no!" he broke in. "I'd rather Mrs Kelsey—a proper business agreement—if I could feel absolutely certain—"

"Well, you can," said Mary. "The beginning and end of all the trouble to us is our answering for Mrs Kelsey. She was once our nurse, and we know her ways; for the rest, she is as independent of us as that lady in Sandridge."

"In that case—of course, I've very little time, and really I don't know where to turn—perhaps until after this voyage—"

"Yes. Then, if you are dissatisfied, you can make a change." She assumed the matter settled, and began to go into details. "Deb saw Mrs Kelsey while you were away; she's willing enough. She says ten shillings a week would cover everything. The drainage is all right. Kelsey will see that he has one cow's milk. They'll feed him well, but they won't give him rich things; she's the most careful woman. He'll be out in the air, getting strong, all the time. He'll want hardly any clothes in the country. Deb says he'd be better without shoes and socks."

"I hope he'll be kept out of Miss Deborah's way, after that exhibition —" "Nonsense! She was too rough and ready with him. And she didn't mind a bit—of course not. She says she likes boys to be boys. He is a thorough boy," Mary proudly declared, bending to kiss a chubby knee.

Harry acknowledged the caress with a thumping smack of her bowed head.

"Gently—gently!" warned the father amiably.

"Now, what do you say to our walking over to interview Mrs Kelsey?" Mary pushed her advantage home. "I daresay she will be busy, but she'd give us a few minutes. It would be a satisfaction to her to speak to you herself, and here is a good opportunity. They won't be home much before two."

Guthrie fetched his straw hat. Mary retied the baby's flapping head−gear, and they set forth.

"Let me have him," she begged, mother−like.

"No. He is too heavy for you."

The father carried the child, who loved the feel of the strong arms, in which he jumped up and down, continuing to make play with his sturdy little fists. Instead of striking back, Guthrie answered the baby assaults with wild−beast roars and gestures that sent the little man into fits of delight. Mary laughed in chorus, keeping touch with the happy creature over the towering shoulder reared between them. It was more than ever like a little self−contained family, taking its Sunday stroll.

Mrs Kelsey had her Christmas dinner in hand, but came to them in her big white apron and sleeves rolled to her dimpled elbows, smiling, business−like, charming in her plain, reposeful, straightforward attitude towards the visitors and their mission. No sooner had he beheld her orderly and cheerful house, looked into her kind eyes, and heard her sincere speech, than the young father was satisfied that he had found a good place for his little son. The child seemed to know it too, for when the strange woman drew him to her broad lap—calmly, as if used to doing it—he surrendered himself without a protest. When presently she gave him a drink of milk and a biscuit to munch, he regaled himself peaceably, with the air of feeling quite at home. When he had finished his lunch he played with a collie puppy.

"I'll do my best for him, sir, and I'll not let these young ladies spoil him if I can help it," said Mrs Kelsey, with a smile at Mary Pennycuick.

Terms had been arranged, and everything settled.

"I hope you will be able to keep him from being any bother to them," said Guthrie earnestly.

"Bother!" crowed Mary, whose intention was to visit the child daily. "We'll see to that, Mr Carey—never fear."

Mrs Kelsey suggested beginning her duties, with the aid of the little nurse, at once; but Mary would not hear of parting the boy from his father while they could be together. So he was carried back to Redford, to be the plaything of the housekeeper's room for the rest of the day.

"MY baby," Mary began to call him. She had to preside at the great dinner, but was not visible to her family for hours before and after.

It was a better Christmas to Guthrie Carey in the end than in the beginning. Deb came back from church chastened in spirit, to make up to him for her unkindness, on the score of which her warm heart had reproached her. She made him play billiards with her after tea, while Claud was resting after his labours; she chaffed him deliciously on his errors in the game. She forgot to ask after his baby; but she asked whether it would not be possible to get his leave extended. When he said "No"—he had had more than his share already—she commended him for his sense of duty, and in her seriousness was more enchanting than in her fun.

"But I do wish we could have kept you longer," she flattered him, in her sweet way. "However, we shall have a hostage for your return."

Several new people came to dinner, including Mr Goldsworthy and Ruby— the latter sent at once, by Deb's command, to keep little Carey company. Spacious Redford was taxed to the utmost to accommodate its guests, and never was better Christmas cheer provided in the old hall of English Redford than its son in exile dispensed under his Australian roof. When every leaf was put into the dining−table, it was so long that Mary at one end was beyond speaking distance of her father at the other, and those at the sides could scarce use their elbows as they ate. The banquet was prodigious, with speeches to wind up with (Mr Goldsworthy, in his oration, disgusted Deb by referring to the host as "princely", and to the ladies of the house as his "bevy of beautiful daughters"); and if the truth must be told, the crowning ceremony of the loving cup was a bit superfluous. It found the host already fuddled beyond a doubt, and several of the guests under suspicion of being so. But in the opinion of all, Redford had celebrated Christmas in an unsurpassably proper manner.

Two mornings later, a waggonette was packed with luggage and four passengers—Mary Pennycuick, Guthrie Carey, the baby and the baby's little nurse. They proceeded in a body to the overseer's house, where the load was halved. Mary, the baby, and one box were left with Mrs Kelsey (reinforced by the collie puppy and a plate of sugared strawberries); the sailor and the nursemaid, after a few poignant moments, went on to a distant railway station.

"Have an easy mind," said Mary, outside the parlour door. "He will be well off with her, and we shall all be looking after him."

"How can I thank you?" said the parting guest, barely able to articulate. He wrung her hand, and looked at her kind, red face with feelings unspeakable. "God bless you! God reward you for your goodness to the little chap and me."

He was including all the family in his benediction, and it was the father in him that was so touched and overcome. None the less, she accepted the tribute for her own, and to her poverty−stricken womanhood it was wealth indeed.

She stood in the porch to watch the wheels of his departing chariot flash through the sun and dust. She stared long at the vacant point of disappearance, like one entranced. When she came to herself, she ran into the house and fell upon little Harry.

"My baby," she crooned passionately, "MY baby!"

Carey Junior responded with his ready fist, pushing her from him. He was feeding the puppy with a strawberry, and she put her head in the way.

"Fie! You mustn't do that," said Mrs Kelsey, mindful of her responsibilities. "That's rude."

"Oh, let him," pleaded the girl, infatuated with that look of his father in his face; and she dropped on her knees before him and kissed a dangling foot, with which he kicked her mouth. "Let him do what he likes, so long as he's happy."

"Not at all," her old nurse reproved her. "I promised Mr Carey that he should not be spoiled."

He was not spoiled. The admirable foster−mother, brooking no interference with her system, improved him into a well−behaved child, as well as the healthiest and most beautiful in all that countryside. It was a standing grievance at Redford that she would not allow him to be always on show there, subject to Mary's indulgence, and Deb's caprices, and the temptations of the housekeeper's store−room. Only Mr Kelsey, who was his idol, was permitted to withdraw him from Mrs Kelsey's eye. The man used to take the child, with a toy whip in his little hand, on the saddle before him, and let him think he was guiding the steady horse and doing all the business of the station as well. The overseer confessed, in bad weather, when he had to ride alone, that he was lost without his little mate. "Hardly weaned," he used to brag, "and knows every beast on the place as well as I do myself." This was gross exaggeration, yet was the infant Harry a conspicuously forward child, with the "makings of a man" in him visible to all. His hearty whoas and gee−ups carried as far as the overseer's gruff voice; and the picture of the jolly boy, with his rosy, joyous face, and his fair curls blowing in the wind, was one to kindle the admiration of all who saw it. The phrase continually on the lips of his adopted family and connections was: 'Won't his father be surprised when he sees him!' They enjoyed in anticipation the grateful praises that would be heaped upon them then.

But Guthrie Carey never saw his son again.

The baby went a−visiting with his foster−parents to the local township, and it was supposed caught the infection of typhoid there from some unknown source. Having caught it, the robust little body, unused to any ailment, was wrecked at once, where a frail child might easily have weathered the storm. No little prince of blood royal could have been better nursed and more strenuously fought for; but three days after he had visibly sickened he was dead. And then the wail went up, "Oh! what will his father say?"

When Guthrie came, prepared by letters from fellow−mourners as bereaved as himself, it was but from one day to the next—only to "hear the particulars" and to see the little grave. Deborah was away from home, but in any case Mary would have been the one to perform the sad duties of the occasion; they were hers by right. She took him to the family cemetery on the only evening of his stay, and, herself speechless and weeping, showed him the whole place renovated and made beautiful for the sake of the latest comer. No weeds, no dead rose−bushes, no vampire ivy now; but an orderly garden, new planted and watered, and in the midst a small mound heaped with fresh−cut flowers. She had visited the child daily while he lived at Mrs Kelsey's; now she almost daily visited his grave.

They dropped on their knees beside it, close as bride and bridegroom on altar steps, as father and mother at the firstborn's cradle. The dusk was melting into moonlight; they could not see each other's faces. When his big frame heaved with heavy sobs, she laid a timid hand—her beautiful hand—on his shoulder; and when he felt that sympathetic woman's touch, he turned suddenly and kissed her. Afterwards he did not remember that he had done it.

She seemed to cling to him when, next morning, the time came for him to go.

"You will come again?" she implored him, in a trembling whisper. "You will come here when you return next time?"

"Oh, surely," he replied, whispering too, and to the full as deeply moved. But when he got away it was to other lands that he turned his eyes, in the search for new interests to occupy his lonely life. With Lily and the baby dead, and Deborah Pennycuick given to another man, Australia had no more hold on him. His first letter to Redford notified that he had changed into another line, and that the name of his new ship was the DOVEDALE. She traded to the West Indies.

He forgot to write again when, not very long afterwards, he went back to his old line, at the invitation of the Company, as captain of the ship on which he had served as mate.

CHAPTER IX.

"'Dovedale'—DOVEDALE—hullo!" Mr Pennycuick broke the silence of his newspaper reading. "Why, isn't that—Well, upon my soul! it does seem as if some folks were born unlucky. Here's that poor young fellow— first he loses a charming wife, before he's been married any time, and then the finest child going, and now here he's gone himself, before his prime, with no end of a career before him—"

"Who?" cried Deb from the tea−table, where she was helping herself to a hot cake.

"Young Carey—our Carey; oh, it's him all right, worse luck! His ship's been wrecked, and only two A.B.s saved to tell the tale. Look here."

He passed the newspaper, pressed under his broad thumb.

Deb stood to read the indicated item, while her father watched her face. Neither of them noticed Mary's peculiar appearance, nor marked her departure from the room.

"We must inquire about this," said Deb earnestly. "We must get the names of those on board. He may have been on leave." She was a prompt person, and as she spoke looked at the clock—a little after four— and laid the paper down. "I'll drive you to the station, daddy, and we'll telegraph to the shipping people and his doctor friend. We'll get authentic information somehow, if we have to cable home for it."

They were off in a quarter of an hour, having sent a message to Mary by Miss Keene to explain their errand. They dined in the township while waiting for replies, and came home late at night, heavy−hearted, with the melancholy news confirmed. Since it happened to be the transition moment, when Mr Carey had ceased to be a mate, and was only a prospective commander, the authorities in Melbourne, consulting latest advices, had no doubt of his having been on the DOVEDALE to the last. Those of them who presently found themselves mistaken did not take the trouble to say so. They left it to time and the newspapers.

But meanwhile Mary Pennycuick sadly complicated the case. When Deb and her father returned from their expedition, it was to hear from Frances an excited story of how the elder sister had hidden behind locked doors, and not only refused dinner but denied speech to all comers.

"We know she's there, because she said 'Go away' to Miss Keene when she knocked first; but since then she hasn't said a word—not for hours and hours. I've been listening at her door since Miss Madden let me out of school. I shouldn't be surprised," said Frances, who had a fine imagination, "if she's committed suicide. Poor Mr Carey was her lover, you know."

"Pooh!" said Deb.

SHE knew whose lover poor Mr Carey had been. But she ran to Mary's room in some concern. She tried the handle of the door, and then rapped sharply.

"Molly, open this door!" she commanded.

And there was a rustle inside, a shuffling step, and the lock clicked. She marched in, to see Mary fling herself back on the bed from which she had risen, with a protesting wail:

"Oh, why can't you all let me alone?"

"Why, what's the matter?" Deb climbed on the bed, and tried to lift the half−buried head to her breast—a signal for the pent−up grief to burst forth. "Molly, sweetheart, what's all this about?"

"Oh, my love! my love!" keened Mary wildly. "Oh, Deb! oh, Deb! He was my all, and he's dead, and I can't bear it—I can't! I can't!"

Deb pursed her lips, and the colour rose in her clear cheek. She saw the situation, so pathetic and so ignominious! SHE could not understand a woman falling in love with, and then breaking her heart for, a man who had never cared for her. But then Deb's face was not heavy and bricky, with prominent cheek−bones, and a forehead four inches high.

"My precious," she crooned, as tenderly as if she understood it all, and as if her immense pity was not mixed with contempt—"don't, don't! It doesn't matter about me, but don't let the others think—It would be too undignified, darling—a casual acquaintance—though a dear, good boy as ever lived—"

"There was nobody like him, Deb, and he was my all—"

"No, no, Mary—"

"You don't know, Debbie—oh, nobody knows!" And wrapping her head in her arms again, Mary abandoned herself to her despair.

Deb got off the bed, lit dressing−table candles, and poured water and eau de Cologne into a wash−basin. She returned with a fragrant sponge, with which she stroked what she could reach of her sister's face.

"Come now," said she briskly, "you must have a little pride, dear. You mustn't give way like this—for a man who did not—and you know he did not—"

Mary broke in with sudden passion, lifting her distorted countenance to the cruel light.

"He did!" she affirmed. "You have no business to sneer and say he didn't—he DID!"

It was not for nothing that the heart−hungry girl had brooded for months over a few acts and words, magnifying them through the spectacles that Nature and her needs had provided. Deb put her pitying arms round her sister's shoulders.

"But, my dear, I know—we all know—"

"How could you know when you were not at home? Nobody knows—nobody but him and me." Feeling Deb's continued scepticism in the silence of her caresses, Mary burst out recklessly: "Would he have KISSED me if he had not?"

Deb's arm was withdrawn. She twisted half round to look in Mary's face. Mary covered it with her pretty hands, weeping bitterly.

"Is that—did he do that?" asked Deb, in a low tone.

"That night—that last night—oh, I ought not to have spoken of it!— when we were at our little grave. It was that precious child that drew us together. You think he had gone away and forgotten, but I know he had not; he would have come back—he promised to. He gave me his dear photograph. I have not shown it to anybody, but here it is—"

And still sobbing, and with tears running down her cheeks, she reached to a drawer by the bedside, and dragged out this further testimony to her claim—it was wrapped in layers of tissue−paper, like her father's valentine—and displayed it with a touching pride. Before handing it to Deb, she gazed at it with grotesquely distorted face, kissed it, pressed it to her bosom, kissed it again, and moaned over it, rocking to and fro; then, when she had pushed it from her, flung herself into her former attitude of complete abandonment to grief.

Very calmly Deb carried the picture to the dressing−table, and held it behind a candle. There he was, big, strong, healthy, manly, with that clear brow, that square chin, that steady, good mouth; and he looked her straight in the eyes. Was it possible that a countenance could so deceive? No more tears from Deb for his untimely fate. Had it been his face in the flesh, it could not possibly have gazed in that undaunted way at hers; her expression would have withered him.

She returned to the morning−room—drawing−room also when no guests were in the house—to report to her father.

"Mary has gone to bed," she said quietly. "She is very much upset by this business. It appears there was something between her and Mr Carey. She expected him to come back for her—"

"What! MARY?" cried Rose, waiting with Frances to say goodnight.

"There!" triumphed Frances, "what did I say?"

"MARY!" their father echoed Rose's surprised tone. "The dickens! You don't say so. Poor little soul! Poor little girlie! Well, I never thought of that. Did you, Deb?"

"Never, father. Not for a moment."

"I suppose it was the child. It must have been the child." Mr Pennycuick was deeply concerned. "I wonder why he never said anything," he addressed Deb, when Rose and Frances had been sent to bed. "Eh, Deb? Seems strange, don't it? We had so much talk together. Quite like a sort of son, he was. Aye, I could have made a son of that fellow. Poor lad!—poor lad! Suppose he thought it wasn't the straight thing to bind a girl of ours till he was in a better position—it'd be just like him. Well—but Mary, of all people!" (This was the puzzle to all.) "It must have been the baby. She certainly did dote on that child, and 'love me, love my dog'—eh? But to think of her keeping it so close all that time! Afraid I'd make a fuss, I suppose. You could have told her, Deb, that I don't stand in my children's way for the sake of my own feelings; and a Carey of Wellwood isn't for us to sniff at either, if he is poor. A Carey has been good enough for a Pennycuick before today. God! I wish I'd known. I might have got him

something better to do, and saved them both from this. Poor old girl! Is she very bad, Debbie? Shall I go and talk to her a bit?"

"I wouldn't tonight, father, if I were you," replied Deb, with a weary air. "She is quieter now, and I have given her something to send her to sleep. I will keep my door open, and go and look at her through the night. I think she will be better tomorrow."

On the morrow Mary was at least more self−controlled. She came amongst her family with the look of one who had passed through an illness, and shrinking from the first words and glances. But they all gathered her to their hearts, and murmured loving sympathy in her ears, and tenderly fussed over her and waited upon her. Her father took her to his sanctum, and showed her his old daguerreotype and valentine, and told her they should be hers at his death. Miss Keene excited as an old maid is over anybody's love affair, wanted to take over the house−keeping as well as the doing of the flowers, in order to leave the mourner free to enjoy the full luxury of her state. The governess, assumed to be above love affairs, was very strict with Frances, holding her to tasks set on purpose to prevent her from teasing her eldest sister. But Frances had informed the servants overnight that Mr Carey was drowned, and that he had been Miss Pennycuick's affianced husband all the time, unbeknown to anybody. And the tale was already spreading far and wide—to the Urquharts at Five Creeks, to Mr Thornycroft at Bundaboo, to Mr Goldsworthy and his parishioners, to the editor of the local paper—so that soon the family friends were arriving, to press Mary's hand and condole with her—to show her how she had risen in the world, as a woman in the eyes of all.

"No, no," she protested, when the affianced husband was too literally taken for granted; "it was not a formal engagement. It was only"— defending herself against the puzzled stare and lifted eyebrow—"only that we understood each other. He was coming back, if he had lived."

The wish was father to the thought. Good, honest girl as she was, she had persuaded herself to this—that he would have come back if he had lived, and that then the omitted formalities called for by that graveside kiss would certainly have been observed. It seems incredible, but rampant sex does stranger things every day of the week. There is, at any rate, nothing extraordinary in the way she clung to the sweet dignity that a similar belief on the part of others brought to her— the poor, plain girl, who had always been "out of it".

The long−hidden photograph was now put into a costly frame, and set up in her room for anybody to see. Frances would often sneak in with a visitor, to show the manner of man who would have married Molly; there were even times when Mary herself was the exhibitor. At other times she might have been found kneeling before it as at a shrine, and weeping her eyes out. And she put off her colours and ornaments, and wore black, and nobody made any objection. The hero of romance was given to her unquestioningly, and with him a respect and consideration such as she had never known before. Lovers talked to her of their love affairs, feeling that she was now one of them. Her father maundered to her for hours at a stretch of the old Mary Carey, at last secure of sympathy and a perfect listener. Deb was reserved and silent, but otherwise as devoted as the rest.

And then came the inevitable discovery that Guthrie Carey was not dead, after all. It was made at Five Creeks, while Frances was on a holiday visit to her friend, Belle Urquhart. At Redford, nobody thought of reading the shipping columns in the newspaper—their interest was supposed to be gone for ever; but Jim Urquhart glanced at them daily, looking for the arrival of a friend from overseas. And one day he saw a ship's name that was familiar to him, and bracketed with it the name of G. Carey as its commander. The coincidence was startling. He pointed it out to a man staying in the house—a stranger to the Redford family and to the district.

"There was a mate named Carey on this ship a while ago. He changed into that unfortunate DOVEDALE that was wrecked, and was lost with her. Odd that the captain of his old vessel should have the same name—same initial too. Our friend was Guthrie—"

"Guthrie Carey? Oh, I know Guthrie Carey. Met him in London last year, just after the DOVEDALE wreck. He told me of his narrow escape—was really going with her on her last voyage, and only prevented at the last moment by the offer of this captaincy from his former owners. It's the same man. Do you know him?"

They all told how much they knew him; and there was great commotion at Five Creeks. Jim was for driving hot−foot to Redford to warn Mr Pennycuick against disseminating the newspaper through the house too rashly. Alice and her mother each volunteered to go with him, so as to "break it" with feminine skilfulness to Mary, whose reason might be destroyed by too sudden a gorge of joy, like the stomach of a starved man by clumsy feeding. But while they anxiously discussed what ought to be done, Frances was doing. The enterprising young

lady slipped away, and with Belle's help caught and saddled her pony, and was off to Redford as if wolves were at her heels. No war correspondent on active service ever did a smarter trick to get ahead of other papers.

She burst into the family circle violently.

"Mary—Mary! Deb! Rose! father! Mr Carey is alive! He wasn't drowned! He wasn't on the DOVEDALE—he was just going; but they wanted him back, and they made him a captain, and he's here now. His ship came in last night, and there it is in the paper, and his name; and Mr Mills at Five Creeks saw him himself after the Dovedale was wrecked, and he knows him well, and he's in Melbourne now, and I expect he'll be here directly—perhaps he's coming up now, this very minute—"

She was checked by angry exclamations from all persons addressed, except Mary. She, at the moment bending over a table, cutting out needle−work, straightened herself, and stood stockstill and staring, while first her bricky face went dark purple all over, and then seemed drained in three seconds of every drop of blood. She heard the words: 'Mr Carey is alive,' and instantly believed them; at the same moment her dream−palace vanished, and she saw the bare ground of her love affair exactly as it was—as Guthrie himself would see it—and just how she had deceived herself and others. Her healthy heart and nervous system could not support her under the impact of such a shock. She reeled as she stood, spun half round, and fell backwards into Deborah's arms.

"You little FOOL!" Deb rated the dismayed child, "to blurt it out like that. Never mind, father, it's all right. She has fainted, but she'll soon come round. Go and get a smelling−bottle, somebody. Tell Keziah to bring a little brandy—don't speak to anybody else. Where's today's ARGUS?"

While Rose was flying for restoratives, and Frances speeding through the house with her great news, Deb and her father exchanged significant glances over Mary's prostrate form.

"It is more than a year," said Deb, "and he has not even written to her."

"I'll write to him," said Mr Pennycuick, grinding his teeth—"I'll write to him!" It was the tone in which he might have said, "I'll wring his neck for him!"

But when Mary came round and perceived his mood and intentions, she implored him not to write—went on her knees, and almost shrieked in her frantic fear of his doing so.

"Oh, father, don't—DON'T! If he does not remember—if he does not want to come—you would not drag him by force? And he never bound himself—he never really asked me; very likely he did not mean anything, after all."

"Not mean anything!" shouted the indignant father. "He can kiss a girl —a daughter of mine—and not mean anything! I'll make him tell me whether he dared not to mean anything—"

"No, father," commanded Deb. "You must not write to him. It is not for a Pennycuick to fling herself at any man's head. Let him alone; we don't want him. Treat him—as I hope Molly is going to do—with the contempt that he deserves."

Mr Pennycuick stormed and muttered, but obeyed; and for two days Captain Carey was left to the anathemas of Redford and the countryside as a heartless jilt, to Mary's extreme anguish. She tried to water down the concoction that she stood answerable for, to take blame off him and put it on herself; but she dared not go far enough to convince anybody that she was not sacrificing herself to shield him.

It was a horrible position for a delicate−minded and even high−minded girl, and the misery of it was aggravated by the constant effort to efface its signs and evidences. She was left with no outlook in life but to get through twenty, thirty, forty years somehow, and come to a little peace at last, when everything would be forgotten; and her one forlorn hope was that Guthrie would not discover her crime— would keep up the neglect with which he had treated his old friends, and not come near them.

He might have done this—for the fact was that he now had a dawning "affair" in another quarter—had not Frances intervened. To her, inaction at such a crisis was intolerable, and since nobody else would do it, she wrote to Guthrie Carey herself. She wrote, she said, to welcome him back to life and to Australia, and to congratulate him on being a captain; incidentally she mentioned other matters, and asked innocent−seeming questions which she was well aware could only be answered in person.

Frances, since his first acquaintance with her, had shot up into a slim, tall girl, exquisite in colouring and the daintiness of her figure and face. Although unlike Deb in every way, people were beginning to compare them as rival beauties—Frances' private opinion being that there was no comparison. She had nearly done with governesses, short frocks and pigtails, and was ardently anticipating the power and glory coming to her when she should be a full−grown woman.

Two days after the clandestine postage of her letter to Captain Carey, a new housemaid brought Mary his visiting−card on a silver tray. Mary knew, before looking at it—having heard nothing of the letter, and no sound of his arrival in his hired buggy—what name it bore. Her forlorn hope had been too forlorn to stand for anything but despair. She had expected the catastrophe from the first.

CHAPTER X.

How she got into the room—the isolated big drawing−room, which somebody else, who was aware of his arrival, had directed that he was to be shown into—Mary knew not; but she was there. He stood perfectly still, massive and inflexible, to receive her. Without approaching him —or he her—to shake hands, without looking at his face or anywhere near it, she perceived the adamantine set of lips, the cold gaze, more withering than fire, which informed her that he knew all; and she sank crouching into a chair, and hid her face. But her back was against the wall now. The coward stage was past. In the most desperately false position that a girl could occupy, she made no further attempt to run away from the truth, perhaps because she saw that it was useless. When he began, very politely, but with no beating about the bush, to say: "I daresay you are surprised to see me, Miss Pennycuick, but I was told— and since I came up here I have been told again by several different persons—something that I want you to help me to understand," she jerked herself upright, and stopped him with a swift gesture and the cry of: "I know! I know what you have been told; and I have nothing to say. I cannot contradict it."

She was a piteous object, in her shaking anguish; but he looked at her, of course, without a scrap of pity.

"Do you think you really know?" he questioned her, with cold gravity. "Perhaps I have been given an exaggerated version. I was in hopes that it was altogether an invention of Miss Francie's—I know of old that she is prone to make reckless statements—"

"Ah−h—Francie!"

"She was kind enough to write me a long letter, to congratulate me on my promotion. She told me all the family news. And she said—she asked me—but really I haven't the cheek to repeat her words—"

His cold face had become hot, and his manner agitated.

"Go on," said she, calming under the perception that the worst had come utterly to the worst.

"Well, if you will forgive me—she asked me, in effect, when I was coming to marry you, and why I had kept the engagement a secret so long." He paused, one dark red blush, to note the effect of so brutal a stroke.

She said, meeting his eyes for the first time:

"And you believed it at once—of ME?"

"No, Miss Pennycuick. I laughed. I said to myself: 'Here is another of Miss Francie's mare's nests.' But when I read on—she told me so many things—they were incredible, but still I felt I had to sift the matter; and since I came up today, other people—I've been to Five Creeks and had a talk with Jim Urquhart—now I don't know what to think; at least, there is but one thing that I can think."

The chair she had taken had a high back, and against this she laid her head, as if too weary to support it. Lack of sleep and appetite had paled her florid colour to a sickly hue, and she looked wan and languid as a dying woman. But still he did not pity her, as he must have done had her face been half as beautiful as Deb's or Francie's.

"Miss Pennycuick," he continued, as she kept silence, "I want to get the hang of this thing. Will you tell me straight—yes or no—have you been giving it out that I left Redford two years ago engaged to you?"

Her first impulse was to cry out: "Oh, no, no! Not quite so bad as that!" But on second thoughts she said:

"Yes—practically."

Sudden rage seemed to seize him. He sat up, he crossed his knees, he uncrossed them, he twisted this way and that, he muttered "Good God!" as if the pious ejaculation had referred to the Other Person, and his stare at her was cruel.

"But—but—I have been racking my brains to remember anything— surely I never gave you—I am perfectly convinced, I have the best reason for being absolutely certain, that I could not have given you— "

"Never!" she broke in. "Of course not. It was all my own invention."

"You admit it? Thank you. You formally relieve me of the imputation I have so long lain under without knowing it, of having run away from my duty?"

She said lifelessly: "We thought you were dead."

"Hah! I see. You thought it didn't matter what you said of a dead man? But dead men's characters should be all the more sacred because they cannot defend them. I should be sorry indeed to leave behind me such a reputation as I seem to have hereabouts—though, indeed, a man is very helpless in these cases. He is at a hopeless disadvantage when a woman is his traducer. I can see that Jim Urquhart will never be a friend of mine again, whatever happens."

"He shall know the truth. Everybody shall know the truth," said Mary.

"How can everybody know the truth? Only by my own affidavit, and that would not be believed. Besides, it is not for me to deny—at the cost of branding a lady a liar."

It was the straight word, regardless of manners, with this sea−bred man.

"You need not. I know how to do it so that people will believe. I am going to write a letter to the newspaper—a plain statement, that will fully exonerate you."

He nearly jumped out of his chair with the fright she gave him.

"You will do nothing so ridiculous!" he exclaimed angrily.

"It is the only way," said she—"the only way to make sure."

"If you do," he menaced her, "I shall simply write another for the next issue to flatly contradict you."

"Then you would be a liar."

"That doesn't matter in the least. I must be a man first. I am not going to let you ruin yourself."

"Ah, that is done already! Nothing can make it worse—for me."

He looked at her, taking in the words, in some sort understanding them. She lifted her eyes to look at him, and what he saw behind the look went to his kindly heart. He "felt" for her for the first time.

"May I go now?" she whispered.

His answer was to move to a seat beside her.

"I wish you would tell me," he said, in more humane tones, "how you came to do it. I would like to understand, and I can't, for the life of me. You must have had some reason. DID I do anything, unknowing—"

She shook her head hopelessly.

"No. You were only kind and good, as you would have been to anyone."

"Kind and good? Rubbish! It was you—all of you—who were kind and good. Oh, I don't forget what you did for me, and never shall. I feel" —it was the very feeling that had so oppressed him in the case of the lady at Sandridge—"under a load of obligation to you that I can never hope to discharge. But still—but still—though I trust I showed some of the gratitude I felt—I cannot remember how I came to give you the idea—I must have done something, I suppose; one is a blundering fool without knowing it—"

"No," she protested—"no, no! It was my own idea entirely."

"But I can't reconcile that with your character, Miss Pennycuick."

"Nor can I," she laughed bitterly.

"There's a mystery somewhere. Did anybody tell you anything? Did Miss Frances put constructions on innocent appearances? Did—"

"No," Mary resolutely stopped him. "It is good of you to try to make excuses, but there is no excuse for me—none. Francie only said what she knew. I let them believe you were my lover; I am twenty−seven —I never had one—and—and—oh, I thought that, at least, you might be mine when you were dead! I did not mean to be a liar, as you called me—yes, that is the right word—"

"Forgive me for using it," he muttered. "You do not realise at first that you are lying, when you only act lies and don't speak them. And I DID think that perhaps, that possibly—of course, I was ridiculously wrong—it was atrocious, unforgivable—I don't ask you to forgive me —I don't want you to—but those dear days when our little boy—oh, you know!—and when you kissed me that night beside his grave—"

"WHAT!" A lightning change came over the young man, as if the word had been an electric current suddenly shot into him. "KISSED YOU?"

"It was nothing; you did not know you did it—"

"But here—hold on—this is serious. DID I kiss YOU? You are sure you are not dreaming?"

"I would not be very likely to dream that," she said, with a strange smile. "But of course it was only—at such a time—as you would have kissed your sister—anybody. Your very forgetting it shows that."

But a dim memory was awakening in him, frightfully perturbing to his mind.

"I KISSED you!" he repeated, and slowly realised that he had been that consummate ass. The poor baby's dead hand had retained its old power to entrap a simpleton unawares.

Well, simpleton or not, Guthrie Carey was Guthrie Carey— sailor−bred, accustomed to meet vital emergencies with boldness and promptness; accustomed also to take his own views of what was a man's part at such times. While she implored him to say no more about that kiss, crying shame upon herself for mentioning it, he sat in silence, thinking hard. As soon as she had done, he spoke:

"Miss Pennycuick, I now understand everything. You are completely justified. It is I who have been to blame." And he then, in precise language, such as no real lover could have used, but still as prettily as was possible under the circumstances, requested the honour of her hand in marriage.

To his astonishment, she laughed. It was a wild−sounding cackle, and quickly turned into a wail.

"Ah−h! Ah−h−h!" She faced him again, head up and hands down. "That, Mr Carey, is the one way out of it that is utterly, absolutely, eternally impossible."

"Why?" he demanded, with his man's dull incomprehension, and went on to demonstrate that there was no other. "I do not wish," he lied chivalrously, "to take any other. I—I—believe me, I am not ungrateful for your—for your thinking a great deal more of me than I deserve. I will try to show myself worthy—"

A magnanimous arm attempted to encircle her. She backed from it, and rose hurriedly from her chair, with what he would have imagined a gesture of repulsion if he had not known her, from her own showing, so over−eager for his embraces. He rose too.

"Do not!" she cried breathlessly, passionately. "As if I could dream—What can you think of me, to imagine that I would for a moment —"

She broke from him and ran towards the door, sobbing, with her handkerchief to her eyes. In three strides he was there before her, cutting off her retreat; so she swung back into the room, cast herself on the floor beside a sofa, and throwing up her arms, plunged her head down between them into the depths of a large cushion, which smothered cries that would otherwise have been shrieks. She abandoned all effort to control herself, except the effort to hide, which was futile.

Guthrie Carey's first feeling was of alarm, lest anyone should hear and come in to see what was the matter; he felt like wanting to guard the door. But in a minute or two his soft heart was so worked upon by the spectacle before him that he could think of nothing else. However little he might want to marry Mary Pennycuick, he was not going to be answerable for this sort of thing; so he marched resolutely to the sofa, and stooped to lift the convulsed creature bodily into his arms.

He might as well have tried to grasp a sleeping porcupine.

"How dare you?" she cried shrilly, whirling to her feet, dilating like a hooded snake before his astonished eyes. "How dare you touch me?" He was too cowed to answer, and she stood a moment, all fire and fury, glaring at him, her tear−ravaged face distorted, her hands clenched; then she whirled out of the room, and this time he made no effort to stop her.

He dropped back on the sofa, and said to himself helplessly:

"Well, I'm blowed!"

There was stillness for some time. This part of the house seemed quite empty, save for one buzzing fly, which he or Mary had let in. The little housekeeper was very particular about flies in summer, every window and chimney−opening being wire−netted, every door labelled with a printed request to the user to shut it; and his dazed mind occupied itself with the idea of how this insect would have distressed her if she had not had so much else to think of. He had an impulse to hunt it, for her sake, through the green−shadowed space in which it careered in long tacks with such energy and noise; but, standing up, he was seized with a stronger impulse to leave the house forthwith, and everything in it. He wanted liberty to consider his position and further proceedings before he faced the family.

As he approached the door, it was opened from without. Deb stood on the threshold, pale, proud, with tight lips and sombre eyes. She bowed to him as only she could bow to a person she was offended with.

"Would you kindly see my father in his office, Mr Carey?" she inquired, with stony formality. "He wishes to speak to you."

"Certainly, Miss Deborah," he replied, not daring to preface the words with even a "How−do−you−do". "I want to see him—I want to see him particularly."

Deb swept round to lead the way downstairs.

An embarrassing march it was, tandem fashion, through the long passages of the rambling house. While trying to arrange his thoughts for the coming interview, Captain Carey studied her imperious back and shoulders, the haughty poise of her head; and though he was not the one that had behaved badly, he had never felt so small. At the door of the morning−room she dismissed him with a jerk of the hand. "You know your way," said she, and vanished.

"She is more beautiful than ever," was his poignant thought, as he walked away from her, and from all the glorious life that she suggested —to such a dull and common doom.

Mr Pennycuick, at first, was a terrible figure, struggling between his father−fury and his old−gentleman instincts of courtesy to a guest.

"Sir," said he, "I am sorry that I have to speak to you under my own roof; in another place I could better have expressed what I have to say —"

But before he could get to the gist of the matter, Mary intervened.

"Miss Keene has some refreshment for Mr Carey in the dining−room," she said. "And, father, I want, if you please, to have a word with you first." She had recovered self−possession, and wore a rigid, determined air, contrasting with the sailor's bewilderment, which was so great that he found himself driven from the office before he had made up his mind whether he ought to go or stay.

He sat down to his unnecessary meal, and tried to eat, while an embarrassed maiden lady talked platitudes to him. Didn't he find it very dusty in town? Miss Keene, knitting feverishly, was anxious to be informed. And didn't he think the country looked well for the time of year?

He was relieved from this tedium by another summons to the office. Fortified with a glass of good wine, he returned to the encounter, inwardly calling upon his gods to direct him how to meet it. He found poor old Father Pennycuick aged ten years in the hour since he had seen him last. But he still stood in massive dignity, a true son of his old race.

"Well, Mr Carey," said he, "I have had a great many troubles of late, sir, but never one like this. I thought that losing money—the fruits of a lifetime of hard work—was a thing to fret over; and then, again, I've thought that money's no consequence so long as you've got your children alive and well—that THAT was everything. I know better now. I know there's things may happen to a man worse than death—worse than losing everything belonging to him, no matter what it is. When that child was a little thing, she had an illness, and the doctors gave her up. Two nights her mother and I sat up watching her, expecting every breath to be the last, and broken−hearted was no word for what we felt. I cried like a calf, and I prayed—I never prayed like it before or since—and fools we are to ask the Almighty for we don't know what! Now I wish He had taken her. And I've told her so."

"Then you have been very cruel, Mr Pennycuick," Guthrie Carey replied sharply—"and as unjust as cruel. She has done nothing—"

"I know what she's done," the stern parent interposed. "I wouldn't have believed it if anybody else had told me; but I have her own word for it. And if she has been a liar once, I still know when to believe her."

"If you will be so good as to tell me what she has said, then I will make MY statement."

The old man put up his hand.

"Don't perjure yourself," said he, grimly smiling. "It is very kind of you to try to let us down easily, but you can spare your breath. Excuses only make it worse. There's nothing to be said for her, and you'll really oblige me by not going into details. I only sent for you to make such amends as I can—to apologise most humbly—to express my sorrow—my shame—my unspeakable humiliation—that a child of mine—a Pennycuick—a girl I thought was nothing if not maidenly and self−respecting, and the very soul of honour and straightness and proper pride—"

"You speak as if she was not all that now—"

"NOW!—and done a low, contemptible thing like that! Oh, I don't understand it—I can't; it's too monstrous—except that I have her word for it. She says she did it, and so there it is. And, sir, I beg your pardon on behalf of the house that she has disgraced—the house that reared her and thought her so different—"

He gulped, coughed, and gave Guthrie a chance to put in a word.

"Mr Pennycuick, the simple fact is that I made love to your daughter— "

"Made her an offer of marriage?" snarled the other, wheeling round.

"I kissed her—"

Mr Pennycuick snapped his thumb and finger derisively.

"THAT kind of kiss!—as good as asked for."

"It was not as good as asked for. Your daughter is not that kind of woman."

"I thought not, but she says she is."

"Pay no heed to what she says. Her morbid conscientiousness runs away with her. I tell you the plain truth, as man to man, without any hysterics—I kissed her of my own free will—your daughter, sir. And I am here now to stand by my act. If she will forgive my—my tardiness—as you know, I was in no position then to aspire to marriage with a lady of this family; I am not now, but I am better off than I was—will you give your consent to our engagement?"

"No!" roared Mr Pennycuick, looking as if threatened with an apoplectic fit. "I'll see her engaged to the devil first!"

Like Mary, he seemed to take the generous offer as a personal insult. Guthrie Carey, conscious of doing the duty of a gentleman at enormous cost, could not understand why.

CHAPTER XI.

Captain Carey, while leaving it to be understood that he held himself engaged to Mary Pennycuick until further orders, realised the welcome fact that in the meantime he was honourably free; and he excused himself from staying to dinner. But scarcely had he driven off in his hired buggy than that of Mr Goldsworthy clattered into the stableyard. It was the good man's habit, when on his parochial visitations, to 'make' Redford at meal times, or at bed−time, whenever distances allowed; he called it, most appropriately, his second home, and walked into the house as if it really belonged to him two or three times a week.

The first person that he encountered on this occasion was Frances, who had waylaid Guthrie Carey on his departure, and whom he had left standing under the back porch, aglow with excitement. She was a picture in her pale blue frock—put on for his eyes—and with her mane of burnished gold falling about her sparkling blush−rose face; but the parson, accustomed to regard her as a child, was unaffected by the sight.

"Surely," he exclaimed, with agitation, "that was young Mr Carey that I passed at the gate just now? He had his hat pulled over his eyes, and did not stop to speak to me; but the figure—" "Was his," said Frances, bursting to be the first to say it. "Very much in the flesh still, isn't he? And oh, to think he's gone like this, just as we'd got him back—SO big and handsome, and such a DEAR brother−in−law as he would have made!"

She stamped her foot. "What do you think, Mr Goldsworthy?—he came for her today, just as he promised, and then she turned round and wouldn't have him! We thought he'd jilted her, and instead of that she's jilted him. Oh, I could smack her! To have such a chance—SHE!—and after all the fuss she made about him—and throw it away! But I think he'll come back before his ship sails—he said he would—and perhaps she'll be less of an idiot by then; she'd better, unless she wants to die an old maid. Oh, if it was ME—!"

Mr Goldsworthy penetrated to the morning−room, where something of the same tale was repeated to him. Yes, Guthrie Carey was alive and well, and had been up to see them. Yes, he had asked for Mary—now that he was a captain—but she had finally decided against marrying a sailor. Wisely, perhaps; at any rate, it was her business; the family did not wish to discuss the matter.

When Mr Goldsworthy found that Mary did not come to dinner, he drew some conclusions for himself. He told himself there was something "fishy" in the affair—something behind, that was purposely kept from him. But he was hungry, and the fragrant soup steamed under his nose and glittered in his spoon—it was so admirably clear. Just now the doings of the Redford cook were of more concern to him than Mary's doings.

But although he enjoyed the meal to which he had looked forward all day, he enjoyed it much less than usual. A more sensitive person in his place must have found it wretched. Deb was a chilling hostess. Her frigid dignity and forced politeness caused discomfort even to him, thereby lowering her status in his eyes, lessening the ardour of his admiration for her. Mr Pennycuick, such a stickler for hospitality, scarcely spoke a word to the guest. Rose was a nobody, but still might have done something in the way of entertainment; and she quite ignored him, looking down as if to hide eyes that had been crying. Frances was eager to engage in conversation, but was bidden roughly by her father to hold her tongue. The stately governess wore only more ostentatiously than usual the detached air that always marked her out of school; and it was left to poor Miss Keene, with her timid platitudes, to keep up an appearance of civility.

Mr Pennycuick vanished abruptly after dinner; it was presently rumoured that he was not well, and had gone to bed. Frances was taken away to prepare lessons. Rose and Deborah came and went. Coffee was served. The parson was again left to Miss Keene, who would not be pumped for confidences, further than to admit that Mary was keeping her room with a headache, in consequence of the agitating visit of Captain Carey, but laboriously talked parish to him, without appearing to know anything of the subject. So the poor man actually became so bored that he changed his mind about staying for the night. He remembered that there was a good moon, and that he had an early engagement next morning, and ordered his buggy soon after nine o'clock. Afterwards he believed that it was the direct voice of the Lord that had called him to take his journey home at that hour.

He drove alone, having a steady (Redford) mare, that stood quietly at gates and doors, and no groom—a luxury almost unknown amongst country parsons, who must all keep horses. The night was beautiful, still, cool

and clear, the moon so full that he could see for miles. Because of this, he took his daylight short cuts across country, preferring grass when he could get it to the dusty summer road. And one of his short cuts led along the top of the embankment of the big dam.

He slackened speed at this spot, touched by the beauty of the scene, which could hardly have appealed in vain to any man who had just had a good dinner. How peacefully the still water lay under the shining moon —that moon which is capable of making, not soft young lovers only, but the toughest old stagers sentimental—nay, maudlin—at times; an intoxicant purged of the grossness of spirituous liquors, but acting on the brain in precisely the same way. Mr Goldsworthy, already uplifted by good Redford wine, felt the effect of the lovely night in dim poetic stirrings of his sordid little soul. He mused of God and heaven, and the other things that he made sermons out of, in a disinterested, unprofessional way, these being the lines along which his imagination worked. "Surely the Lord is in this place," was the unspoken thought, elevating and inspiring, with which he surveyed the placid lake and the dreaming hills; and "it is good for me to be here," he felt, even at the cost of a Redford bed and breakfast, and the choice vegetables that the gardener would have put into his buggy in the morning.

But what was this? A boat adrift! From out of the shadow of the white shed on the further shore a black spot moved—one of the boats that should have been locked up, since no one was allowed to use them without Mr Pennycuick's permission. It came into the open moonlight, into the middle of that silver mirror, and he saw that oars propelled it, and saw the figure of the person wielding them. Who had dared to take this liberty with sacred Redford property? he wondered, with the indignation of a co−proprietor; and he assumed a poacher after the fish that Mr Pennycuick had been trying with characteristic perseverance and unsuccess to naturalise in his dam. But looking harder, the clergyman saw the figure rise in the boat, and that it was a woman's. Almost at the same instant he saw that it had disappeared. Seizing whip and reins, he lashed his mare to a gallop along the embankment and down its steep side, where she nearly upset him, and round the lake shore—the buggy rocking like a cradle—to the point nearest to the boat, now visibly adrift and empty. He jumped to the ground, tore off his coat and vest (which had a valuable watch attached), flinging them and his hat, and presently his boots, into the buggy; and with a word of warning to the mare, he plunged into the water to the rescue of some poor fool whom as yet he had not identified.

He returned to shore with Mary Pennycuick in his arms. Spent and panting from his struggle, and awed by the tragical significance of the affair, his heart exulted at his deed. He thanked God that he had been in time—with a fervour proportionate to her rank and consequence— and anticipated the splendid reward awaiting him as the benefactor of the great family, entitled to their full confidence and eternal gratitude. But also he was filled with solicitude for the poor girl.

She was unconscious when he laid her down on the grass, but choked and moaned when he set to work to revive her, and realised that she was back in life and misery after he had succeeded in getting some whisky down her throat—contents of the flask he always carried, as a preventive of chills and remedy for undue fatigues, and from which he had first helped himself. They sat upon the ground side by side, his arm round her waist, her head—feeling only that it was cushioned somewhere—on his shoulder. The night was so warm and windless that their wet clothes were little discomfort to them, but he kept grasping and wringing handfuls with the hand at liberty, while he supported her with the other. The danger of damp "things" was more terrifying to him now than the danger of death had been a few minutes ago.

"There, there," he said soothingly, "you feel better now—don't you? Then I'll just put on my coat, if you don't mind. I'll wrap you up in the buggy rug—and we'll get back to Redford as soon as we can. And in the morning, dear, you'll wake up sorry for this—this madness, and you'll never do it again, will you?"

"Hysteria," he said to himself. "Her head turned by this love affair. He's treated her badly, whatever they may say, and it has unhinged her mind."

This thought disposed him to be gentle with her when she positively refused to be taken back to Redford.

"Leave me here," she implored him. "I cannot go home! I will not go home! My father told me he wished I was dead. Oh, I should have been dead now if you had left me alone, and then they would have been satisfied, and I should have been out of my misery, which is more than I can bear. Oh, Mr Goldsworthy, don't—don't!" "Mad as a hatter, poor thing," he thought, as he desisted from his effort to raise her. "Why, her father thinks the world of her!"

But something had to be done. It was unwise to use force in these cases —nor could he have brought himself

to use it—and of course he could not leave her at the dam, or leave her at all, while she was in her present mood, and without other protection; at the same time, it was imperatively necessary that he should get out of his wet clothes—her also. He mentioned this latter fact, and it was touching to see her own careful housewifely instincts assert themselves through all her mental agony.

"Oh, you ARE wet," she mourned, feeling him—it did not matter about herself; "oh, I am so sorry! Do—do go home at once, and take them off, and have something hot before you go to bed."

"I will," he said, "if you will go with me." A moment's reflection showed him that this was the best course—to take her to his own house, and send a message to Mr Pennycuick that she was there, and safe.

The thought of the town frightened her. She dreaded to go anywhere out of the solitude of Nature in which she had tried to hide. But he assured her of privacy and protection, and she was spent and beaten, and she gave in. Like a child, she stood to be wrapped in the rug and lifted into the buggy, and they proceeded on their way to his home, where his old sister kept house for him and mothered his child, with the aid of one servant.

It was nearly midnight when they arrived, and the parsonage was dark. Miss Goldsworthy, not expecting him, was sitting up with a sick parishioner half a mile off; Ruby and the maid were fast asleep. When the latter was heard stirring in her room, her master called a few questions to her, and then bade her go back to bed.

"We don't want her poking round," he whispered to Mary, as (when together they had hurried the mare into her stall) he led the drooping girl to his study—and how grateful she was to him for this consideration! He closed the door behind them, and led her gently to his own arm−chair—she clung to the hand that was so kind to her in her need—bidding her keep the rug about her (so as not to wet the furniture); and he lit a kerosene stove that was one of his private luxuries, always available when the maid−of−all−work was not. He exhorted his charge to comfort herself by the poor blaze while he fetched such odds and ends of clothes as he could gather from his sister's room; and then he told her to change her wet garments for these dry ones while he performed the same operation for himself elsewhere. She obeyed him as meekly as a child, and was sitting huddled in Miss Goldsworthy's faded flannel dressing−gown when he returned, carrying a kettle and a tray.

"Now I will make you a nice hot cup of tea," said he cheerily, planting the kettle on a round hole at the top of the stove and the tray on his writing table. "You put your clothes in the passage? That's right. We'll dry them presently. Oh, yes"—starting to cut bread and butter—"you must have something to eat. You have had no dinner."

He forced her to eat, and to drink the hot tea, and she did feel the better for it. Over her cup she lifted swimming eyes to his face, whispering: "You are good to me!" And he remarked to himself that she was not mad, as he had thought.

When the meal was disposed of, he felt that the time for explanations and for considering how to deal with the extraordinary situation had come.

"Now, my dear," he began, taking on something of the parson air at last, "the first thing to be done is to inform your family of your whereabouts. I must go and find up somebody to take a message to them, to relieve their minds."

She roused from her semi−torpor to plead for a reprieve. Not yet—not yet! Whatever she had to face, let her rest for a little first. They had parted with her for the night; they would not go to her room, she knew—outcast as she now was from the sympathy of them all; they would not miss her before the morning. And, oh, she could not go home! She had disgraced her family—her own father had wished her dead. She was a wicked woman, not fit to live; but, if she must live, let it be anywhere—anywhere—rather than at Redford now!

At this repetition of her strange charge against a doting father, and the mention of disgrace, a distressing suspicion came into the parson's mind. He calculated the length of time between Guthrie Carey's visits; he looked at her searchingly. No, there was no evidence that she had done the special wrong. But that there was wrong of some sort somewhere was evident enough.

"I know your father's affection for you," he said seriously, "and I cannot believe that he would express himself as you say he did."

"I deserved it," she said. "I don't blame him—nobody could."

"There must indeed have been some grave reason—"

"There was—there was!"

"What was it?"

"Oh, don't ask me!" she wailed, covering her face. But, crossing over to her side, he took one of the shielding

hands, and holding it tenderly, assured her that she must tell him. He was her pastor—he was her best friend; just now he was her champion, prepared to fight her battle, whatever it was. And to do this successfully it was necessary that he should know all. In the end she told him—not all, but the main facts. He thought it the silliest case of making a mountain of a molehill that he had ever heard of. He was convinced there was more in the background, to account for the violent emotions aroused—to account for a good girl leaving a good home in the middle of the night to drown herself. In his conjectures he made Guthrie Carey the villain of the piece—the young man who, after creating all the disturbance, had significantly cleared out. Sailors were an immoral lot —a sweetheart in every port, as the world knew. And this fellow—why, you had only to look at his big, brawny build (Mr Goldsworthy was a small man) to see that he had a brutal nature.

At any rate, the parson was satisfied that the heroine of the story remained a "pure" girl—foolish, but womanly, and very, very unfortunate. As she sat weeping by his side, dependent solely upon his protection, he stroked her hand and looked at it—so shapely and high−bred, the hand of a Pennycuick of the great house—a hand that would be full of gold some day; and his thoughts were busy.

The beautiful Deborah was gone, and could never have been for him; he had been an idiot to think it. She had no bent towards religion, was ruinously dressy and extravagant, unhousewifely as a woman could be; but Miss Pennycuick, great lady as she was, could cook and sew, was a master hand with servants and with children, and had never failed of interest in the church—nor in him. They had always been the best of friends, he and she; did it not seem that Providence had decreed they should be more? Why had he been sent to the dam in the nick of time, when he had intended to stay at Redford until morning? Why was she sitting here now, alone with him in his study, cut off from everybody else in the world? The hand of the Lord was in it. Looks were of small account when one considered her rank and the fortune she would inherit; but, of course, he did not admit to himself that he considered any one of these three things; nor that she was of age and her own mistress, although she had just forced the fact upon him when, promising him to make no further attempt upon her life, she announced an intention to find a situation somewhere in which she would be able to support herself apart from her family, and away from all who knew her. No, what he considered was the will of God and the dictates of his conscience. She had been given into his hands; he was bound to take care of her, and there was but one way to do it. It would be wrong and cruel to force her back to Redford. It was preposterous to think of making a governess or companion of her, a daughter of the proud Pennycuicks. She could not remain in his house as she was, without scandal, although he was a clergyman, with a sister housekeeper. Here they were now—past midnight, and practically without a soul in the house—and he so young still, and, if he might presume to say it, so attractive!

He put the case to her guardedly, gradually, plainly at last, and argued it for a full hour, while she drooped and wept, gazing at the smelly stove and shaking her head wearily. By the time dawn came, and she was quite worn out, he had won her consent to be his wife, which meant for her a footing somewhere, and at the same time a means to commit suicide without violating the law.

Miss Goldsworthy, who was but his humble slave, came home, put the forlorn girl to bed, and made a wedding breakfast for her while she was there; Mr Goldsworthy took the opportunity to fill up marriage papers in his study. Ruby was sent to school, as usual. Before her return therefrom, Mary Pennycuick had been led to the altar of the adjacent church, the white frock in which she had tried to drown herself dried and ironed to make her bridal robe. A neighbouring clergyman and crony of the bridegroom's performed the ceremony. Old Miss Goldsworthy, the chief witness, deposed, bewildered, wept bitterly. The bride was unmoved—until little Ruby, returning during the course of the ghastly wedding breakfast, was brought up, giggling and staring, to "kiss her new mamma", when the new mamma snatched the child to her breast, and went off into wild hysterics.

"There, there," said the new husband, pleased with the maternal gesture, but alarmed by her excitement, "you are overwrought. You have had no sleep. You must come and rest, my dear. Come and lie down. You can have Ruby with you, if you like—while I go and settle things at Redford. No, I won't be long; I'll just see your father, and be back by tea−time. Have the drawing−room opened, Charlotte"—it never was opened except for visitors—"and we will sit there this evening. And meanwhile, make her some tea or something, and see that she has all she wants. Come, my love—"

He led her to the door of a room, and she shrank back from it with a shriek.

"Well, well," he soothed her; "the spare room, if you like—"

"Oh, promise me—promise me—!"

"Yes, yes; just as you wish, darling. I would not hurry you."

She turned to Miss Goldsworthy and clung to her. "Save me! save me!" was what the desperate clutch meant, but what the paralysed tongue could not articulate.

She was in a high fever and delirious on her wedding night, and a week later at death's door. When she came out of her illness, reconciled to her family, meekly obedient to her husband, she was a wreck of herself —a prisoner for life, bound hand and foot, more pitiable than she would have been as a dead body fished out of the dam.

The tragic disproportion between crimes and punishments in this world!

CHAPTER XII.

Mrs Goldsworthy was reconciled to her relations through her illness— the greatest peacemaker in families, save death; and for her sake they made a show of tolerating her husband, after they had given him some bad hours behind her back. But the whole affair was like a blight on Redford, which was never the same place again. Mr Pennycuick had a slight "stroke" on hearing all the bad news at once. It was light enough to be passed over and hushed up, but his vigour and faculties declined from that hour with a rapidity that could be marked from day to day. "A changed man," observed his neighbours, one to another. At the same time, they hinted that other things were not as they used to be—that the old man had had losses—that Redford was heavily burdened—that the proud Pennycuicks, already humbled, were likely to experience a further fall. Certainly, the governess was dispensed with, and the dashing four−in−hand withdrawn from the local racecourses and agricultural show−grounds, of which it had long been the constant and conspicuous ornament, to be sold at public auction, without reason given. The great, hospitable house got a character for dullness for the first time in its history. No lights or laughter flowed from the windows of the big drawing−room of an evening; the lawns lay dark and still, while downstairs a rubber of whist or a hand at cribbage with Jim Urquhart or Mr Thornycroft represented what was left of the gaieties of the past. These men—these old fogies, as fretful Frances styled them both—were not of those who shunned Redford because it had grown dull; on the contrary, they now—according to Frances again—virtually lived there. And it was the absent pleasure−seekers, her true kindred, for whom her soul longed.

He who most openly resented the change, having (next to Mary) been most instrumental in causing it, was Deborah's lover, Claud Dalzell.

He had been none too gracious a lover—although graceful enough, when all was well—seeing that he had continued his bachelor life, with all its social obligations, after as before his engagement, and had allowed this to run to nearly two years, without coming to any effective understanding about the wedding−day; but when, in the thick of her troubles, he descended upon Redford merely to denounce the Goldsworthy marriage as a personal affront, and, as it were, to tax her with it, then her loving indulgence did not suffice to excuse him.

As usual, he went to his room first, to wash and change. He hated to pass the door of a sitting−room with the dust of travel on him; he could not shake hands with equanimity until he had restored his person and toilet to their normal perfection, which meant more or less the restoring of his nerves and temper to repose. So he appeared on this occasion, fresh and finished to the last degree, the finest gentleman in the world—the very light of Deb's eyes, and the satisfaction of her own fastidious taste—walking in to her where she awaited him, in the morning−room, herself 'groomed' to match, with as much care as she had taken when she had no more serious matter to think of than how to dress to please him.

He met her, apparently, as usual. She, turning to him as to a rock in a weary land, flung herself into his arms with more than her usual self−abandonment.

"Oh, darling!" she breathed, in that delicious voice of hers, "it is good to see you. I have wanted you so badly."

"I am sorry I did not come before," he replied, kissing her gravely. "Somebody has been wanted to deal with that extraordinary girl."

"Ah, poor girl! Do you know she is very ill with brain fever? Keziah has gone to nurse her. It must have been that coming on. She was out of her mind."

"I should think so—and everybody else too, apparently. What were you all about, Debbie, not to see this Goldsworthy affair going on under your noses?"

"It hasn't been going on. It has been Guthrie Carey—until now."

"I am told"—it was Frances who had told him in the passage just now— "that she refused Carey only the day before."

"She did."

"In order to make a runaway match with this parson fellow. The facts speak for themselves."

"Ah!" sighed Deb, turning to the tea−table, "I expect we don't know all the facts."

She meant that he did not know them. He only knew what Frances knew, and providentially they had been able to keep the episode of the dam out of the published story. That was the secret of Mary herself, her husband, her father, and this one sister; and they kept it close, even from Claud Dalzell. "I will tell him some day when we are married," Deb had promised herself; but as things fell out, she never did tell him. And it was on account of her brother−in−law's part in the suppressed event that she now forbore to call him behind his back what she had not hesitated to call him before his face—that is, failed to show that she fully shared her lover's indignation at the MESALLIANCE, and the scandalous way that it had been brought about.

"But, good heavens!"—Claud took his cup perfunctorily from her hand, and at once set it down—"are more facts necessary? She has made a clandestine marriage with a man whose bishop will turn him out of the church, I hope. They were right, I suppose, in concluding that no one here would consent to it; and what conceivable circumstances could excuse such an act?"

"Illness," said Deb. "Madness."

"Nonsense! There's too much method in it. It is obviously but the climax of a long intrigue—a course of duplicity that I could never have believed possible in a girl like Mary, although I have always thought HIM cad enough for anything."

"Have your tea," said Deb, a trifle off−hand; "it will be cold."

And she sat down with her own cup, and began to sip it with a leisurely air.

"A clandestine marriage," remarked Claud, ignoring her advice, "logically implies a clandestine engagement. Carey was but a red herring across the trail. And you ought to have known it, Deb."

"Well, I didn't," said she shortly.

He took a turn up and down the room, trying to preserve his wonted well−bred calm. But he was intensely irritated by her attitude.

"I cannot understand you," he complained, with a hard edge to his voice. "I should have thought that you—YOU of all people—would have been wild—as wild as I am."

She exasperated him with a little laugh and a truly cutting sarcasm. "It is bad form to SHOW that you are wild, you know, even if you feel so."

"I am just wondering whether you feel so. You are not used to hiding your feelings—at any rate, from me. I expected to find you out of your mind almost."

"What's the use? If I raved till doomsday I couldn't alter anything. The mischief is done. It is no use crying over spilt milk, my dear."

"You look as if you did not want to cry." "Do I?"

"As if it did not much matter to you whether it was spilt or not." "It doesn't matter to me, compared with what it matters to her." "Well, it matters to ME," Claud Dalzell announced, in a high tone, the crust of his fine manners giving to the pressure of the volcano within. "I can't stand the connection, if you can. Carey was bad enough, but he had some claim beside his coat to rank as a gentleman. This crawling ass, who would lick your boots for sixpence, to have him patting me on the back and calling himself my brother—Good God! it's too sickening."

"Not YOUR brother," Deb gently corrected him.

"He is mine if he is yours." "Oh, not necessarily!"

"Deb," said Claud, with an air of desperation, planting himself before her, "what are you going to do?"

She looked up at him with narrowing eyes and stiffening lips.

"What IS there to do?" she returned. "Are you going to put up with this —this outrage—to condone everything—to tolerate that fellow at Redford, taking the position of a son of the house, or are you going to show them both that they have forfeited their right ever to set foot upon the place again?"

"My sister too, you mean?"

"Certainly—if you can still bring yourself to call her your sister. She belongs to him now, not to us. She has voluntarily cut herself off from her world. Let her go. Deb, if you love me—"

He paused, and Deb smiled into his handsome but disgusted face.

"Ah, is that to be a test of love?" she asked. "I understand. I am to choose between you. Well"—she rose, towering, drawing the big diamond from her engagement finger—"I am going to her now. I ought to have been there hours ago, but waited back to receive you. Good−bye! And pray, don't come again to this contaminated house. We have too horribly gone down in the world. I know it, and I would not have you compromised on any

account. We Pennycuicks, we don't abandon our belongings, especially when they may be dying; we sink or swim together." She held the jewel out to him.

"What rot!" he blurted vulgarly, flushing with anger that was not unmixed with shame. "Why will you wilfully misunderstand me? Put it on, Deb—put it on, and don't be so childish."

"I will not put it on," said she, "until you apologise for the things you have been saying to me, and the manner of your saying them."

"My dear child, I do apologise humbly, if I have said what I shouldn't. Perhaps I have; but I thought we were past the need for reserves and for weighing words, you and I. And really, Debbie, you know—"

"Hush!" She stopped him from further arguing; but she did not stop him from taking her hand and cramming the diamond back into its old place. "I must go. Father cannot—he is ill himself; and Miss Keene is too frightfully modest to nurse him alone, so that I must send Keziah back, and stay—"

"Can't Miss Keene go and send her back, and stay?"

"Oh, she would be no use in such an illness as Mary's. And I must see for myself how things are—whether they are taking proper care of the poor, unfortunate child—"

"Is she so very ill? I did not know that."

There was commiseration in his tone, but in his heart he hoped that the deservedly sick woman would crown her escapades by dying as quickly as possible. Then, perhaps, he could forgive her.

Deb gave him sundry confidences. On his appearing to take them in a proper spirit, she gave him some more tea. And so they lapsed into their normal relations. When she again urged the need for her to be getting off on her errand of mercy, he magnanimously offered to drive her. She accepted with a full heart, and her arms about his neck. While she was getting ready, he repacked his portmanteau, and ordered it to be put into the buggy.

"It's no use my going back," he said to her, when they were on the road, "with you away, and your father too ill to see me. I'll put up at the hotel tonight, and go on to town in the morning. You can send for me there whenever you want me, you know."

"Just as you like, dear," said Deb quietly; and for the rest of their journey they talked commonplaces.

When they reached the parsonage gate, from which the maid−of−all−work and a group of street gossips scattered in panic at their approach, the lovers shook hands perfunctorily.

"Goodbye, then, for a little while," said Claud. "You don't want me to come in, do you?"

"Certainly not," said she coldly.

"You know that it is totally against my judgment—and my wishes—that you go in yourself, Deb?"

"Yes. But one's own judgment must be one's guide."

Thus they parted, each with a grievance against the other—a root of bitterness to be nourished by much thinking about it, and by the circumstance that poor Mary neither died nor was repudiated. Claud drove on to the hotel, to be further disgusted with his accommodation and his dinner; Deb walked into the house which hitherto she had visited in a spirit of kindly condescension, to be revolted by the new aspect which her changed relations with it now gave to its every feature. Ruby, neglected, with a jam−smeared face—the flustered maid, tousled, grubby, her frock gaping—the horrible hall, with its imitation−marble paper and staring linoleum—the prim, trivial, unaired, unused drawing−room, with its pathetic attempts at elegance— Deb inwardly curled up at the sight of these things as things now belonging to the family. When the master of the house came hurrying in to her, rusty, unshaven, abject, she would have changed places with a Christian of old Rome facing a lion of the amphitheatre.

"Oh, this is good of you! This is kind indeed!" Mr Goldsworthy greeted her, and threatened in his grateful emotion to fall at her feet. "I did not dare to hope—"

But Deb shudderingly swept him aside, with his gratitude and his excuses and his timid justifications. He could stand up before his other critics—he had a clear conscience, he said; but before her he knew himself for what he was. He followed her like a dog to Mary's room, obeyed her directions like a slave, wept when she consented to "say no more", and stooped to beg from him a solemn vow and promise that he would be good to his wife. This was after the doctors had refused to permit his wife's removal to Redford to be nursed, and after Redford had practically been in command of his establishment for seven weeks.

Christmas is the time for reconciliations, and by Christmas Mary was convalescent—pale as she had never been since childhood, and wearing a little cap over her shaved head; very humble and gentle, and strangely docile

in her attitude towards her captor, who now gave himself all the airs of a husband of his class. He was the benevolent despot of his women−kind—the god of the machine; she was as properly submissive as if born in the ranks. Negatively so, that is to say; positively, her manifestations of duty to him took the form of services and endearments bestowed upon his child and sister. Her first occupation after she could use her hands was to improve Ruby's wardrobe —the little girl, now her own, appealed to her motherly heart, a saving interest in her wrecked life. The poor old ex−housekeeper was the other prop to which she clung for a footing in the new and alien world which was now all her home. When Miss Goldsworthy proposed to go out into a situation, not to "be in the way of" the new wife, and when her brother would have approved the plan as only right and proper (and as facilitating his schemes for the raising of the "tone" of his establishment to Redford level), Mary protested vehemently and with tears, the only occasion of her showing a Pennycuick spirit since renouncing the Pennycuick name. The old maid, for her part, was enthusiastically devoted to the new sister−in−law, whom it was her joy to pet and coddle. "I can be of use to her," she tremblingly commended herself to her brother. "I can take the drudgery of the housework off her, and save her in the parish." "Well, perhaps so," said Mr Goldsworthy. And, sincerely desiring to endear himself to his aristocratic wife, he consented to her wish.

The whole Goldsworthy family was transferred to Redford, while, on the pretext of disinfecting it, the parsonage was painted and papered what Deb called "decently", and its more offensive furniture replaced. Mary was provided with a trousseau and many useful wedding presents, a cheque from her father for 500 pounds amongst them. They did not forgive her, but they pretended excellently that they did. Without any pretence at all, they tried to make the best of a bad job. To this end, they gathered their friends together as usual at Christmas. Mr Thornycroft and the Urquharts needed no pressing; they came to see Mary the day she returned home, and showed her the old affection without asking questions. Mr Thornycroft's wedding presents to her were magnificent—a complete service of silver plate and house linen of the finest. Deb wrote to Claud: "I suppose we shall see you, as usual?"— for he had always spent Christmas at Redford unless away on the other side of the world. He wrote back: "I think not, this time." He was the only defaulter.

"He will never have a chance to refuse again," said Deb fiercely, as she tore up his note.

His absence was too marked not to provoke frequent comment, and whenever it was alluded to in her hearing, her spine stiffened and her head went up. It was quite evident to her family that the rift in the lute was serious, and strange to say, it was her father, who might have been expected to hail the signs, who was most concerned to see them. He expostulated with her when she spoke bitterly of Billy's son, as once he had been so ready to do himself.

"Well, my dear," said he, "I can understand it, if you can't. I wouldn't come myself, if I was in his place, to mix−up with the sort of thing we've got to mix up with."

"If I can mix up with it—!" quoth proud Deborah.

"Yes, yes—I know; but you must consider the silly way that he's been reared. I don't like his taking upon himself to criticise what we choose to do; but no doubt Goldsworthy IS a pretty big pill to swallow—to a chap like him, always so faddy about breeding and manners, and that sort of thing."

"If he is too faddy for the society that I can put up with, though it be that of chimney−sweeps," said Deb, "he is too faddy for me, father."

"Now, my dear, don't talk so," the old man pleaded with her, quite agitated by her mood. "We all have our little weaknesses—we have to make allowances for temperament and for bringing up. Don't let a trifle like this estrange you two—don't, Debbie, for my sake. Let me go down to my grave feeling that one of you, at least, is safe and happy, and well provided for."

"Decidedly," thought Deborah, "father is not the same man that he was before his illness."

She understood the cause of his change of views on her engagement better a few weeks later.

He had parted with his eldest daughter then, and the emotion of the event had fatally affected him. Owing to some obscure working of the "influence" which her social position had brought to her husband, the latter had been promoted to the charge of a Melbourne parish. The affair was arranged while they were still at Redford, and just on the completion of the improvements to the local parsonage. In spite of all they had done to make this first home fit for her, family and friends were unanimous in hailing her removal to another and more distant one— out of the buzz of the gossip of her native neighbourhood—as the best thing that could have happened. But when it came to the point of sending her forth to battle with her fate alone for the rest of her life, the wrench was dreadful. She was the bravest of them all under the ordeal. The shattered father, whose right hand she had been for so many

happy years, and whose heart was broken with the weight of his responsibility for her misfortunes, was completely overwhelmed. She had not been gone twelve hours when Deb found him in his office chair, unable to rise from it, or to answer her questions. And he never spoke again. He made signs that he wanted Claud sent for, and when the young man quickly came, looked significant things at him and Deb, as they stood by his bedside hand in hand. Then he lapsed into stupor and died, without waiting for a third stroke.

Through all the shock and sorrow of the time, Claud was Deborah's mainstay and consolation. He took the role of nearest male relative, the right to which was undisputed by Mr Goldsworthy, preoccupied with the important interests of his new parish; also by Mr Thornycroft and Jim Urquhart, who, of course, "stood by" to serve her as far as she would allow them. It was Claud who gave the orders for the funeral, and superintended the ceremonies, and acted as chief mourner; it was Claud to whom the household looked for direction, as if acknowledging him to be the new master; it was on Claud's breast that Deb wept—who so rarely wept—and his word that she obeyed, as if he were already her husband; and in all that he did for her, and in all that he did not do, he showed the grace, the tact, the tenderness, the thoughtfulness of her ideal lover and gentleman.

But there came a day when he fell again below the indispensable standard—when the rift in the lute, that had seemed closed, gaped suddenly, and this time beyond repair. It was when, after close investigation of the deceased man's affairs, and some heated interviews with one of the executors (Deb being the other), Claud discovered that the Pennycuick wealth was non−existent—that Redford was mortgaged to the hilt, and that if the estate was realised and cleared, as Deb desired it should be, nothing would be left for her and her sisters— that is to say, a paltry three or four hundred a year amongst them, less than Deb could spend comfortably on her clothes alone.

He was too upset by the discovery, and a bad quarter of an hour that Mr Thornycroft had subsequently given him, to preserve that calm demeanour which was his study and his pride. He came in to Deb where she sat alone, and expressed his feelings as the ordinary man is wont to do to the woman who loves and belongs to him.

"What could your father have been dreaming of," he rudely interrogated her, "to let the place go to pieces like this? Drifting behind year after year, and doing nothing to stop it—not cutting down one of the living expenses—not giving us the least hint of how things really were—"

"He gave several hints," said Deb, in that voice which always grew so portentously quiet when his was raised, "if we had had the sense to take them. I have been putting two and two together for some time, so that I am not altogether taken by surprise."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were not here, for one thing. Because it was father's private business, for another."

"He seems not to have made it his business to take any care of his children's interests," said Claud bitterly. "Bringing you up as he has done, with the right to expect that you were to be properly provided for, and then leaving you literally paupers—"

"Not LITERALLY paupers," corrected Deb gently. "We shall be quite independent still. And if you want to insult my father now that he is dead—the best of fathers, if he did have misfortunes in business and make mistakes—do it somewhere else, not in this room." "You have no right to take that tone with me, Deb." "No?" She raised sarcastic eyebrows, under which her deep eyes gleamed. "Well, I suppose I haven't —now. I forgot my new place. I am very sorry, Claud"—rising, and making a gesture with her hands that he had seen before—"very sorry indeed, that I did not know I was going to be a poor woman and a nobody when you did me the honour to select me to be your wife. Now that you have shown me that I am disqualified for the position—" she held out the big diamond, with a cold smile. "That's vulgar, Deb," he loftily admonished her, fending off her hand. "You know I am not actuated by those low motives. DON'T let us have this cheap melodrama, for pity's sake! Put it on."

But no more would she put it on. He had revealed his disappointment that she was not something more than herself—that beautiful and adorable self that she quite knew the worth of—and he had permitted himself to take liberties of speech with her that she instinctively felt to be provoked by the circumstance that she was no longer rich and powerful.

Deb's love was great, but her pride was greater.

CHAPTER XIII.

Deb sat amid the ruins of her home. She occupied the lid of a deal packing−case that enclosed a few hundreds of books, and one that was half filled stood before her, with a scatter of odd volumes on the floor around. The floor, which was that of the once cosy morning−room, was carpetless; its usual furniture stood about higgledy−piggledy, all in the wrong places, naked and forlorn. Mr Thornycroft leaned against the flowerless mantel−shelf, and surveyed the scene, or rather, the central figure, black−gowned, holland−aproned, with sleeves turned back from her strong wrists, and a grey smudge on her beautiful nose.

"That cottage that you talk about," said he, "will not hold all those."

"Oh, books don't take any space," she replied brusquely. "They are no more than tapestry or frescoes. I shall have cases made to fit flat to the walls."

"That will cost money."

"One must have the bare necessaries of life. I presume I shall be able to afford that much. Pine boards will do. I can Aspinall them." "Aspinall is very nice, but sometimes it gets on the edges of your books and spoils them."

"No, it doesn't. I have an Aspinalled book−case in my room now, and not a mark ever came off it."

"Did you paint it?"

"I did."

"Are you going to leave it there?"

"I must. It is a fixture."

"That's all right. I am glad you are going to leave something." "Something? I leave all."

"Except a library of books, and a collection of forty odd pictures, that you will have to hang over the books—"

"You would not have us part with family portraits?"

"And a grand piano, extra sized, calculated to fill a suburban villa drawing−room all by itself—"

"Pianos make nothing second−hand, and the girls must practise. Better keep a good instrument than sell it for fifty pounds and spend the money on a bad one."

"Certainly, if you can stow it. But with seven easy−chairs, and the biggest Chesterfield sofa extant, and a large writing−table—"

"I can have that in my room."

"Along with a six−foot dressing−table, and a nine−foot wardrobe, and I don't know how many chests of drawers—"

"The wardrobe will stand in a passage somewhere. We must have places to put our clothes."

"A house with passages of that capacity—"

"Well, never you mind. If I can't find room for my things, I can sell them in Melbourne as well as here."

"Having squandered a small fortune on the carriage down. Better leave them with me, Debbie, and let me send you what you want afterwards."

"Thank you. You would not have them to send afterwards."

"Oh, I think I would."

"No. I shall settle everything before I leave, and the sale will be held immediately. The furniture first, and then the place." Her mouth closed upon the words like a steel snap.

"Just as you please about that," he said quietly. "Any time will suit me."

"By public auction," she added, with a sharp glance at him—"to the highest bidder."

"Yes," was his laconic comment. "Me."

"Not necessarily," said she, roused by the small word that held such large meanings. "There are a few other rich persons in the western district, to whom Redford may appear desirable."

"There are," he agreed easily. "I know several. But I shall outbid them."

She was strongly agitated. "Oh, I hope they won't let you!"

"Why?" he asked.

At first she fenced with the question.

"Because you don't want it. You have more land already than one man ought to have." "I don't know about what I ought to have, but I know that if you persist in throwing Redford away, I shall take it." He smiled at her angry perturbation. "If I find I haven't enough money to outbid everybody—but I think I have—I can sell Bundaboo. If you won't have Redford, I will—yes, and every stick and stone that belongs to it."

"And have people talking and saying that you did it for something else, and not business reasons."

"People would be right, for once."

"But I won't have it!" cried Deb. "I won't stand being an object of your benevolence. You want to pay a lot more than the place is worth, so as to augment our income. You as good as own it—"

"I want to keep your home for you against you change your mind." "The last thing I shall do, I assure you—particularly after your saying that." Her nose, in spite of the smut on it, testified to her indignant dignity, up in the air, with its fine nostrils quivering. "Now, look here, godpapa—I will not have Redford put up to auction. I'll sell privately—and to somebody else."

"You cannot."

"Oh, indeed! Not when I am executor?"

"Certainly not—except with the permission of your fellow−executor."

She fell to pleading.

"Oh, let me—do let me! You know what I want—to square up all the debts and have done with them. I can't sleep for thinking of what we owe you already. Do you know how much it is? Nearly forty thou—"

He checked her with an impatient wave of the hand.

"All the debts will be provided for, of course. The lawyers will adjust those matters."

"I don't trust you," she urged, looking at him less angrily, but still as puzzled and distressed. "I know you have designs to benefit me somehow—unfairly, and because it's me—and if you only knew how I HATED to be benefited—"

"I do—nobody better. That is why I am letting you do a lot of things that won't benefit you, but just the opposite—things you will repent of horribly by−and−by. Knowing your independent spirit, I do not offer my advice—"

"Oh!"

"Not effectively. I do not force it upon you. I do not bring my undoubted powers to bear upon you for your good—"

"Ah!"

"Because I know, of course, that you would rather suffer anything than be guided by me."

She softened instantly. "I am not such a fool, I hope. But—but you WILL bring friendship into business. You did things for my father that you know you would never have dreamt of doing for strangers—that you never ought to have done at all; and now you want to be twice as idiotically generous to us, because we are girls, and out of pity for us—to do us a kindness, as it is called—when, if you only knew—"

She had risen and drifted to him where he stood, and now laid a hand on his arm. He put a hand over it, and looked into her pleading eyes. He seemed not to have heard her last remark, to be far away in mind from the point of discussion, and his fixed and strange gaze perplexed and then embarrassed her. "How he feels our going!" she thought to herself, and turned her face from his, and tried to turn his apparently sad thoughts.

"If you would only let me sell Redford to somebody else, and have the lump money to pay all the debts in a plain way that I could understand, and take the remainder for ourselves, and know that we were straight and free, I would do anything you liked to ask me in return!"

He still kept silence, and that tight grasp upon her hand. So she looked at him again; and his far−away stare was bewildering.

"I wonder," said he slowly—"I wonder, if I were to take you at your word, whether you would stick to it?"

"Try me," said she.

"I will. Deborah Pennycuick, if I let you sell Redford, and pay all debts with your own hands, will you—I am your godfather, and something over fifty, and it is quite preposterous, of course, but still you said anything—will you be my wife?"

"Oh!" This was the unexpected happening, with a vengeance. Never had she imagined such a notion on the part of this staid and venerable person. She flushed hotly, and wrenched her imprisoned hand free. "I don't like

stupid jokes," she muttered, overcome with confusion. "Do I give you the impression that I am joking?" he asked.

"If you are serious, that is worse," said she. "Then I know you are only trying another way of providing for me."

"You believe I have only just thought of it?"

"Haven't you?"

"I have thought of it since you were fifteen, my dear. But never mind. We will call it a joke, if you think that the least of two evils. I see you do. The incident is closed. The bargain is off. And I can buy Redford when it is put up for sale. Goodbye, goddaughter. No, I can't stay to lunch today; I have some business to attend to. But of course I shall see you again before you go."

And when he did see her again, he gave not the smallest sign of what had happened, so that she almost grew to feel that she must have dreamt it.

That same afternoon, Jim Urquhart, who was always doing so, rode over to Redford to see if he could help her pack. He wondered at her abstracted manner, and her sudden change of mind concerning the piano and wardrobe and other things. Having laboriously packed books and pictures, she now proposed to unpack half of them. She wanted to see what room she would have in her cottage first. In fact, it seemed to him that she did not know what she wanted. She was evidently tired and overwrought. "Oh, Jim," she moaned, from amongst the dust and litter, "it is a wrench!"

"What do you suppose it is for us?" he returned gloomily. "Without you at Redford! I'm trying not to think of it."

"So am I. But it's no use—it has got to come."

"I suppose there is no way out?"

"None. That is all settled. I have told Mr Thornycroft, and he won't tease me any more."

"Do you think you will be happy down there, cooped up in streets?"

"I know I shall not. But the streets down there will be better than the streets of a bush township."

"Why streets at all? Why not stay about here somewhere, where you have us all near you?"

"Exiled from Redford? No, thank you. Besides, where could we stay? Detached cottages don't grow in these parts."

Then he blurted it out.

"I have never said anything, Deb. I knew I wasn't fit for you, and. I am not now. I've got to look after my dear old mother and the children, who haven't got anybody else, and I couldn't give you a home worthy of you—perhaps never, no matter how I worked and tried; but if love is any good, and the things that after all make homes—not money and fine furniture—" "Dear old boy, don't!" she pleaded, with twitching lips.

"I may as well, now I have begun," said he. "I don't suppose it is any use, but I'd just like you to know once—as far as my life is my own, it is yours any day you like. It has been since I was a boy, and it will be for a good while yet—I won't say for ever, because you can't tell what's going to happen; but I'm ready to bet my soul that it will be for ever. Now, do just what you feel inclined to, Debbie. I'm not going to press you—I know my place too well; but if you should think it a better plan to live with me, and have me work for you and take care of you the best I can, why, any heaven that's coming to us by−and−by simply won't be in it—not for me." He looked at her across the packing−case between them, and dropped his voice to add: "But you wouldn't, of course."

"I would, dear Jim!" she cried, with warm impulsiveness; "that is, I might. A good man like you is worth a worldful of money and furniture. I don't live for those things, as you seem to think; but—but you know how it is—I can't change about from one to another—"

He dropped the saddest "No" into the pregnant pause.

"No, Deb—no; I expected that. Staunch through everything— that's you all over. Well"—with a movement as if to pull himself together—"I'm staunch too. We're equals in that, anyhow, and don't you forget it. I'll not bother you any more—I never have bothered you, have I?—but I'm here when you want me, body and soul, at any hour of the day or night. You'll remember that?" stretching his horny hand across to her, and being in the same instant electrified by the touch of her lips upon it.

"Oh, I will! I will!"

The evening post brought a ship letter. Guthrie Carey was in port. He had been there long enough to hear the news that Deborah Pennycuick was penniless, and that Claud Dalzell had deserted her. So he had written to her at

length—the longest letter of his life—ten pages.

She took it to her bedroom and sat down to read it, while at the same time she rested a little before dinner. She had frowned over the envelope; now she smiled over the first pages; she sighed over the middle ones; she even wept a little over the last. Then she wrote out an answer and sent it by a groom to the nearest telegraph office:

"Please do not come. Am writing."

Thus she cast aside in one day three good men and true, heart−bound to one who was not worthy to be ranked with any of them. But that is the way of love.

CHAPTER XIV.

There was an attic at the top of a dark flight of stairs in the suburban villa that was now the sisters' home. It contained a fireplace and a long dormer window—three square casements in a row, of which the outer pair opened like doors—facing the morning sun and a country landscape. The previous tenants had used it for a box and lumber room, and left it cobwebbed, filthy and asphyxiating. Deb ordered a charwoman to clean it, and a man to distemper the grubby plaster and stain the floor, and then laid down rugs, and assembled tables and books, and basket−chairs, and girls' odds and ends; whereby it was transformed into a cosy boudoir and their favourite room. Hither came Mary when she could escape from that treadmill of which she never spoke, bringing her black−eyed boy to astonish his aunts with his cleverness, and astonishing them herself with the heretical notions which an intimate association with orthodoxy seemed to have implanted in her. But Bennet was not admitted, nor any other outsider.

The little bricked hearth, when reminiscent wood fires burned on it, was a pleasant gathering−place in cold weather; but it was the window in the projecting gable towards which the sisters most commonly converged. It was about eight feet long by two feet high, and close up under it, nearly flush with its sill, stood a substantial six−foot−by−four table, the chairs at either end comfortably filling the rest of the alcove. They could sit here to write or sew, or drink afternoon tea, and look out upon as pleasant a rural landscape—the Malvern Hills—as any suburban villa could command. It was that view, indeed, which had decided Deb to take the house.

There was, of course, a towny foreground to it; and this it was, rather than the distant blue ranges, that held the gaze of Rose Pennycuick when she looked forth—the back−yard of the villa next to their own. It was a well−washed−and−swept enclosure, spacious and well−appointed, and amongst its appointments displayed a semi−circular platform of brickwork, slightly raised above the asphalted ground, and supporting the biggest and best dog−kennel that she had ever seen.

"Those are nice people," she remarked, "for they have given their dog as good a house as they have given themselves. Isn't it a beauty? I wish to goodness everybody was as considerate for the poor things. I wonder what sort of a dear beast it is?"

She watched so long for its appearance that she thought the kennel untenanted, but presently saw a maid come out from the kitchen with a tin dish. This she dumped upon the brick platform, turning her back instantly; and a fine, ruffed, feather−tailed collie stepped over the kennel threshold to get his dinner.

"Chained!" cried Rose. "And she never spoke to him!"

Deb looked over her shoulder, sympathetically concerned. "Is he really? What a shame! I expect they are too awfully clean and tidy to stand a dog's paws on anything; but no doubt they let him out for a run."

Rose waited for days, and never saw this happen. The master of the house and a dapper young man, his son, went to town every morning at a certain hour, evidently for the day's business; a stout, smart lady, with smart daughters, was seen going forth in the afternoons; the maids took their little outings; but no one took the dog. He lived alone on his patch of brick, either hidden in the kennel or lying in the sun with his nose between his paws. He had his food regularly, for it was a regular household; but beyond that, no notice seemed taken of him. Rose, worked up from day to day, declared at last that she could not stand it. "Why, what can you do?" said Deb. "He is their dog, not yours." "Oh, I don't know; but I must do something."

One moonlight night she heard him—always silent and supine, except when suspicious persons came into the yard—baying softly to himself, plainly (to her) voicing the weariness of his unhappy life. She sat up in bed and listened to him, and to his master shouting to him at intervals to "be quiet"; and she wept with sympathetic grief.

It was a Saturday night. On Sunday morning she excused herself from going to church. She saw Deb and Francie go, and she saw the family of the next house go—heard their front door bang, and caught gleams of smart dresses through the foliage of their front garden. Then she put on her hat and stole forth to intercede for the collie with the cook of his establishment, a kindly−looking person, who had once been observed to pat his head.

The gleaming imitation−mahogany door at which she rang with a determined hand but a fluttering heart, was, to her dismay, opened to her by a young man—the son of the house, whom she had seen going to business every

week−day morning, tailored beautifully, and wearing a silk hat that dazzled one. He was now in a very old suit, flannel−shirted and collarless, so that at first she did not recognise him.

The desire of each was to turn and fly, but the necessity upon them was to face their joint mishap and see it through. Crimson, the young man mumbled apologies for his state of unreadiness to receive ladies; equally crimson, Rose begged him not to mention it, and apologised for her own untimely call.

"Miss Pennycuick, I believe?" stammered he, with an awkward bow.

"Miss Rose Pennycuick—yes," said she, struggling through her overwhelming embarrassment. "I called—I wanted—I—I—MIGHT I speak to you for just one minute, Mr Breen?"

She had lived beside him long enough to know his name, also his occupation. The Breens were drapers. Their shop in the city was not to be compared with Buckley Nunn's or Robertson Moffat's, but it was a good shop in its way, as this good home of the proprietors testified.

"Certainly," said young Mr Breen, whose name was Peter. "With pleasure. By all means. Walk in, Miss Pennycuick."

She walked into a gorgeous drawing−room, where all was of the best, and wore that shining air of furniture too valuable for daily use. Mr Peter drew up a cream linen blind that was one mass of lace insertion, and apologised anew for his unseemly costume.

"The fact is, Miss Pennycuick—I hope you won't be shocked at my doing such things on Sunday—I was cleaning my gun. There is a holiday this week, and I am going shooting with a friend. It was he I expected to see when I went to the door in this state." "Oh," said Rose, more at her ease, "I often do things on Sundays; I don't see why not. In fact, I am doing something now—"

She cast about for words wherein to explain her errand, while he shot a stealthy glance at her. Though not beautiful, like Deb and Francie, she was a wholesome, healthy, bonnie creature, and he was as well aware of her position in life as she was of his.

"I came, Mr Breen—I thought there were only servants in the house—I am sure you must wonder how I can take such a liberty, such an utter stranger, but I wanted to speak about that poor dog of yours—"

"Bruce—ah!" Enlightenment seemed to come to the young man. "You have called to complain of the row he made last night. We were only saying at breakfast—"

"No, no, indeed!" Rose spread out protesting hands, and ceased to feel embarrassed. "Not to complain of him, poor dear, but—but—if you will forgive such impertinence, to ask somebody—I thought I should see your cook, who looks kind—to do something to make his life a little less miserable."

"Miserable!" Mr Breen broke in, and sat up, stiffening, as if half inclined to be offended, even with this very nice young lady.

"There isn't a dog in the country better off. We had his place in the yard built on purpose for him; had his kennel made to a special design —" "A lovely kennel! I never saw a better."

"Clean straw every few days; all his food cooked—"

"But CHAINED, Mr Breen. And a collie, too!"

"Well, we couldn't have him messing all over the place; at any rate, my people wouldn't. Oh, I assure you, Miss Pennycuick, Bruce is in clover. He was only baying the moon. Dogs often do that. It's only their fun—though it isn't fun to us."

"Fun!" sighed Rose helplessly. And she fixed her eyes upon her companion, as they sat VIS−A−VIS on the edges of their brocaded chairs, with no sense that he was a strange young man—a gaze that troubled and disconcerted him. "I am sure," she answered earnestly, "that you have a kind heart. One has only to look at you to know it."

"The idea never occurred to me before," he mumbled, flattered by her discernment, and no more offended with her.

"I am sure no one could mean better by a dog than you, giving him all those nice things," she continued. "But—but you don't THINK. You don't try to imagine yourself chained up in one spot night and day, week in and week out, with nothing to do—no interests, no amusements, unable to get to your work, to go shooting with your friends, to do anything that you were born to do—and consider how you would like it."

Mr Peter submitted to her humbly the fact that he was not a dog.

"And you think you are not both made of the same stuff? That's just where people make the mistake, even the

kindest of them. Mr Breen, I once had a long talk with the curator of a zoological garden, and he told me that animals in confinement suffer mentally, just as we should do in their place. Unless they have occupation and companionship they go out of their minds. They get sullen and savage, and people say they are vicious, and punish them, when it is only misery. He said no happy dog ever got hydrophobia unless it was bitten; and that it was to save themselves from going mad that squirrels kept whirling their wheel and tigers running round and round their cages. They want notice, and change, and work, or they cannot bear it. The stagnation kills them— or I wish it did kill them quicker than it does. Look at your Bruce, born to work sheep, to scamper over miles of country, free as air, to be mates with some man who would know the value of such a friend, and be worthy of him. Oh, it is too cruel!"

Never had Rose displayed such eloquence, and a sudden glisten in her candid eyes put the piercing climax to it. Mr Peter's kind heart, which had been growing softer and softer with every word she spoke, was in melting state.

"Upon my soul," he declared, "you put quite a new light on it; you do indeed, Miss Pennycuick. I see your point of view exactly. But—"

With the utmost willingness to meet her views, he was unable to see how to do it. It was easy to say "Let him off the chain," but the mater, who was very particular, would never stand a dog muddying the verandahs and digging holes for his bones in the flower−beds. He, Mr Peter, was an only son, and she would do most things for him, but he was afraid she would draw the line at that.

"Well, you might at least take him for walks," Rose pleaded. "Nobody could object to that." "Yes, I might take him for walks," the young man conceded thoughtfully. "Of course, I don't get home from business till tea−time, and I have to leave directly after breakfast—"

"Our Pepper, when we go to town, takes us to the station and sees us off; and you are not at business on Saturday afternoons." "I usually play tennis or something on Saturday afternoons—"

"Well, take him and let him see you play tennis. He'd love it."

"I question whether my club would. But see here, Miss Pennycuick, I WAS going to meet some lady friends this afternoon, but now I won't; I will take him for a walk instead. And I'll get up in the mornings, and give him a run before breakfast. There!"

"Oh, how kind, how good you are!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"Not at all," he returned, glowing. "It is you who are good, taking all this trouble about us. I am only ashamed that you should have had to do it, and that you should have caught me in this state"—another blushing reference to his distressing toilet.

"Never mind your state," she consoled him sweetly, rising from her chair. "I like you better in this state than I do when you are smart. I thought you were too smart to—to condescend to trouble yourself about a poor dog."

"I am sorry you had such a bad opinion of me. It was simply—the thing didn't occur to me until you mentioned it."

"I know. But it is all right now. Well, I must go. You will never get your gun cleaned at this rate."

"Bother the gun! This is better than—I mean—won't you take a glass of wine?"

She declined emphatically and with haste, and hurried into the hall. He opened the front door for her, and they stood together for a moment on the dustless door−mat, mathematically laid upon verandah boards as white as new−peeled almonds.

"What a lovely garden!" remarked Rose, as she stepped down to it. Those were her words, but what she really said in her mind was: "Who would think he was a draper?"

Francie was aroused from her Sunday afternoon snooze on the drawing−room sofa.

"What IS the matter with that dog?" she complained pettishly. "Surely, after howling like a starved dingo all night—be quiet, Pepper! One of you is enough." Rose's terrier was up and fidgeting, with pricked ears.

"They must be killing him!" cried Deb, lifting her handsome head from her book.

"Oh, no," said Rose; "that sort of bark means joy, not pain."

"Poor, dear beast! What's making him joyful, I wonder?"

"I must go up and see," said Rose, who had carefully refrained from mentioning her forenoon proceedings.

The drowsy pair sank back upon their cushions; only Pepper accompanied her to the attic room. He jumped upon the window seat, wriggling and yapping, and they looked forth together from the open casement upon the

spectacle of Bruce and Mr Peter apparently engaged in mortal combat. The collie had realised that he was off the chain and about to take a walk, and was expressing himself not merely in frenzied yells, but in acrobatic feats that threatened to overwhelm his master. The latter, tall−hatted, frock−coated, lavender−trousered, with a cane in his hand and a flower in his button−hole, jumped and dodged wildly to escape the leaping mass, his face puckered with anxiety for the results of his experiment. Pepper's delighted comments drew his eyes upwards, and he made shift to raise his hat, with a smile that was instantly and generously repaid. Rose nodded and waved her hand, and Peter went off, making gestures and casting backward glances at her, until he was a mere dot upon the distant road, with another dot circling around him.

"Dear fellow!" she mused, when he was out of sight.

CHAPTER XV.

Bruce went unchained, within limits, and had a run nearly every day. Workmen came to put a railing and gate to the back verandah of his establishment, and Mrs Breen kept a fidgety watch upon his movements; but evidently the only son's will ruled, and he was more than faithful to his compact with Rose. She was able to see this from her commanding window, and to hear it from Bruce's mouth; and day by day her heart warmed towards Bruce's master. Many were the friendly smiles and salutes that passed between the attic window and the Breen back−yard, all unknown to Rose's sisters.

They were walking with her one Saturday afternoon, when they met Mr Peter and the collie. Pepper ran forward to greet Bruce, and they sniffed at each other's noses and wagged their respective tails in a friendly way. Deb was remarking to Rose that their pity for the Breens' dog had been quite misplaced, when a bow from her sister and a lift of the hat by the young man caused her to stop short and raise her fine brows inquiringly.

"Rose!"

"I—I spoke to him one day," explained Rose, pink as her pinkest namesake. "About Bruce."

"Who's Bruce?"

"That's Bruce—his dog."

Frances came running up. "Rose," said she indignantly, "did you bow to that man?"

"He is our neighbour next door," mumbled Rose.

"I know that. So is the wood−carter. But is that a reason why you should bow to him? Do you know who those people are?"

"They are perfectly respectable people, I believe," said Rose, growing restive.

"DRAPERS," said Frances witheringly.

"I shouldn't care if they were chimney−sweeps. They have a beautiful dog, and young Mr Breen is very kind to him, and I—I thanked him for it." "Oh, Deb!"

"Was that necessary, my dear?"

"Perhaps not. But I did."

"Well, be careful, Rosie. We are not at Redford now, you know. Girls living alone and going about in public places—"

"And that sort of person," Frances broke in crossly, "always takes advantage of a little notice. Why, he looked at you as if you were friends and equals, Rose!"

Rose turned to retort again, but feeling the weight of opinion against her, forbore. And she was glad she had never mentioned the circumstances under which she had made poor Peter Breen's acquaintance.

On a later afternoon she was in the attic room, sewing at a frock for Robbie Goldsworthy—Robert Pennycuick, after the grandfather who had been expected to leave much money—while Deb and Frances entertained visitors downstairs. Old Keziah had brought her tea and cakes, and she had had a pleasant time with her work and her thoughts, and her view of Bruce and his premises, when suddenly Frances flounced in.

"Now, madam!" exclaimed the irate young lady, "we have to thank you for this. What did I say? Give these people an inch and they will take an ell—a mile indeed, if they can get it."

"What people?" inquired Rose faintly.

"Those Breen people—those DRAPERS. They have had the cheek to come and call on us—to call and leave their cards, 'First and third Wednesday', as if they expected us to call back again!"

"Who came?"

"Mrs and Miss—with half the shop upon their backs. Debbie"—Deb was coming in behind her—"you are NOT going to return the call of those people, I TRUST?"

"Oh, I don't know," smiled Deb easily. "It would please them, and it wouldn't hurt us. There would be no need, of course, to return a second one."

"I should think it would NOT hurt us," Rose spoke up, "to behave like decent people. I never heard that it was considered high breeding and fine manners to snub your inferiors—if they are your inferiors." "You have to snub

them," said Frances, "if they don't know manners themselves."

"A very GENTLE snub," said Deb. "We are not going to be rude to the poor things. We will call once—that is, I will—in a few months' time. After all, it was hardly their fault."

"No; it is Rose's fault. Please, Rose, in future be so good as to consider your family a little, as well as your neighbours' dogs."

Rose's only reply was to start the sewing−machine and drive it vehemently. But her heart burned within her. Evidently Peter's mother and sister had been insulted in her house, after he had been so good to her.

He did not appear in the yard that evening, and next day when he did, his face was turned from her all the time. The day after that, she rattled the window and encouraged Pepper to bark to draw the young man's attention, having ready for him a smile that should counteract Francie's frowns, if smiles could do it; but again he took no notice. Then she was sure that his feelings had been hurt. Mrs and Miss Breen had returned to report a cool reception of the overtures that had been made almost certainly at his instigation—had probably reproached him for exposing them to the insolence of stuck−up snobs. Oh, it was horrid! And doubtless he thought her as bad as the rest. She had not gone downstairs to see his mother and sister, and how was he to know she had been ignorant that they were there? And still he took Bruce out for walks, before breakfast and after business in the afternoons, when he might have been playing tennis and enjoying himself.

She bore with this state of things for some time, then suddenly determined to end it. "Where there's a will there's a way." One of Deb's petticoats showed signs of fraying, and, Deb−like, she must have fresh lace for it immediately. Rose offered to go to town to fetch it, taking with her the money for her purchase.

Never before had she been to "Breen's." Second−rate, if not third or fourth, was its class amongst Melbourne shops, and the Pennycuicks had always been accustomed to the best. But when she turned in at the somewhat narrow and encumbered doorway, she was pleasantly surprised to note how far the shop ran back, and how well−stocked and busy and solidly prosperous it seemed.

He was there—not, to her great relief, behind the counter, but in a sort of raised office place at the farther end—attending to the books apparently, while keeping an eye upon other matters. Hardly had she set foot upon the carpeted aisle when his head popped up from behind his desk, and she saw herself recognised. As it was her object to be recognised, and to speak to him, she passed the lace department, the ribbons, the silks, the dress stuffs, until she reached the Manchester department, where they sold towels and table−cloths, and beautiful satin eider−downs in all the colours of the rainbow. Here she halted and asked sweetly for torchon lace.

All the way had Peter watched her, but with his head down, as if wishing to hide from her. "He fancies I shall be ashamed of him because he keeps a shop," thought she; and that was exactly what he did fancy, knowing the world and its funny little inconsistent social ways. So, when informed that she had left the lace counter far behind her, and while turning to retrace her steps, she frankly sought his eye, and catching it, bowed and smiled with all the friendliness that could be expressed in such fashion.

That smile drew Peter out. But still he came with a bashful and hesitating air, as if uncertain of his reception; so that she had to meet him half−way, with bold hand extended.

"How do you do, Mr Breen? How is Bruce? But I see how well he is, and happy—thanks to you. I am so sorry I did not have the pleasure of seeing your mother and sister when they were so kind as to call the other day; but I did not know they were in the house till they were gone."

He glowed with joy. He clasped her hand with a vigour that made it tingle for a minute afterwards.

"I was sorry too," he said. "My old mater is a good soul. I think you and she—I wanted her to see you. Another time, perhaps—"

"Oh, I hope so! We are such near neighbours." She was ready to say anything that would make him feel he was not being treated as a shopman. "And did you have your day's shooting? Were you successful?" "Well," with modest pride, "I came upon snipe unexpectedly, and brought home a couple of brace. If I had thought you would condescend to accept them, Miss Pennycuick—if I had dared—"

"Oh, thank you very much, but I could not have let you rob your mother—"

Conscious of heightened colour, and several pairs of watching eyes, Rose hastily put out her hand. Peter took it respectfully, slightly abashed.

"Can I—is there anything—anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, please," she said, struggling to remember what it was. "Some—er —lace—torchon—for my sister; that

is what I came for." "This way," said Peter gently; and they walked down the long, narrow shop together, closely scrutinised by the young women behind the counters. Two or three of these, with ingratiating smirks, converged upon the spot where their young chief halted and called aloud for torchon lace. The favoured one brought forth the stock, unexpectedly large and valuable, and the girl was soon able to make her choice. She wanted one dozen yards, and there was a piece of fourteen that Peter styled a "remnant" for her benefit. If he could have presented it to her free of cost, he would have loved to do so; as it was, she made an excellent bargain.

"I only hope they won't ask me where I got it," she said to herself on the way home. Happily, they did not. The usual Buckley was taken for granted, and Deb slashed up the lace without noticing that she had fourteen yards for twelve.

But Rose was a poor schemer, and it was inevitable that she should soon be found out.

The sisters were gathered about their window table in the attic room on the following afternoon. Keziah had brought their tea, and amid the litter of their needlework they drank it leisurely, enjoying a spell of rest. Both casements stood wide. Deb, at one end, gazed wistfully at the Malvern Hills; Frances, at the other, looked down on objects nearer home. Rose had purposely drawn her chair back farther into the room. A joyous bark arose.

"There's your young man, Rose," said Frances flippantly. "Really, the dandy has surpassed himself. Knickerbockers and a Norfolk jacket, if you please! Why, actually a horse! He is going out to ride. This it is to be a counter−jumper in these levelling times!"

"He is not a counter−jumper," said reckless Rose.

"How do you know?" returned Frances swiftly.

"Proprietors don't wait behind the counter."

"That is where he has had to learn his business, of course," said Deb. "But there is nothing disgraceful in counters. Don't be snobbish, Francie. Every trade—profession too, for that matter—has to have a counter of some sort."

"Of course it has," said Rose, heartened.

"Oh, but to see a man—a miserable apology for a man—measuring out calicoes and ribbons, and tapes and buttons, and stays and garters, and all sorts of things that a man has no right to touch—pugh!"

"Only women sell the stays and garters," corrected Rose vehemently. "And at least young Mr Breen is not a miserable apology for a man. He is as much a real man as anybody else—goes out shooting—plays tennis—"

Again Francie's cat's−paw pounced on her. "How do you know?"

"Why—why—you can see he is one of that sort," squirmed poor Rose.

"Oh!" said Frances significantly, with a firm stare at her sister's scarlet face. "Deb, there is more in this than meets the eye—even than meets the eye."

"I don't care what you say," struck Rose blindly.

"Don't tease her," Deb interposed. "And don't be putting preposterous ideas into the child's head."

"Please, Deb, I am not a child."

"No, my dear, you are not; and therefore you know, as well as we do, that young Mr Breen is nothing to us."

"Did I say he was anything? It is Francie that makes horrid, vulgar insinuations."

"But how do you know that he shoots and plays tennis?" persisted Frances, with a darkling smile.

"Because he told me so—there!"

In five minutes the inquisitor had drawn forth the whole innocent tale. She fell back in her chair, while Deb seemed to congeal slowly.

"Oh," moaned Frances, "no wonder they thought they could come and call and make friends with us! And no wonder," she added, more viciously, "that there he stands leering up at this window, when his horse has been ready this half hour."

"Is he doing that?" asked Deb quickly.

"Look at him!"

Deb rose and looked; then, with a firm hand, closed the two little windows and drew down the blinds. With a sob of rage, Rose jumped from her basket−chair, almost flung her cup and saucer upon the tea−tray, and rushed out of the room.

Thereupon the little family resolved itself into a strong government and one rebel.

"When I DO want to marry a shopkeeper," said weeping Rose to her sisters, "then it will be time enough to

make yourselves ridiculous."

But they thought not. "No use," said they, "to shut the stable door after the steed is stolen." Danger, or the beginning of danger, had distinctly declared itself, and it was their part to guard the threatened point. So they took steps to guard it. The name of Breen was not mentioned, but its flavour lurked in every mouthful of conversation, like the taste of garlic that has been rubbed round the salad bowl in the salad that has not touched it; it filled the domestic atmosphere with a subtle acrimoniousness unknown to it before. And Rose was watched—not openly, but systematically enough for her to know it —never allowed to go out alone, or to sit in the attic after a certain hour; driven into brooding loneliness and disaffection—in other words, towards her fellow−victim instead of from him.

CHAPTER XVI.

Now that she could no longer entertain, Deb refused to be entertained, much to the discontent of Frances, who pined continually for a larger and brighter life, so that the invitations fell off to nothing before the excuse of the deep mourning was worn out. But when Mrs Urquhart, always maternally solicitous for her poor Sally's girls, wrote to beg them to spend Christmas at Five Creeks, Deb and Frances, who did not, for different reasons, wish to go themselves, agreed that it would be 'the very thing' for Rose to do so. She would be absolutely safe up there, and with her old social world about her, and old interests to occupy her mind, would recover that respect for herself which seemed to have been more or less impaired by association with suburban villadom. They hoped she would stay at Five Creeks a long, long time.

"And if only Jim would keep her altogether!" sighed Frances. "I would be content with Jim now."

"I wish to goodness he would!" said Deb, with fervour—not thinking particularly of her sister as she spoke.

The matter was put to Rose, and she consented to go. Five Creeks was better than Lorne, which had been spoken of, and the companionship of Alice than the shepherding sisters in the close limits of seaside lodgings; besides, Rose was a born bush girl.

She was tenderly escorted to Spencer Street, and put into the hands of Jim himself, in town on station business. Alice met them at the other end, and the two friends slept, or rather bunked, together—the house being full for the Christmas dance—and talked the night through. But not a word about Peter Breen passed Rose's lips, so full of words as they were.

Next day the trestle−tables and Chinese lanterns, the sandwiches and creams, and what not, occupied her every moment and thought until it was time to dress, when the interest of the ball itself became supreme.

"Well, there's one good thing," said Alice, as, hemmed into a corner of a small room crowded with girls, she laced Rose's bodice, "we shall not want for men. There'll be one to each girl, and three over. The Simpsons alone have promised to bring six."

The Simpsons were new people at Bundaboo, which Mr Thornycroft had let. He now lived at Redford—in a third part of the great house, the other two−thirds being closed. He was not coming to the ball, Alice said. "Getting too old for balls."

In their white frocks and flowers, the friends went to the drawing−room, and in the thick of the arrivals Jim brought up from the bachelors' quarters the six Bundaboo young men. Mrs Simpson introduced them to Mrs Urquhart and her bevy of assistant hostesses.

"Mr Leader—Mr Henry Leader—down from Queensland; Mr Parkinson— English—globe−trotter; my two sons, whom you know; my nephew, Mr Breen."

Thus do the sportive Fates love to make mock of the most carefully−laid family plans!

Rose and Peter faced each other, sharing one blush between them. Their natural pleasure and astonishment was only equalled by their mutual admiration.

"What a little love she is in that pretty gown," thought he, a connoisseur in gowns. And "Who would take him for a draper now?" thought she, noting the vigorous frame and the perfect correctness of its garb. As a matter of fact, no one did take him for a draper, and no one cared what he was, since he was Mrs Simpson's nephew and a man.

As soon as it was understood that a previous acquaintanceship existed between them, Rose was given Peter to take care of—to show round and introduce. They walked off, elated.

"Well, I never expected to see you here!" said she.

"Nor I you," said he. "I thought I was never going to see you any more."

"How is your mother? How is dear Bruce? Will anyone take him for walks while you are away? How terribly he will miss you!"

"Well, it is something to be missed, even by a dog."

"What a nice face your aunt has! Is she your father's—?"

"No, my mother's. They are very much alike. But—you don't know my mother—"

The blessed Urquhart children romped up to them at this opportune moment, thrusting forward their basket of programmes. Rose and Peter each took a card, and Peter proceeded to business.

"With pleasure," said Rose. And then: "Oh, if you like."—"Well, only one more round one."—"I belong to the house, and must distribute myself."—"No, no, that's enough; leave room for all the nice girls I am going to introduce you to—Miss Alice Urquhart—Mr Breen, dear— Mrs Simpson's nephew, and a friend of mine in town."

It slipped out unawares. Peter's air, as he scribbled "Miss Urquhart" on his card, was seraphic. Later, Alice snatched a chance to whisper to Rose: "What a good−looking fellow! Who is he?" And Rose hastened to explain that she knew him only very slightly.

They had their first waltz together, and he danced delightfully. This was a fresh agreeable surprise to Rose—as if drapers did not take dancing lessons and make use of them like other people; she was almost indiscreet in her eulogies on his performance. But there was not room for all, or half, or a quarter, to dance at once; and the crowded house was hot, and the night outside soft, dry, delicious; and the Five Creeks garden was simply made to be sat out in.

So presently Rose and Peter found themselves leaning over a gate at the end of a long, sequestered path.

"That," said Rose, nodding towards open paddock, "is the boys' cricket ground. They play matches in the holidays with the stations round. That fence leads to Alice's fowl−yards—"

"Yes," said Peter. "But now, look here, Miss Rose—tell me straight and true—am I to understand that my position in life makes me unfit to associate with you?"

"What nonsense!" she protested, scarlet in the darkness. "What utter stuff!"

"I am in retail trade," confessed Peter mournfully, "and lots of people think that awful. Why, even the bookmakers and Jew usurers look down on us! Not that I care a straw—"

"I should think not!"

"Except when it comes to your family—"

"What does it matter about my family—when I—"

"Ah, do you? Do you forgive me for being a shopkeeper?"

"As if I ever thought of it!" mocked Rose, which was disingenuous of her. "I don't mind what anybody is if he's nice himself."

"Do you think I'm nice?"

"I am not going to pander to such egregious vanity."

"Do you think I am a gentleman? Do I pass for one—say, in a house like this?"

"I am not going to answer any more of those horrid, indelicate, unnecessary questions."

"Ah, I see—you don't."

"I DO," she flamed out, indignant with him. "You KNOW I do! Would I— if I didn't—"

Her mouth was stopped. In the twinkling of an eye it happened, before either of them knew it. He was carried away, and she was overwhelmed. An earthquake could not have given them a greater shock.

"Forgive me," he muttered tremulously, when it was too late. "I know I oughtn't to have—but I couldn't help it! You are not angry? It was dashed impudence—but—oh, I say! we shall never get such a chance as this again—could you, do you think, put up with me? Could you—I have loved you ever since that dear morning that you came about Bruce—could you try to care for me a little bit? I'd give up the business, if you wished, and go into something else—" "If you mention that blessed business again," laughed Rose hysterically, "I won't speak to you any more."

"I won't—I won't!" he promised, a joyful ring in his young voice. "As long as you don't mind—and of course I wouldn't like to disappoint the old pater—and, thank God, there's plenty of money to make you comfortable wherever you like to live—Yes, yes, I know it's awful cheek—I've no business to count chickens like this; but here we are, face to face at last, no one to keep me from speaking to you—and oh, darling, it must be time for the next dance, and I'm engaged for it—"

"Then go—go," she urged. "The one after this is ours, and I will wait here for you till you come back. It is only Jim, and he doesn't matter. I must be alone to think—to make up my mind—"

"You ANGEL!" for he knew what that meant.

Off he went, wing−footed, to get through his duty dance as best he could. Rose stayed behind, dodging

amongst the bushes to hide her white dress, deaf to Jim's strident calls. And then, presently, the lovers flitted out of the gate, across the boys' cricket ground, and down the bank of one of the five creeks, where Rose knew of a nice seat beyond the area of possible disturbance. As they sat down on it together, they leaned inwards, her head drooping to his shoulder, and his arm sliding round her waist in the most natural way in the world. Then silence, packed full. Beyond, in the moonlit waste, curlews wailing sweetly; behind, a piano barely audible from the humming house. . . .

* * * * *

"What's the matter?" asked Alice Urquhart, when her bedfellow broke out crying suddenly, for no reason that appeared.

"Oh, I don't know," cackled Rose. "I am upset with all this—this—"

"What has upset you? Aha! I saw you and that good−looking young Mr Breen making off into the garden. You've been having a proposal, I suppose?"

"Yes," sobbed Rose, between two foolish laughs, and forthwith poured out the whole story to her bosom friend. She and Peter had decided not to disclose it to a soul until further consideration; but she was so full that a touch caused her to run over.

Miss Urquhart's feelings, when she realised the fact that one of the Pennycuicks was committed to marry a draper, expressed themselves at first in a rather chilling silence. But subsequently, having reviewed the situation from its several sides, and weighed the pros and cons, she decided to assist her friend to make the best of it, as against all potential enemies.

"Of course, they will be as mad as so many March hares," said Alice, referring to the other Pennycuicks. "But after all, when you come to think of it, what is there in a draper's shop any more than in a soft−goods warehouse?—and that's quite aristocratic, if it's big enough. Trade is trade, and why we should make chalk of one and cheese of another passes me. Oh, you've only got to be rich nowadays to be received anywhere. These Breens seem well off, and anyway, there are the Simpsons—they are all right. Solid comfort, my dear, is not to be despised, especially when a girl can't pick and choose, and may possibly never get another chance. He is awfully presentable, too, and most gentlemanly, I am sure. Oh, on the whole—if you ask me—I'd say, stick to him."

Alice's voice was sad, and she sighed inwardly.

"I'm going to stick to him," said Rose.

"Well, you may count on me. I'll get them all asked here for a picnic, and we'll go over to Bundaboo to invite them—tomorrow. Mrs Simpson said he was only with her for a few days."

"You darling!"

"And if I were in your place, Rose, I'd marry him just as soon as he wanted me to. I'd walk out and get it done quietly, and tell them afterwards. It would save a lot of unpleasantness, and it wouldn't force the hostile clans to try and make one family when they never could."

"I don't see why they couldn't. Mrs Simpson is his mother's sister—"

"Oh, well, we shall see. I don't know about Deb and Mary, but France can be all sorts of a cat when the fit takes her; and as she is certain to oppose it to the bitter end, she will never have done irritating his people and setting everybody at loggerheads. However, never mind that now." She enveloped Rose in a comforting embrace. "We'll just enjoy ourselves while we can. And until we MUST start the fuss with the girls at home, we'll keep things dark, shall we? Just you and I and he. You can tell him, when you see him tomorrow, that I am his friend."

"I will—I will! And he will adore you for your goodness."

Alice, with still no lover of her own, was pleased with this prospect. And so Rose had a heavenly time for a week or two—Peter extending his visit to match hers—and went home, within a day of him, in good heart for the inevitable struggle.

CHAPTER XVII.

The starting of the fuss was thus described by the starter in her first letter to her friend:

"Oh, my dear, it is simply awful! There is not a scrap of hope. Dear old Deb is the worst, because she cries—fancy DEB crying! I don't care what Francie says and does, only, if she were not my sister, I would never speak to her again. Even Mary is antagonistic, though I don't believe she would be if it were not for that insufferable husband of hers; he thinks himself, and puts it into her head, that we are all going to fall into the bottomless pit if we let trade into the family— as if nine−tenths and more of the aristocracy of the country were not traders, and my Peter is as good as her parson any day. But I don't care, except for Deb. I do hate her to have to cry, through me, and to be so kind at the same time. She scolds Francie for being horrid—that does no good, she says, and she is quite right—and then asks me if I have any love left for her, and all that kind of thing. It makes me feel like a selfish brute; and yet it would not be unselfish to sacrifice Peter. Really, I am quite distacted. I have hardly slept a wink since I came back."

Further details followed:

"I did not know until I got a letter from him (by the gardener) that Peter came this morning to call—THE call—and was not let in. Keziah had been got at, you must know, and works against us; the old liar told him (under instructions, of course) that none of us was at home!—she that goes to church every Sunday, and pretends to be so pious. Old hypocrite! Well, as I was reading Peter's letter, the door−bell rings, and who should it be but old Daddy Breen coming to demand what we mean by it, snubbing his precious son, whom he thinks good enough for a princess (and so he is). HE was not going to be turned from the door—not he; and presently I heard him and Deb at it hammer and tongs in the drawing−room, and she came up to me afterwards simply in flames. She WAS wild. My dear, she has left off crying and started to fight. Papa Breen (I am afraid he is a bit bumptious for what she calls his class in life) turned the scale, and now she is as implacable as Francie. She says she will NOT have the house of Pennycuick disgraced (or words to that effect) while she is alive to prevent it; and when I ask her to be just to Peter, who is no more answerable for his family than I am for mine, and not to judge him off−hand before she knows a scrap about him, she simply looks at me as if she itched to box my ears. Isn't it too hard? Other girls have such a lovely time when they are engaged—everybody considering them and giving them opportunities to be together. There's not going to be anything of that sort for us, I can plainly see. Well, I shall not give him up, so they need not think it. . . .

"I have seen my poor old boy. He was much cut up, but feels better now. . . . He asked me to go and see his mother. . . .The moment I walked in and he said, 'Mother, here she is,' the darling opened her arms, and we just hugged as if I was her daughter already. There is nobody like mothers. . . .

"Papa Breen came home while I was there. I thought he was going to be aggrieved, but he was not with ME. If it is not a snobbish thing to say, he is rather proud of his son's choice. He was a bit too fussy and outspoken, and dear Peter got the fidgets wondering what he would say next; but I did not mind. He talked about building us a house, but Peter whispered to me that that would take too long, and that already he had one in his eye (I know it—a lovely place, with the prettiest grounds, and stables, and coach−house, and all). Nothing is too good for me. I tried to pacify the girls by telling them I should have a comfortable home; but they seem to think that the vulgarest feature of the whole affair. It may be, but it's nice. Would you condescend to come and stay with a draper's wife sometimes? We are going to have Bruce to live with us. . . .

"Then I made Peter come home with me, and I took him in myself to see Deb. He behaved as nicely as possible, but it was no use. 'She is of age, Mr Breen,' says Deb, with that look of hers; 'she will do as she chooses, but she will never do this with my consent.' And I feel I never shall. Papa Breen sticks in her throat. If only she had seen Peter before his father came, and not after! But I daresay it would have been the same. They are too eaten up with their prejudices to begin to know him. . . .

"It is quite hopeless! Here I live in my own home without a friend, and he is treated like a pariah, my poor dear boy! He has been to see me two or three times, as he has a perfect right to do, and they have just had him shown into the drawing−room, and left him to me, neither of them coming near. And this while Bennet

Goldsworthy loafs all over the house, as if it was his own, and presumes to look at me in a superior sort of way, as if I was one of his dirty little Sunday−school children in disgrace. They bring him up into the attic even—our own private room—mine as much as theirs; they never did it before, and it is only because he is banded with them against me. Well, I wouldn't marry Bennet Goldsworthy if there was not another man in the world...

"I have my ring—SUCH diamonds! too valuable, I tell Peter; but he says nothing can be that—and I know they can't help seeing it, because the whole room flashes when I turn it this way and that, like blue lightning playing; but they all pretend not to. Since they find they cannot break our engagement, the idea is to ignore it as if it was something so low as to be beneath their notice. Perhaps they fancy that will wear me out; but it won't. . . . If they had been nice, and pleaded with me, and if Peter had not been so VERY dear and good, I might have caved in; but not now. And indeed, I am sure I never should anyway, only we might have agreed to differ without quarrelling, which we never did before. Oh, it is too miserable! Poor Mr and Mrs Breen must hate the very name of Pennycuick, and they will end by hating me if this goes on. . . .Peter has bought the house, and is asking me to hurry our marriage, to get me out of it. He says a private ceremony would not be dishonourable under the circumstances. It seems to me a mean sort of way to go to him, but—what do YOU think?"

"My dear," wrote Alice Urquhart, "I think Peter is right. Next time he asks you, you say yes. It will be a real kindness to both families, who would never know what to do with a house wedding. Besides, then you might have to be given away by B. G. Walk out quietly and unbeknown, and don't come back. Write from the Blue Mountains or somewhere—'Yours ever, Rose Breen.' And later on, when things have settled down, their hearts will melt, and they will come and see you. Let me know what day, and I will run down (to the dentist) to see fair play and sign the register.

"Now, you need not have any scruples, child, because the whole of your husband's family approve of the match (Simpsons delighted, if a little huffy for the moment to see solid worth looked down upon), and Deb and the others are certain to come round when they find it is no use doing anything else. Outsiders don't matter; and I should hate touting for wedding presents in such a mixed concern. As for your clothes, you have plenty; when you want more, you can get them cost price at the shop. It is a very good shop, I hear, and I mean to be a steady customer from this out. Oh, yes, and I will come and see you, old girl, nows and thens, when I have to go to town. And you and Peter must spend all your Christmases up here. While he is seeing his people at Bundaboo, you can camp with me, like old times."

* * * * *

At the last moment Rose broke down, and wept upon the breast of her favourite sister in the act of bidding her goodbye—perhaps because Frances chanced to be absent at the time.

"Oh, Debbie darling, I won't deceive you—I am not going shopping; I am going into Melbourne to get married—to get married quietly and have done with it, so as not to be a nuisance to you any more."

"Married!" gasped Deb, holding the agitated creature at arm's−length. "What—NOW? And you spring this on us without a word of warning—"

"What was the use, Deb? You know what you would have said. I have GOT to have him, dear—I really have—and this seemed the only way."

"Where is he?"

"Waiting till I'm ready. They have a carriage outside. His mother and sister are going with us. His father will join us when we get there. And Alice Urquhart, who is in town, and one of his cousins from Bundaboo—quite respectable and above−board, you see, only very quiet, so as not to trouble you and the girls and poor dear Bennet Goldsworthy more than we can help—"

"Not trouble us!" broke in Deb, her face, that had paled a moment ago, flaming scarlet. "Rose, in your wildest aberrations, I did not credit you with being capable of humiliating us to this extent."

"Ah, you always say that! If you only knew him; but some day you will, and then you will wonder how you could have set yourself against us so. I can't help it, Deb. I did it for the best. Marry him I must and will, and I am only trying to do it in a way as inoffensive to you as possible."

"You call this an inoffensive way? But those people cannot be expected to know—"

"They can—they do. Don't insult them any more. They are giving me everything they can think of to make me happy, and here I have no home—no love—no sympathy from anybody—"

Tears gushed from her eyes and Deb's as from the same spring; they were instantly locked in each other's

arms.

"Poor little Rosie! Poor dear child! But you don't understand pet—you don't know what you are doing—going right out of your class—out of your world—"

"But to a good husband, Debbie, and the man I love—and that's first of all! And I must go to him now—I must not keep him waiting. Bless you, dearest! I am happy now. Never mind the others. You can tell them after I'm gone. But I felt that I must speak to YOU before I went. Oh, I am so glad I did! Goodbye, darling! I must go."

"You must NOT go," said Deb, swallowing her tears and resuming her imperious air. "Not this way, Rose, as if your family had cast you off. How can you treat us so, child? But perhaps we deserve it; only you don't see what you are doing as clearly as we do—"

"Deb, Deb, don't stop me! They are waiting. It is late now!"

The bride−elect, pale with fright, struggled in her sister's strong hands, which held her fast.

"Where is Mr Breen?" demanded Deb.

"Waiting at his house—waiting for me—"

"I must send for him."

"Oh, Deb, not now, when everything is settled, and they have had all the expense and trouble—"

"Will you fetch him, Rose, if I let you go? For one minute only. No, I won't stop it. I can't, of course; but I must go with you, Rose—I MUST."

"Oh, Debbie, WOULD you? Oh, how I wish I had known before! Yes, I'll run and bring him. We must drive faster, that's all. Oh, Deb, how happy this will make us! But—"

"Run away and fetch him—ask him, with my compliments if he will be so good—and I will get my hat on while you are gone."

How she managed it was a mystery, but by the time the bridegroom appeared, Deb was in her best walking costume, hatted and veiled, with a pair of new pale−coloured gloves in her hand.

"Mr Breen," said she, grave and stately, "I am going to ask a favour of you. Allow me to take my sister to the church and give her away."

Peter was naturally flurried, besides being a trifle overawed. He mumbled something to the effect that he was sure his family would be "quite agreeable", and that his sister would give up her place in the carriage and go by train; and Deb, facing him with the air of a duchess, thought how thoroughly "shoppy" his manner was. His splendid new clothes helped to give her that impression. Fine dressing was one of the Breens' trifling errors of taste (as drapers) which damned them in her eyes. But what would she have thought if he had not done all honour to his bride in this respect?

"WE will go by train," said she decisively. "I have already delayed you a little, and you must be there first. The train will be quicker than driving, so that we shall be quite in time." She smiled as she caught his swift glance of alarm at Rose. "No, I am not going to kidnap her; I only wish to observe the proprieties a little—for her sake."

"If the proprieties have not been observed," retorted Peter, suddenly bold, "it has not been ALL my fault, Miss Pennycuick." "Perhaps not," she said gently, for she was a generous woman—"perhaps not. At any rate," holding out her hand, "we must let bygones be bygones now. Be good to her—that is all I ask." Peter seized her hand in his superfine glove, and wrung it emotionally, while Rose embraced her sister's left arm and kissed her sleeve. Then, after a hurried consultation of timetables, the bridegroom retired, and was presently seen to clatter past the house in the bridal carriage, which had white horses to it, to Deb's disgust.

She and Rose talked little on their journey. Rose was questioned about clothes and pocket−money, and asked whether she had a safe pocket anywhere. On Rose answering that she had, Deb pressed into it a closed envelope, which she charged her sister not to open until away on her honeymoon. Rose disobeyed the order, and found a hastily scrawled cheque for one hundred pounds—money which she knew could ill be spared.

"Oh, you darling!" she murmured fondly. "But I won't take it, Deb—I WON'T. It would leave you poor for years, while I shall have heaps of everything—"

"If you don't," broke in Deb, tragically stern and determined—"if you don't take it and buy your first clothes with it, I will never forgive you as long as I live. Child, don't you see—?"

Rose saw this much—Deb's horror of the thought of being beholden to the Breens for a post−nuptial trousseau. Reluctantly she pocketed the gift.

"But I shall never want it, you know."

"I don't care about that," said Deb.

The bridegroom's relief of mind when he saw the bride coming was so great as to do away with all the usual embarrassment of a man so circumstanced.

"Ha! now we are all right," he said to Harry Simpson, cousin and best man; and forthwith acted as if the trouble were over instead of just beginning. There was nothing shoppy in his demeanour now, even to Deb's prejudiced eye.

The sisters walked up the nave to the altar, hand in hand. Deb passed the bridesmaid, Alice Urquhart, without a look—her people had brought the young pair together, and were answerable for these consequences— and similarly ignored those walking fashion−plates, Mrs and Miss Breen. She landed her charge at the appointed hassock, and quietly facing the clergyman, stood still and dry−eyed amid the usual tearful flutter, apparently the calmest of the party. But poor Deb suffered pangs unspeakable, and her excessive dignity was maintained only by the sternest effort.

In the vestry, after the ceremony, she was introduced by the bride to her new relations; and Papa Breen, with a great show of magnanimity, expressed his satisfaction at seeing Miss Pennycuick "on this suspicious occasion", and formally invited her to what he called "a little snack" at Menzies', where a gorgeous wedding breakfast had been prepared at his orders.

"Thank you very much, Mr Breen," she said affably. "It would have given me great pleasure, but if you will excuse me, I must run home to my other sisters, whom I left in ignorance of this—this event—which concerns them so nearly."

"Oh, Deb, DO come!" pleaded the bride.

No; the line had to be drawn somewhere. Deb was very kind, very polite, very plausible with her excuses; but to Menzies' with those people and their white−horsed carriage she would not go.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Rose had never been reckoned a person of importance by her family, but now that she was gone, there remained a terrible emptiness where she had been. She was one of those unselfish, good−natured members of households to whom falls the stocking−mending, the errand−going, the fetching and carrying, the filling of gaps generally; and at every turn Deb and Frances missed her unobtrusive ministrations, which they had accepted as as much matters of course as the attentions of the butcher and baker. It was presently perceived that Keziah missed her too—that Keziah, who had loyally opposed the plebeian marriage, was become a turncoat and renegade, blessing where she should have cursed, blaming where she should have praised—yes, blaming even Queen Deborah, who, needless to say, took her head off for it.

It had been Keziah's own choice to follow the sisters into exile, and to share the privations involved in their change of life. She had given up her Redford luxuries and importance to become a general servant, with only her kitchen to sit in, for their sakes; and she had cheerfully abided by her choice—until Rose went. Rose was the one who had understood the cost of the sacrifice, and who had lightened it by sympathetic companionship. They had cleaned rooms, and made cakes and puddings, and set hens, and stirred jam, and ironed frocks and laces together; they had spent hours in pleasant gossip over the many homely subjects that interested both; their relation had been more that of mother and daughter than of servant and mistress. Regarding her as virtually her child, Keziah had been quick to spring to the side of authority in the matter of the irregular love−affair; the natural parental impulse was to nip it in the bud. But "Providence" had decided the issue in this case. And a flirtatious girl was one thing, and a respectable married woman another. And Keziah was lonely, and felt neglected and "put upon" when nobody came to talk to her in her kitchen, or to help her with her cooking and ironing—and particularly after she had told Deb that it was a shame to bear malice to Miss Rose now, and Deb had commanded her to mind her own business.

She was suspected of treacherous visits to the house next door; she was known to have spent Sunday afternoons with Mrs Peter herself. The iniquity of these proceedings was in the secrecy she observed, or tried to observe, regarding them. It was she who knew, before anybody else, when a baby Breen was coming—and if a married woman was a personage to Keziah, an incipient mother was a being of the highest rank. She had forgiven Mary everything for the sake of her black−eyed boy; now she took the news that Rose was what she called "interesting" to Deb, and demanded that action should be taken upon it, with an air that was almost truculent. Deb, of course, did not believe in being spoken to, even by Keziah, in that way.

"Has the muffin boy been?" she inquired, with a steady look.

"It's too soon yet—and I can tell you, Miss Deb, that if it was you in her place, SHE wouldn't keep it up like this—and at such a time too."

"When the muffin boy comes, Keziah, please pay him the sixpence we owe him from last week. You will find the money on my writing−table."

"Well, I don't care—I call it a shame not to go to her—"

"Perhaps you would like to go to her yourself?" Deb swiftly changed her tone.

"I'd like nothing better," the old woman retorted, with spirit, "if you are agreeable."

"I am perfectly agreeable."

"Well, it was only the other day she said she'd give anything to have me, if it wasn't for taking me away from you."

"Oh, pray don't consider that. I can easily get somebody else," said Deb affably, though her surprise at the idea of Keziah wanting to leave her was only equalled by her dismay.

Keziah, also surprised to find herself of so much less consequence than she had supposed, said that, if that was the case, she'd go and see Miss Rose about it.

"You can go now," said Deb.

"Thank you, Miss Deb, I will," said Keziah, "as soon as I have cleared up. Would a month's notice suit you? I don't wish to put you about at all."

"A month will be ample," said Deb. "A week, if you like."

"I'll see what Miss Rose says," said Keziah.

Rose, after the interview, wrote affectionately to Deb, to say she would not dream of taking Keziah if Deb wanted her; Deb wrote affectionately to Rose, to say that she would be rather glad than otherwise to make the change, as the work was too much for such an old woman. So Keziah went over to the Breen camp, where she had comfort and companionship, and her own way in everything; and Deb began to experiment with the common or garden 'general' as purveyed by Melbourne registry offices.

She loathed these creatures, one and all. They were of a race unknown at Redford, and she was singularly unlucky in the specimens that fell to her; although some of them could have been made something of by a mistress who knew how to do it. It is only fair to state that they loathed her—for a finicking, unreasonable, stuck−up poor woman, who gave herself the airs of a wealthy lady. They came at the rate of two a month, and each one as she passed seemed to leave the little house meaner, dingier, more damaged than before. It was not living, it was "pigging", Frances said—and Deb agreed with her—although when Keziah ventured to call one day to inquire into the state of things, Deb calmly asserted that all was well.

In despair she tried a lady−help, in the person of Miss Keene, dying to return to her dear family (from relations who did not want her) on any terms.

"Whatever we ask her to do we must do ourselves," said Deb to grumbling Frances, who seemed never willing to do anything; "and of course we shall have to get a washwoman, and a charwoman to scrub; but it will be cheaper in the end. And oh, anything rather than sticky door−handles and greasy spoons, and those awful voices hailing one all over the house!"

But it was not cheaper, nor was the arrangement satisfactory in any way after the first fortnight. Miss Keene, spoiled at Redford as they had been, was as unfit for crude housework, and she aggravated her incompetence by weeping over it. She had not gathered from Deb's letters that the change in the family fortunes was as great as it now proved to be; and Deb had not anticipated the effect of adversity upon one so easily depressed. She had no 'heart', poor thing. She struggled and muddled, sighing for flowers for the vases while the beds were unmade; and when she saw a certain look on Deb's face, wept and mourned and gave up hope. So they "pigged" still, although they did not defile the furniture with unwashed hands, and the plate and crockery with greasy dish−cloths. With no knowledge of cookery, they lived too much on tinned provisions—a diet as wasteful as it was unwholesome—feeding their wash−and−scrub−women with the same; and their efforts to support the burden of their domestic responsibilities deprived them of outdoor exercise and mental rest and recreation—kept them at too close quarters with one another, each rubbing her quivering prickles upon the irritable skins of the other two. Frances bore the strain with least good−nature and self−control, and since she had to vent her ill−humour on someone, naturally made Miss Keene her victim when it was a choice between her and Deb. The poor lady grew more and more disappointed, discouraged and tearful. She became subject to indigestion, headaches, disordered nerves; finally fell ill and had to have the doctor. The doctor said she was completely run down, and that rest and change of air were indispensable. She went away to her relatives, weeping still, wrapped in Deb's cloak, and with all Deb's ready money in her pocket; and she did not come back.

Then Deb tried to carry on alone. Any sort of registry office drudge would have been welcome now, but had become an expense that she dared not continue. Moreover, the spectre of poverty, looming so distinct and unmistakable in the house, was a thing to hide, if possible, from anybody who could go outside and talk about it. The thing had become a living terror to herself—its claws Jew money−lenders, so velvety and innocent when her wilful ignorance made first acquaintance with them; but nobody—not even Mr Thornycroft, not even Jim, CERTAINLY not Rose —could be allowed to play Perseus to this proud Andromeda. Until she could free herself, they were not even to know that she was bound. Of course, she need not have been bound; it was her own fault. She should have managed better with the resources at her disposal than to bring herself to such a pass, and that so soon; either Mary or Rose would certainly have done so in her place. But Nature had not made her or Frances—whose rapacities had been one cause of the financial breakdown—for the role of domestic economists; they had been dowered with their lovely faces for other purposes.

That the fine plumage is for the sun was a fact well understood by Frances, at any rate. And she was wild at the wrongs wrought by sordid circumstances—her father's and sister's heedlessness—upon herself. She thought only of herself. Deb was getting old, and she deserved to suffer anyway; but what had Frances done to be

deprived of her birth−right, of all her chances of success in life? Eighteen, and no coming out—beautiful, and nobody to see it—marriageable, and out of the track of all the eligible men, amongst whom she might have had her pick and choice. She had reason for her passionate rebelliousness against this state of things; for, while a pretty face is theoretically its own fortune anywhere, we all see for ourselves how many are passed over simply for want of an attractive setting. It was quite on the cards that she might share the fate of those beauties in humble life to whom romantic accidents do not occur, for all her golden hair and aristocratic profile, her figure of a sylph and complexion of a wild rose.

The fear of this future combined with the acute discomfort of the present to make her desperate. She cast about for a way of escape, a pathway to the sun. One only offered—the landlord.

He was an elderly landlord, who had lately buried a frumpy old wife, and he was as deeply tainted with trade as Peter Breen; but he had retired long since from personal connection with breweries and public−houses—and a brewer, in the social scale, was only just below a wholesale importer, if that—and he was manifestly rolling in money, after the manner of his kind. Half the streets around belonged to him, and his house towered up in the midst of his other houses, a great white block, with a pillared portico—a young palace by comparison. Above all, he had no known children.

From the first he had taken an interest in his pretty girl−tenants. He had liked to call in person to inquire if the cellar kept dry and the chimney had ceased smoking; and he had been most generous in offering improvements and repairs before they were even asked for. Deb had blighted these unbusiness−like overtures on her own account, and Frances herself had said the rudest things about them and him—but not lately. In the utter dullness and barrenness of her life, she had been glad to accept the civilities of anything in the shape of a man—to try her 'prentice hand on any material. All the armoury of the born beauty was hers, and she knew as well how to use each weapon effectively as a blind kitten knows how to suck milk. They were easily successful with the old fool, who is ever more of a fool than the young fool; and when she found that, she found something to entertain her. She not only received Mr Ewing when he called, but talked to him at the gate when he went past—and he went past several times a day. Now, when the situation at home had grown desperate, and she was looking all ways for means to save herself, his amusing infatuation became a matter for serious thought. COULD she? She was a hard case, but even she wavered. He was probably sixty, and she was eighteen. Oh, she couldn't! But when, after Miss Keene's departure, Deb told her they could no longer afford hired help, and that she (Frances) must give up her lazy ways and take her share of that intolerable housework, then Frances changed her mind. Beggars could not be choosers.

Deb felt like the camel under the last straw when the announcement of the proposed marriage was made to her. It was worse than Mary's—worse than Rose's—worse than any other misfortune that had befallen the family. She sat down and wept at the thought of what the Pennycuicks had come to. She rated Frances furiously; she reasoned with her; she pleaded with her; she tried to bribe her; but Frances was getting boxes of diamonds, and sets of furs and lace, and what not, and it was useless for Deb to attempt to outbid the giver of these things, or to part her sister from them. She loved the old man, Frances said— he certainly was a decently−mannered, good−natured, rather fine−looking, and most generous old man—and he was going to take her everywhere and give her a good time—and she would never have to go shabby again as long as she lived; and if Deb refused her a proper wedding, law or no law, she would run away with him, as Mary had run away with Bennet Goldsworthy, and Rose with Peter Breen.

Whether this dire threat prevailed, or the temptation of the money, or whether she could not any longer fight against fate, Deb gave in. After all, Frances was not to be judged as an ordinary girl—she was a hard−hearted, tough−fibred, prosaic little minx, for which reason Deb pitied the prospective husband more than she did her; and if she did not do this bad thing now, the chances were that she would do a worse thing later on. She was made to disport herself in the sunshine of the world; she was of the type of woman that must have men about her; she would get her "rights", as she called them, somehow, by fair means or foul. Deb was sufficiently a woman of the world herself to recognise this, and the uselessness of thinking she could alter it. Well, money is a consolatory thing—she knew its value now; and there was that additional comfort, which, of course, she did not own to—the thought of where Mr Ewing would be when Mrs Ewing was in her prime.

"You dear old thing!" the bride−elect patronised her elder sister. "James is so pleased to have your consent, and he says he won't ask you to give me my share of what father left us—it would be but a drop in the bucket

anyway; you are to keep it all yourself."

Deb had had whole control of the fragments of his once large fortune left by Mr Pennycuick to his four daughters, on behalf of any of them unmarried or under age; but Mary and Rose—although Peter had also protested against it—had been paid the value of their shares (whence the Jew element in the present difficulties); and the unforeseen marriage of Frances at eighteen threatened total bankruptcy to the remaining sister. Yet Deb said, with fierce determination:

"Of course you will have what is your due, like the others."

"I'm sure he won't take it, Deb. He said he wouldn't."

"I don't care what he says. It concerns you and me—not him."

"I really should not miss it, dear. I am to have a thousand a year to draw against, for just nothing but my clothes and pocket−money."

"I am glad to hear it," said Deb. "You can give your own income to the poor."

"You really won't keep it?"

"Is it likely I would keep what doesn't belong to me?"

"Well, then," said Frances, her easy conscience satisfied, "we can put it into my trousseau. I MUST have a decent trousseau mustn't I?"

"Of course!"

Frances saw to it that she had a decent one. Now was the time, the only time, that she should want her money, and she did not spare it. She ordered right and left, and Deb seemed equally reckless. The bills were left for her to settle—of course made out in her name. Mr Ewing pressed for permission to pay them, and the cost of the wedding, and Miss Pennycuick could hardly forgive him the deadly insult. He also desired that she should occupy her villa rent−free, and she gave him notice on the spot.

"I shall not continue to keep house when I am alone," said she grandly. "I intend to travel for a time."

The wedding was quiet, but as "decent" as the trousseau. The other sisters were invited, and Bennet Goldsworthy—who delighted in the connection, and received a thumping fee—performed the ceremony. Deb gave the bride away, but was also treated as the bridesmaid, and had a diamond bracelet forced upon her. She sold it as soon as the donor's back was turned, together with every article of jewellery in her possession, every bit of silver plate, and all her furniture. The breakfast was very elegant, and served in a private room at one of the best hotels; the bride's handsome luggage had also been brought thither, and it was the meeting−place of the family which so seldom met. There, also, when she had parted from Frances, Deb parted from Mary, so silent and constrained, and from Rose, over−dressed, for her station, in her rich gown and Brussels lace (but nevertheless sniffed at and condescended to by her still more wealthy sister), and from the uncongenial brothers−in−law, to whom she was so discouragingly polite. Their expressed anxiety to befriend and to see more of her was gently but firmly ignored.

"I will write," she said. "I will see you again soon. I will let you know my plans. Good−bye!"

And they went. There were no friends to go, for she had insisted on inviting none—for fear of the lynx eyes and the destructive influence upon her plans of Mr Thornycroft and Jim. She gained the one end she had schemed for throughout—to get past the risks of the public marriage and back to her struggle in obscurity, unmolested, unpitied, unshamed. The Urquharts wrote, and Mr Thornycroft, when he sent his present; but she had "bluffed" them with her implied misrepresentations, and hurt their feelings by not wanting them at the wedding. Jim was easily snubbed; Mr Thornycroft—though he did not mention it—was ill at the time.

So she got rid of all possible hindrances, and then—professing to go travelling—went nobody knew where, and was virtually lost for years.

Frances drove away from the hotel in her smart carriage, with her smart luggage and smart maid, and her amorous old husband, and never thought or cared what was to become of her abandoned sister. She could only think of her own exciting affairs.

Partly they were unsatisfactory, no doubt. All her rights were not hers even now—no, not by a long way. But oh, how much better was this than the drab and shabby and barren existence for ever left behind! She was bound, indeed; yet she was free—freer than another might have been in her place, and far, far less bound. One must expect to pay some tax to Fortune for such extraordinary gifts, and Frances was not the one to pay it in heart's blood. She was philosophically prepared to pay it in her own coin, and be done with it, and then give herself to the

enjoyment of the pleasures of her lot.

Her first enjoyment was in her beautiful going−away dress—grey cloth and chinchilla fur, with flushes of pink as delicate as the rose of her cheeks—and in her knowledge of the effect she made in that dream of a costume. There was no hiding her light under a bushel any more. The highway, and the middle of it, for her now—her proud husband strutting there beside her—and every passer−by turning to look at and to admire her. There was joy in the occupancy of the best suite of rooms in the best hotel at every place she stopped at during her gay and well−filled bridal holiday; joy in the dainty meals—so long unknown; in the obsequious servants, in the plentiful theatres, in the ever−ready carriage that took her to them, in the having one's hair done to perfection by an expert maid, in sweeping forth with one's silks and laces trailing, and one's diamonds on. These were the delights for which her little soul had so long yearned; she now pursued them greedily. She could not rest if she were not doing something to display herself and feed her craving for what is known as seeing the world. Her husband was almost as obsequious as the servants—doubtless because from the first she took the beauty's high hand with him, as well as the attitude of the superior, naturally assumed by youth towards age—and he enjoyed the sensation she made almost as much as she did. Visibly he swelled and preened himself when his venerable contemporaries cast the eye of surprise, not to say of envy, upon the conjunction of his complacent figure and that of the bride who might have been his grand−daughter; he toiled for that pleasure, and to make pleasure for her, as no old gentleman should toil; he gave her everything she asked for, including his own ease and consequence, his own vital health and strength.

But the honeymoon waned, and the novelty wore off, and prudence and old habits resumed their sway. He grew tired of incessant gadding about, alarmed at his symptoms of physical overstrain, weary for his arm−chair and his club, and his men friends and his masculine occupations. She, on the other hand, insatiable for admiration and excitement still, was weary of his constant company. It became the kill−joy of her festive days, growing from a necessary bore to an intolerable irritation as the dimensions of her little court of younger gallants enlarged about her. Therefore she had no objection to his halting on the toilsome path, so long as he allowed her to go on alone.

It was not a case of allowing, however. He might object, and did; but he was no match for her either in diplomacy or in fight, and her cajoleries were usually sufficient for her ends, without calling out the reserves behind them. In any contest between selfishness and unselfishness, the result is a foregone conclusion.

So she began to go about with miscellaneous escorts, to play the combined parts of frisky matron and society beauty—an intoxicating experience; while the supporter of that proud position played the humble role of chief comer−stone, unseen and unconsidered in the basement of the fabric. He attended to his investments and increasing infirmities, and made secret visits to a married daughter (wife of a big hotel−keeper), who hated her young step−mother, and whose existence Frances ignored.

One day, Guthrie Carey, after several voyages to other ports, appeared again in Melbourne. He had just landed, and was strolling along Collins Street, when he encountered a vision of loveliness that almost took away his breath.

"What! It is not Miss Frances, surely?"

"It is not," smiled she, all her beauty at its conscious best as she recognised his, which was that of a man of men, splendid in his strong prime. And she told him who she was, and a few other things, as they stood on the pavement—she so graceful in her mature self−possession, he staring at her, stupidly distraught, like a bewildered school−boy.

"I had no idea—" he mumbled.

"That I was married? Alas, yes!"—with a sad shake of the head. "We girls are fated, I think."

"Miss Deb?"

"Oh, not Deb; she has escaped so far."

"Is she well?"

"I have not seen her lately, but I am sure she is, she always is." "She is not in Melbourne?"

"No. I don't quite know where she is. She has got a wandering fit on. Come and have some lunch with me, and I'll tell you all the news."

They turned into a restaurant, and had a meal which took a long time to get through. In the middle of the afternoon they parted, on the understanding that he would dine with her later in her own house. At the end of the few days that were virtually filled with him, Mrs Ewing sat down in her fine boudoir to weep over her hard fate.

"Oh, why wasn't HE the one to have the money! Oh, why do we meet again, now that it is too late!"

At the end of a few more days she went to her old husband to ask him how he was. He said he was a bit troubled with his lumbago, but otherwise fairly well.

"What you want," said she, "is a sea−voyage."

He thought not. He had never found the sea suit him. And travelling was a great fatigue. And it was the wrong time of year for it, anyhow. They had a good home, and it was the best place.

But she knew better. She had made up her mind, and it was useless for him to rebel. The sea−voyage was decided on—not so much because it would benefit his health as because his young wife had not seen England and Europe, and was dying to do so.

Then they discussed routes.

"The thing to do," said Mrs Ewing, "is not to crowd up with that lot in the mail steamers, where you can't do as you like, or have any special attentions, but to go in a smaller vessel, where you would be of some importance, and have your liberty, and plenty of space, and no tiresome rules and restrictions—"

"My dear child, you don't know those second−rate lines. I do. I assure you you'd be very sorry for yourself if I let you travel by them. They are not YOUR style at all."

"Yes, I was talking to Captain Carey about it, and that was his advice, and HE knows. On his ship they have accommodation for about six passengers, and he suggested that, if we were quick about it, we might be able to secure the whole, so as to be exactly as if we were on a yacht of our own. They have a fair cook; but we could take any servants we liked, and make ourselves comfortable in our own way— nobody to interfere with us. He doesn't go through the hot canal. He will be back from Sydney in three weeks—just nice time to get ready in."

Of course, they went that way. And perhaps it is better to leave the rest of the story to the imagination of the reader, who, one hopes, for Guthrie Carey's sake, is a common−sense person, as well as a dispassionate student of human nature.

CHAPTER XIX.

Deb was at Redford once more.

In her own room too, surrounded by familiar objects—the six−foot dressing−table and the nine−foot wardrobe, and the Aspinalled book−case that was a fixture, amongst other things. She had not taken them to her suburban villa, nor sent for them afterwards. Meanwhile, Mr Thornycroft had bought them with the place, and taken care of them, as of everything that she had left behind. They had been in his possession now for several years.

The strange thing in the room was Mr Thornycroft himself—Mr Thornycroft on the little white bed that Deb used to sleep on, his hair white, his once stalwart frame reduced to a pale wreck of skin and bone.

"You will forgive me for coming here," he apologised. "I have not been using the things. But they had me moved for coolness—the south−east aspect, and being able to get a current through—"

"I am thankful they did. It is the best place for you this weather. But there's one thing I shall never forgive you—that you didn't let me know before."

She was sitting at his bedside, holding his hand—she, too, much changed, thinner, sadder, shabbier, or rather, less splendidly turned out than had been her wont in earlier days; beautiful as ever, notwithstanding—infinitely more so, in the sick man's eyes.

"Why should I bother you? I haven't been very bad—just the old asthma off and on. It is only lately that I have felt it upsetting my heart. And you know I am used to being alone."

He spoke with the asthma pant, and a throb of the lean throat that she could not bear to see. His head was propped high, so that they squarely faced each other. His eyes were full of tenderness and content—hers of tears.

"You have been pretty lonely yourself, by all accounts," said he, stroking her hand. "It's odd to think of you in that case, Debbie."

"I've felt it odd myself," she smiled, with a whisk of her handkerchief. "But, like you, I am getting used to it."

"Where's Dalzell all this time?" "Don't know. Don't care. Please don't talk of him."

"Nobody else—?"

"Oh, dear, no! Never will be. I am going to take up nursing or something."

"YOU!" he mocked.

"Do you suppose I can't? Wait till I have got you over this attack, and then tell me if I can't. I am going to stay with you, godpapa, until you are better. I have spoken to your housekeeper, and she is quite agreeable—if you are."

He did not think it necessary to reply to that hint, but just smiled and closed his eyes. She took up a palm−leaf fan and fanned him, watching him anxiously. It was a roasting February day, and he was breathing very badly.

"Have you given up your house?" he asked, when he could speak.

"Long ago. No use my staying there alone. Besides, I could not afford it."

"Francie not much good to you, I suppose?"

"Oh, I don't want her to be good to me."

"Keziah Moon hasn't deserted you, of course?"

"Oh, Keziah—she was moped to death, poor old woman—I found her a nuisance. And then those babies of Rose's were so irresistible. I thought she'd better go. As Rose's head−nurse, I believe she is in her element."

"Is Rose happy with her draper?"

"I don't know—I suppose so."

"You don't see much of her?"

"Not much."

"And Mary?"

"I haven't seen her for months. Her husband and I don't hit it off, somehow."

"Deb, how much have you to live on?"

"That's my business, sir."

"Not the business of a doting godfather—in the absence of nearer male relatives?"

"No. His business is only to see that I learn the catechism and present myself to be confirmed; and I've done both."

"That all?"

"Except to let his doting godchild take care of him when he is ill. Now —don't talk any more."

He was too exhausted to do so. And while he lay feebly fighting for breath, the trained nurse came in and took command.

In the evening that functionary gave a professional opinion.

"He is worried about something," she said to Deb, "and it is very bad for him. Do you know what it is?"

"Not in the least," said Deb promptly. "I have not been seeing him for years, I am sorry to say, and have not the slightest knowledge of his affairs."

But next day she seemed to get an inkling of what the worry was. Mr Thornycroft, when they were alone together, begged her to tell him if she had any money difficulties—debts, she supposed—and to be frank with him for old times' and her father's sake.

"What! are you bothering your mind about that?" she gently scolded him. "I assure you I am all right. I haven't any difficulties—or hardly any—not now. I have no rent, you see."

"They don't charge you anything where you board?" "No. Redford never has charged folks for board. Seriously," she hastened to add, in earnest tones, "I have all I want. And if I try presently to earn more, it will be because I think everybody ought to earn his living or hers. You earned yours. I despise people who just batten on the earnings of others, and never do a hand's turn for themselves."

"Batten!" he murmured ironically, with a troubled smile. "You look as if you had been battening, don't you? Debbie, I'm a business man, and I know you can't get behindhand in money matters and pull up again just when you want to; you can't get straight merely by anticipating income, when there's nothing extra coming in. Tell me, if you don't mind, how you managed?" She flushed, and her eyes dropped; then she faced him honestly.

"I will tell you," she declared. "I've wanted to confess it, though I'm horribly ashamed to—and I'm afraid you'll think I did not value it. I did indeed—I hated to part with it; but I was so hard up, and I didn't know which way to turn, or what else to do—"

"And never came to me!"

"Well, I did—in a way. I—I sold your pearls."

"That's right, Debbie. That's a load off my mind. It is the best thing you could have done with them."

"No, indeed! I have regretted it ever since."

"How much did they give you?" "A tremendous lot—three hundred and fifty guineas."

"The swindlers! They were worth two thousand."

"What!" She was thunderstruck. "You gave me a necklace worth two thousand guineas?"

"I only wish you'd let me give you a score or two at the same price, on condition that you sold them for three−fifty whenever you needed a little cash."

She was quite upset by this remark, and what had given rise to it. Impulsively—too impulsively, considering how weak he was—she kissed his damp forehead, and rushed weeping from his sight.

In the hot evening, while the trained nurse had her tea at grateful leisure in the housekeeper's room, Deb again took that nurse's place. She sat by the pillow of the patient, leaning against it, holding his hand in hers. Only the sound of the cruel north wind and his more cruel breathing disturbed the stillness that enveloped them. She hoped he was sleeping, until he spoke suddenly in a way that showed him only too wide awake.

"Debbie," he said, "if I was quite sure I would not get well this time, I should put that question to you again."

"What question, dear?" she queried softly.

"The question I asked you just before you left Redford."

"I don't remember—Oh!"

"Yes—that one. But if you consented, I might recover—it would be enough to make me; then you would repent."

She was silent, agitated in every fibre of her, but thinking hard.

"What put that idea into your head?" she whispered, still holding his hand.

"It was never put in; it was there always—since you were a kiddie."

"It seems so strange! I thought I was always a kiddie to you." "That does seem the natural relationship, doesn't it?" There fell another long silence, and, listening to his dragging breath, her heart smote her. She squeezed his bony hand.

"I will stay with you, anyway," she comforted him.

He turned his head on the pillow. "Kiss me," he sighed, with eyes closed.

She did, again and again.

The night was suffocating. She could not sleep for the heat and her thoughts, and when, towards morning, she heard the nurse stirring, she got up to inquire how he was.

"Pretty bad," the nurse said. "It's this awful weather. I can't cool the room, though I've got all the doors and windows open, and the wet sheets hanging up. It's air he wants, and there isn't any. If it don't change soon, I'm afraid his strength won't hold out."

It did not change, and consequently grew worse to bear, the parching and scorching of each day being carried over into the next. What the newspapers call a heat−wave was drawing to its culmination, which generally reaches the verge of the unbearable, even to the well and strong, just before the "change"—that lightning change to coolness, and even coldness, which comes while one draws a breath. How many a life has hung upon the chance of the blessed moment coming in time!

The nurse looked at the thermometer in despair. Darkness had not taken 10 degrees from yesterday's temperature of 102 degrees when another blazing sun arose. The fierce wind had raved and calmed, and raved and calmed, but it had not shifted. She wetted and she fanned, turn and turn about with Deb, the livelong day, without freshening the dead air that soaked the house and seemed to soak the world. The fagged and perspiring doctor (a great friend of the patient's), who came twice daily, came again, too tired to care very much even for this special case. He looked at it, and shook his head, and begged for a cool drink for the Lord's sake; and then, having muddled the wits he had tried to stimulate with quarts of whisky−and−soda, went away, saying: "I can do nothing. Send for me at once if you see a change."

At sunset the sick man was very low, his weak heart and his distressed lungs labouring heavily, while the sweat of agony glistened on his forehead and plastered his white hair to his backward−tossed head. Deb was frantic with fear and grief. She summoned the doctor again, sending commands to him to summon more doctors—the best in Melbourne, and any number of them—in defiance of Mr Thornycroft's known wishes to the contrary. At the same time she sent for the clergyman.

"Dear," she crooned in the patient's ear, when he seemed a little easier, "Mr Bentley will be here presently."

Mr Thornycroft's brows seemed to gather a momentary frown over his closed eyes.

"I'd rather not, Deb—"

"Oh, not for THAT! But—the wind will change soon, and then you will feel better; and then—you said it would help you to get well—I will —if you like—"

He opened his eyes and gazed at her. It took him a few seconds to understand.

"Ah—darling!" he breathed, between his pants, and with an effort drew her hand to his lips. Then—they were his last words, whispered very low—"Never mind now, Debbie—so long as you are here."

He seemed to drowse into a kind of half−sleep, in spite of his too obvious and audible suffering. She sat beside him, sponging and fanning him, listening to his shallow, jerky, wheezy respiration, watching for the subtle something in the stifling room that should announce a change of wind, thinking of Mr Bentley's coming, and many other things. The weary nurse came back from her brief rest and cup of tea, and sat down at the foot of the bed. She studied the patient's face intently for some time, and felt his feet; then she took the fan from Deborah's hand.

"You go and lie down, Miss Pennycuick. Mrs Dobson will come and sit with me for a while."

"No, no," said Deb. "He wants me to be here. I cannot leave him."

After a few more minutes of silence, the nurse said again: "You had better go, Miss Pennycuick." When Deb repeated her refusal, the nurse went out to fetch the housekeeper to persuade her.

A minute afterwards, Deb lifted her head with a jerk, and sniffed eagerly. At the same instant she heard a distant door bang.

"Thank God!" she ejaculated, and flew to the windows that all day had had to be shut tight against the furnace blast outside, and flung them wide, one after the other. The trees in the old garden were bending and rustling; the

sweet, cool air came pouring in.

"The wind has changed," she whispered, almost hysterically, to the nurse and the housekeeper, as they stealthily crept in. "And"—as they all gathered round the bed—"he is better already. His breathing is easier."

The nurse bent over the long figure on the bed. "He is not breathing at all," said she.

CHAPTER XX.

Jim Urquhart had been fighting bush fires for several days when the wind changed and carried them back over the burnt ground that extinguished them. When he rode home, dead beat, from helping a neighbour who had helped him, it was to meet the news that Mr Thornycroft was dead, and Mrs Urquhart gone to Redford to support Deborah Pennycuick.

Mr Thornycroft had been ailing with his asthma so long, and making so little fuss about it, that his friends had come to regard him as practically ailing nothing. The death that had slowly stalked him for years came upon them with the shock of the unexpected; so the newspapers said. Jim's heart smote him for that he had been so taken up with the fire epidemic as to have neglected for over a week to inquire after the old man; it smote him more when he heard that Deb had been at Redford through the ordeal, without "anyone" near her. He had known too well—had made it his business to know—that she had had a struggling life, heart−breaking to think of, for a long time, but under various pretexts she had kept "everybody" at arm's−length and further, refusing aid or pity; now there had come a chance to do something for her, and he had been out of the way. And duty still detained him, to arrange about destroyed fences and foodless stock—duty that had to be considered first, even before her. When at last he was free to put himself at her disposal, a dozen men had jumped his claim.

The manager of Redford met him when a few miles from the place. "You are behind the fair, Mr Urquhart," cried he, as they drew rein alongside; and his tone and his face were strangely cheerful, considering that his good employer of twenty years had been buried only yesterday—as usual, within a few hours of his death. "But I suppose you have heard the news. What—you haven't? Then I am the first to congratulate you," extending a cordial hand. "The will was read this morning, and you've got the biggest legacy—a cool five thousand, sir."

Five thousand! Jim, never on particularly intimate terms with the testator, had not thought of the will, and the idea that he might have an interest in it never crossed his mind. Five thousand! It is said of drowning people that they see the whole panorama of their lives in the last seconds of consciousness; in the instant's pause that followed the manager's announcement, Jim saw Five Creeks renovated and prosperous, and Deb's children running about the old rooms and paddocks, and calling him father—a home not quite unworthy of his goddess now, and one that loneliness and poverty would have taught her to appreciate. He stared at the burly manager like a man in a dream.

"I get a nice little windfall myself, which I never expected," the latter continued his tale. "The servants are well provided for, and there are odd sums for a lot of English relatives—I suppose they are—and a good bit for charities. But yours is the biggest individual legacy; and I'm glad of it, and I'm not surprised, because I've heard him many a time speak well of you for the way you worked to keep up your place and look after the family."

"But," said Jim, coming down from his clouds of glory, "I thought—I thought there'd be more than that." "Than what? You surely didn't expect—oh, I see!" The manager threw up his head and roared. "My good fellow, the estate altogether is worth a quarter of a million."

"Then who—?"

"Gets it? Miss Pennycuick. She's here now. And couldn't believe it when they told her—though, when you come to think of it, it was a natural thing for him to do, having been such friends with the old man, and she his god−daughter. A lucky young woman—my word!" Jim's swelled heart collapsed and sank like a burst balloon. His dream−house vanished in thin air, to be built no more.

"That settles it," he said to himself. According to his code of manly honour and self−respect, a man could not possibly, even with five thousand pounds in hand, ask a girl with a quarter of a million to marry him.

A little more conversation, if it can be called such, when one talked and the other did not even listen, and he parted with the garrulous manager and rode on to the house. Deb, wet−eyed, met him with a welcome that severely tried his Spartan fortitude, without in the least weakening his resolve. Although she did not know it, being still filled with grief for her lifelong friend, it was the power and command that he had endowed her with which gave that charming air of fearless and open affection to her manner.

"Oh, my dear, dear boy!" she addressed him, and all but kissed him before his mother's eyes. "I am so glad to have you here. Jim dear, Mrs Urquhart thinks you can be spared—will you stay here for a bit and help me to settle

things? There is so much to do, and it is my duty to attend to everything myself. There are the lawyers and people, of course—everybody is so kind—but I want a man of my own beside me."

"Certainly, Deb," he replied, without wincing; "for as long as you want me—if I can run home every other day or so for a look round."

He stayed, in company with his mother, for a month; then, when he went to live at home again, he spent at least half his days at Redford, acting as Deb's 'own man' indoors and out—her real legal adviser, her real station manager, her confidential major−domo, the doer of all the 'dirty work' connected with the administration of her estate; and never —although she exposed him to almost every sort of temptation—never once stepped off the line that he had marked for himself.

Another person was not so scrupulous, though, to be sure, he was not so poor.

Claud Dalzell, drifting from one resort of the wealthy to another— deer−stalking in Scotland, salmon−fishing in Norway, shooting in the Rockies, hunting in the Shires, yachting everywhere, and everywhere adored of a crowd of women as idle as himself—was loafing at Monte Carlo when he heard of Mr Thornycroft's death and Deb's accession to his throne. Ennui and satiety possessed the popular young man at the moment—for he was made for better things, and his dissatisfied soul tormented him; and a vision of old−time Redford and the beautiful girl who was like wine and fire, a blend of passion and purity that now impressed him as unique, rose before his mental eyes with the effect of water−springs in a dry land. His thoughts went back to the days when they rode and made love together—the sunny days, before the clouds gathered. It was that past which glorified her all at once, not the present—not Mr Thornycroft's money—not the halo of elegance and consequence that again adorned her; he never suspected otherwise for a moment. And that was why he did not hesitate to book a passage to Australia that very day.

Deb was at Redford when he arrived. That she would never part with the place again, she had declared on the day that it came into her possession, and she was now establishing herself there, she said, for life. She had gone through the whole great rambling house, sorting and rearranging the furniture that was in it, adding the cream of the contents of the best shops in town. She made a clean sweep of the now 'awful' fittings of the big drawing−room, replacing them with parquet rugs and divans, and things of the softest, finest and most costly kind; she arranged the morning−room for herself afresh; also the glazed corridor, which became a beautiful art gallery and lounging−place; also the remainder of the long unused rooms. She called to her all the favourite old servants—except Keziah Moon, who was happy where she was—and old Miss Keene to play chaperon once more, with nothing to do but arrange flowers and doze at peace in the lap of luxury. Deb wanted Jim for her manager, at a ridiculous salary, but he would not take the post; he did, however, procure her an excellent substitute. She commissioned him to buy her riding−horses—he "knew what she liked"—regardless of expense; an English groom was given charge of them when they arrived. So easily did the magnificent woman slide back into her magnificent ways, for all her good taste and unpretentiousness.

When Claud Dalzell was driven in his hired buggy from the township to her door, his critical eye took in the many changes that the old homestead had undergone with high approval. Used as he was to far finer houses and the best of everything, he felt that here was as fair a camping−place as even he could desire. Redford, with a quarter of a million behind it, with this setting of sunshine and spaciousness (missed so much more than he had known till now), inclined—what a haven of rest and pleasure, after the crowded and fatiguing experiences of his later years!

He was shown upstairs to the big drawing−room. He hardly knew where he was, with the grass−green carpet and festooned window−draperies and gilding and plate−glass vanished, and these soft−coloured stuffs and subtle harmonies around him. He could recognise nothing but a few pictures and the old piano, the latter spread with a gem of Chinese embroidery, on which stood a gem of a Satsuma bowl filled with fine chrysanthemums. It was late in autumn now.

And while he wandered about, examining this and that with the pleasure of a satisfied connoisseur, Deb stood in the sitting−room downstairs, with clenched hands and teeth, staring at his card on a table before her.

"He has the cheek," she thought, afire with indignation—never so hot and bitter as when directed against one we love who has offended us— "he has the unspeakable effrontery to come and see me NOW, when he never came near me all those hard years—never cared how I muddled and struggled, nor whether I was alive or dead!"

But she must see him, of course. And she must maintain her proper dignity. No descending to vulgar

reproaches—still less to weak condonation. She took a moment to calm herself, and walked forth to the interview. Many things upheld her, but the dead hand of Mr Thornycroft was her stoutest support.

She needed it when she reached the top of the stairs. Facing the drawing−room door, awaiting her, stood the figure that really seemed the one thing wanting to complete the beauty of the beautiful house. He had never in his younger days been so distinguished−looking as he was now. In any company, in any part of the world, he must have attracted notice, as a gentleman, in person and manners, of the very finest type. And how she did love that sort! How her lonely and hungry heart longed for him when she saw him—the only man she had ever deemed her natural mate—and at the same time how she hated him for the disappointment and the humiliation that he had brought her! Outraged self−respect, her robust will−power, and her quarter of a million sufficed to save her from a temptation she would not have fallen into for the world.

She swept forward to shake hands with him, with the grave affability of a great lady to a guest—any guest—and it was plain from the expression of his sensitive face that he was as keenly appreciative of her enhanced beauty and 'finish' as she of his. Black was not her colour—she was too dark—and she had discarded it for pale greys and whites, with touches of black about them; today a creamy woollen, thick and soft, and hanging about her like the drapery of a Greek statue, was an inspiration in becoming gowns. The maid who had dressed her hair was a mistress of the art. And Miss Pennycuick's step and poise—well, she WAS a great lady, and carried herself accordingly.

Her old lover was charmed. He held her hand—and would have held it thrice as long—and looked into her eyes, too overcome, it appeared, to speak.

"How do you do?" she said, evading his intense gaze. "What a man you are for dropping on one in this unexpected, sensational way! Why didn't you write and tell me you were around?"

She made a movement to withdraw her hand. He held it fast.

"Debbie," said he, in quite a tremulous voice—remarkable in one constitutionally so self−confident and self−possessed—"Debbie, you turned me out of your house when I came to see you last. I hope you have a different welcome for me this time?"

"To the best of my belief," she laughed, "you insisted upon going. I am sure you were asked to stay—to lunch, or whatever it was. By the way, have you lunched now?" She showed concern for her obligations as his hostess.

"Yes, thank you—at least, it doesn't matter."

He had to relinquish her hand, and when she immediately made towards the bell−button, he followed and arrested her.

"Let us have our talk first," he pleaded. "I don't want anything to eat until I know—until I feel that you don't grudge it."

"Oh, I don't grudge it," she took him literally. "Not one square meal, at any rate. The only thing I am obliged to grudge is house−room—for any length of time—to single gentlemen. But that is not a question of hospitality, as you know. Sit down, and tell me all the news."

He sat down; she also—about two yards off. Across the gulf of Persian rug he looked at her steadily.

"You are angry with me," he observed. "Why, Debbie? Is it still the old quarrel—after all these years?"

Then her face changed like a filled lamp when you put a match to it. She said, in a deep, breathless way:

"Do you know how many years it is?"

More in sorrow and surprise than in anger, he guessed her meaning after a moment's thought.

"Is that my fault? The number of years has been of your choosing," he pointed out forbearingly. "You sent me away, when I never wanted to go. You broke it off, altogether against my wish. You never relented— never made a sign. Even now I come back uninvited."

It was a clear case, and all he asked for was bare justice.

"Why didn't you come before—uninvited? Why didn't you come back to me when I was poor and lonely? Claud, I have been in every sort of trouble—my father is dead, I have lost all my sisters in one way and another, I have been living in cheap lodgings, doing without what I always thought were the necessaries of life, to keep Francie going and to get debts paid off—I have been ill, I have been unhappy, I have sometimes been penniless, and you have carefully passed by on the other side, like that man in the Bible, and left me to my fate."

He was genuinely shocked. He knew that she had been horribly down in the world, but not that she had suffered to this extent. Seeing her sitting there in her beautiful gown, in her beautiful room, without one trace of

those sordid years about her, his heart ached to think of them.

"My darling, I never knew—" "Why not?" she said swiftly. "Because you never tried to know—never cared to know. But now that I can be a credit to you again—the moment you hear that I have had a great fortune left to me—now you come back."

"Do you mean to say," he demanded sternly, "that you think—you honestly think I have come back to you on account of your money?"

She returned his cold, searching gaze in kind.

"Honestly," she said, "I do think so. There is no way out of it."

He rose deliberately, bowed to her, and picked up his hat. He was not really mercenary—or, if he was, he did not know it—and he was as intensely proud as she was. He felt that he had received the deadliest insult ever dealt him in his life, and one that he could never forget or forgive.

Without another word, he turned to the door and walked out. She stood still and watched him go, a calm smile curving her lips, a very cyclone of passion tearing through her heart; and she scorned to recall him.

CHAPTER XXI.

Deb yearned to have her Australian sisters—Frances was European— with her at Redford, as in the old days; she hated to be luxuriating there without them. But for a time the husbands stood in the way. She could not bring herself to ask them too. The draper she hardly knew at all—in her correspondence with Rose his name was rarely mentioned by either, except in comprehensive messages at the end of letters; and Bennet Goldsworthy's company, Deb said, simply made her ill.

It had made her ill since, after her father's death, the clergyman had permitted himself, in her hearing, to vent his personal disappointment at the unexpected smallness of his wife's inheritance. The man had presumed to take the air of one reasonably aggrieved; he had even dropped angry words about "deception" in the first heat of his chagrin. "As if," said haughty Deb, "it was not enough for him to have married one of us!" When he was understood to say that he had "arranged his life" in accordance with the expectations he had been given the right to entertain, Deb's withering comment was: "As if HIS life matters!"

But she was intolerant in her dislikes.

Poor Mr Goldsworthy, incurable cadger that he was, was bound to feel the family reverses acutely. When he had married Miss Pennycuick for her good, in that risky manner, he had naturally expected to be rewarded for the deed. If ever it be safe to trust to appearances, it had seemed safe then, so far as the solidity of the Pennycuicks' position was concerned. They had imposed upon him with their careless splendour; they had misled him by their condonation of the marriage, which restored Mary to her privileges as a daughter of the house; most thoroughly had they taken him in by that voluntary wedding gift of five hundred pounds. With his habit—which he took to be the general habit —of getting all he could and giving nothing that he was not obliged to give, he could not understand the airy flinging away of all that money, when there was no "call" for it, only as a proof that Mr Pennycuick had more than he needed for all the legitimate claims on him. And the old man had said, again and again, that his daughters would share and share alike in whatever he had to leave.

When Mr Bentley, the new parson, came—young, sincere, self−sacrificing, devoted, a poor preacher and a hard worker, who refused to batten on Redford bounty—all the old furniture of the parsonage was made over to him (on time payment), and the Goldsworthys began life in Melbourne on the basis of a rich wife. It was surprising how the legend grew amongst his set that Mr Goldsworthy had a rich wife. That she might dress the part on all occasions, so that there would be no mistake about it, the family−provided trousseau was added to; it was also subtracted from, for the simplicity that was her taste and distinction was hateful in his sight. When she looked "common" in a cotton gown, she lowered his dignity in the world and amongst his professional fellows—supposed to be so envious of it, in spite of her red face. Deb had had to suffer the shock of seeing her sister in silk of a morning more than once, and it had been reported to her—though she did not believe it—that Mary wore a jewelled necklace to church on Sundays. Deb did not go to Bennet's church, which was, fortunately, a long way from her suburban−villa home.

And she had been to his Melbourne house but twice. On her first visit she had penetrated to Mary's room, and been horrified to find the husband's clothes hung up in it from her door−pegs, and his razors and brushes mixed up with her things on her dressing−table. The arrangement in the country parsonage was to be accounted for; to find it here, made deliberately and of MALICE PREPENSE, was to see what gulfs now yawned between Mary's old life and the new one. Deb reached forth for a comb, and drew back her hand as if she had inadvertently touched a snake. Mary's red face went purple as she explained that there was not space in that house for a dressing−room. There was space enough going to waste in the drawing−room, where Deb had her feelings hurt on her second visit. It was a very large room, sharing the front of the house with a large study; and behind them all the other rooms huddled as of no account, none of them bigger than Keziah's Redford storeroom. The study was sacred to the master of the house; the drawing−room to "company". One look showed Deb that Mary never sat there, and that it was not she who had chosen and arranged the furniture. The foundation of the scheme was a costly "suite", upholstered in palish silk brocade, the separate pieces standing at fixed intervals apart on a gorgeous Axminster carpet. When Deb entered the room, Mr Goldsworthy was bending over the central sofa,

excited and talking loudly. Miss Goldsworthy and Mary stood by, mute and drooping; Ruby looked on irresponsibly, with joy in her eye.

"What's the matter?" inquired Deb, advancing.

As she was not a great lady then, but quite the contrary, Mr Goldsworthy explained what was the matter, with scarcely any modification of his minatory air. A caller had called yesterday, bringing with her a little boy. Mary had thoughtlessly fed the little boy with soft cake, and the little boy had first made his hands sticky with it, and then pawed the sofa, which had cost him (B.G.) nearly twenty pounds (part of Mary's 500 pounds). Greasy marks had been left on that lovely brocade, for which he (not she) had given thirty−five shillings a yard, and which he had forbidden children to be allowed to sit on. As if that were not bad enough, "they"—i.e., those two poor women—had, without telling him, tried to take the marks out with some wretched chemist's stuff, which had not taken them out, but only spread them more. Now the sofa was completely spoiled, and what to do he did not know, unless he could match the brocade, which was scarcely likely. And ill could he afford to be buying brocade—and so on. Finally he went out to consult with a furniture repairer of his acquaintance, banging doors behind him. Deb cast a scornful glance upon the smudged brocade.

"What a fuss about nothing!" she brushed the subject by.

"My brother is very particular about this room," Miss Goldsworthy apologised for him.

"So I see."

"And he is very fond of this brocade, which he chose himself. It certainly is very pretty—don't you think so? But too delicate to wear well. I am always frightened to see children go near it, or even grown−up people when it has been raining, or if they have been gathering dust—it does show every spot so! And it was the mother's fault. I signed to Mary to give him a biscuit, but his mother picked out that cake, which had jam in it. It is very unfortunate. I don't wonder at his being vexed."

"Why don't you have chintz covers, Moll?"

"Oh, he wouldn't like it to be covered up," Miss Goldsworthy struck in, and seemed shocked herself at the suggested waste. Mary lifted dull eyes to her sister's face.

"Come and have some tea," she said. "Come, auntie; it is no use your worrying yourself."

And they went into the poky living room, which smelt of meals, and had tea, and the sort of barren talk that the presence of the third person necessitated. Mary seemed purposely to avoid a TETE−A−TETE. When Miss Goldsworthy went to fetch the baby, Ruby was kept at her step−mother's side. Only when the black−eyed boy appeared did Mary brighten into a likeness to her old self. She was a born mother, and her child consoled her. Then, in the midst of the baby worship, back came the still agitated husband and father, the furniture man with him; and the house was filled anew with the affair of the soiled sofa, so that Deb's presence, as also her departure, attracted little attention. As her brother−in−law pushed out a valedictory hand, she noticed a shirt−cuff that had the grime of days upon it.

"He economises in the wash," she soliloquised, with wrinkling nostril and curling lip. "And in those filthy cheap coals that choke the grate with dust, and in tea that is undrinkable. Oh, what a house!"

And she had not been there since. But now—

Her benevolence embraced the world, and the world included Bennet Goldsworthy. It was no longer in his power to make her feel ill. The sun of her prosperity, shining on him at her sister's side—poor, struggling, well−meaning little man!—gave him a pathetic and appealing interest. In fact, it was to him that her maternal dispositions towards her family drew her first.

"Thank God," she said to herself, "I can now make things a bit easier for that poor child. She won't let me, I daresay, but he will."

She took the humble tram to their suburb, and rang at their parsonage door. Having considerately sent word that she was coming, due preparations had been made to receive her. She was shown into the drawing−room, which had not a displaced chair, and where the many−coloured Axminster and the cherished brocade still looked as good as new. Almost her first act was to search for the grease marks on the sofa—the spot was indicated by a bleached patch—and she sat down on it, alone for a few minutes. On this occasion the old aunt had been ordered to keep in the background; Ruby also, after due consideration of her claims, had been denied the share she clamoured for of the impending excitement, and sent out of the house; Mary had had her directions, and remained invisible for a time. She was employed in getting Robert ready for inspection—brushing his best jacket, tying his

best neck−tie, etc., while he jerked about under her hands, and freely criticised her labours on his behalf. For Robert took after his father as a knowing person. He was, in fact, a bright and clever lad, who knew some things better than his mother did. She was ever proud to admit it; but his own open acceptance of superiority, and readiness to keep it before her eyes at all times, was one of the secret crosses of her life, weighed down with so many. However, if you marry the wrong man, you cannot expect to have the right children, and it was something that this boy had the genuineness of his intellectual gifts to give her an excuse to adore him.

"There, that will do. It is very bad form, you know, to be so fussy about people coming, and so anxious about what they may think about you," the young authority upon etiquette instructed the fine−fibred gentlewoman, who had done him the honour to be his mother. And Mary took the rebuke humbly.

Bennet Goldsworthy, alone, came softly into the drawing−room to receive the distinguished guest. He had grown fat and tubby, and a phrase of Claud Dalzell's flashed into Deb's memory as she marked the manner of his approach—"that crawling ass, that would lick your boots for sixpence". The noonday sun does not affect polished metal more obviously than Deb's wealth affected him.

"This is good of you," he murmured brokenly, pressing her gloved hand. "This is indeed good of you!" "I ought to have been before," she returned graciously—it was so easy to be gracious to him now—"I have been wanting to come; but you cannot imagine how many hindrances I have had."

"Oh, but I can indeed!" with earnest emphasis—"I can indeed! And have grieved that I was not able to be of some service to you in your—your very difficult position. I did not like to seem to force myself upon you, but I hoped—I confidently hoped that you would send for me, if it was in my power to be of the slightest assistance to you."

"Oh, yes—thank you so much—if I had needed anybody. But there were only too many kind friends."

"Aha! Yes, I expect so." His eye lighted and his lip curled craftily. "I have no doubt whatever of THAT. 'Where the carcase is—' You know the rest?"

"I am not a carcase," she rallied him playfully—for quite the first time in her life.

"No, indeed; I should have said 'prey'. Ah, my dear De—Miss Pennycuick, you will find plenty and to spare of so−called friends, professing anxiety to serve you, when their only object is to serve themselves."

"I expect so," she assented, smiling.

"So young a girl"—subtle flattery this, now that Deb was in her late thirties—"to be suddenly called to a position of such immense danger and responsibility! But"—cheeringly—"I said when I heard of it that Mr Thornycroft had justified my high opinion of his judgment and character. It is not often that great wealth comes into hands so worthy of it."

"I am afraid they are not very worthy," sighed Deb. Mr Goldsworthy knew better. He knew HER better—not only from personal intercourse, the observation and intuition of a man trained to read character, but from the loving representations of his dear wife.

"Where is she?" Miss Pennycuick asked abruptly. "Not out, I hope?"

"Out—hardly! She will be here in a moment. I am afraid, when you see her, you will think her looking delicate. The state of her health is a matter of the most anxious concern to me."

"What is the matter with her health? She was always well at home. We used to think her the strongest of the family—until—"

"Until she fell into the clutches of that dreadful man," Mr Goldsworthy concluded for her.

"Oh!"—Deb coloured and frowned—"that is not what I was going to say." (What she had really been going to say was—"until her marriage.") "And why do you rake up that old story? I thought it had all been forgotten long ago."

"It has been unpleasantly revived," said Mr Goldsworthy solemnly. "And it is my duty to tell you about it, if you have not heard."

Deb looked equally annoyed and alarmed. "What has been revived?" she asked.

He dropped his voice apologetically.

"I have been hearing of his going on in exactly the same way with another."

"Oh," sighed Deb, relieved that it was not Mary who had been the reviver; "then it's no business of ours, thank goodness."

"Pardon me—it is very much our business," he urged weightily. "I grieve to tell you that it is your sister, Mrs

Ewing, who is implicated in the affair. Do you mean to say that you know nothing about it?"

Deb knew something, and so she put the question by.

"I don't encourage scandalmongers. Mrs Ewing is young and thoughtless— and pretty—which naturally lays her open to ill—natured gossip." "My informant is one of the least ill−natured of women; she is a person of the highest principle."

"Ah, those high−principled women—I know them!"

Mr Goldsworthy was nonplussed for the moment. He could not accept the suggestion that Deb was not high−principled. But he gave up his informant.

"There is ample evidence that the man is Mrs Ewing's lover," he grieved. "He has been seen with her in the most equivocal situations. I don't wish to go into details—to mention things unfit for a young girl's ears—"

"I hope not," put in Deb, her patience giving out. "I am not fond of that kind of talk. I should not believe, either, in any nasty tales connected with my sister, or with Captain Carey. And you ought not to listen to them, for Mary's sake. You should not pander to your high−principled ladies. You should tell them to be more charitable, and to mind their own business."

A year ago the parson would have taken umbrage at this rebuke; he now hastened to deprecate displeasure on the part of the one whom, of all the world, he most desired to please.

"Far be it from me to speak ill of anyone belonging to you," he declared solemnly; but still he could not help it.

The most good−natured person, if he be greedy, will seek to ingratiate himself with Power by disparagement of rival suitors. He was following an impulse that might be described as an instinct, in trying to weaken Deb's favour towards the rest of her relatives in order to concentrate as much as possible upon himself—to push back, as it were, the hands that he imagined eagerly outstretched to her (palm upwards), that the more might be dropped into his own. He asked her if she had seen Mrs Breen, and sighed over that plebeian connection.

"I may be poor," said he, "but I do come of a good family. It is unfortunate, perhaps, but we cannot help our prejudices." "It is a ridiculous prejudice," said Deb, "especially in a country like this."

"Oh, it is—it is. I own it; but—well, you know—"

She brusquely brought him back to the question of Mary's health.

"It is Mary that I want to hear about. Tell me—before she comes in— what is the matter with her?"

He was willingly confidential.

"She has worries," said he—"worries that you, my dear young lady, in YOUR position, know nothing of—would not understand if I were to tell you."

"I have been in positions to understand most kinds of worries," said Deb. "What are they? Money worries?"

"Well, I have a delicacy in—"

"Oh, you need not have! I know, of course, that you cannot have been too well off, and I am here on purpose to do something for you, if you will allow me.' There was no need to beat about the bush, she knew, since Mary was out of hearing. 'Tell me exactly, if you don't mind—in strict confidence, of course. No need to trouble her—and I shall not say anything."

He told her, with fullness and fervour, when he had expressed his too fulsome gratitude.

"I have done my best, Miss Pennycuick. You bade me be good to her; I gave you my solemn promise—and I can conscientiously say that I have kept my word." Well, so he had; according to his lights he had been an exemplary husband. "But circumstances have been against me. In the first place, I was in error somewhat, as you know, in regard to my wife's expectations from her father. I did not marry her for her money, as you also know, but appearances were such that I naturally concluded she would have a considerable income of her own. I did not care for myself one way or the other, but I was glad to believe that there would be the means to continue to her the mode of life that she had been used to. I acted upon this supposition, false, as it turned out, and anticipated, most imprudently, I confess, the little fortune that I imagined to be secure. When we came here, where living is so much more expensive than in the country"—with no Redford to draw upon—"I surrounded my wife with the comforts that were her due, and which I fully believed she had every right to." He waved his hand over the still blooming Axminster carpet and the brocaded suite the family was not allowed to sit on. "I spent—we spent the little capital represented by your father's wedding present—I had an erroneous idea that it was to be an annual allowance pending the eventual division of the estate; and then—well, then you know what happened."

Deb nodded.

"Did you," she inquired feelingly, "borrow of those professional money−lenders?"

She was prepared to be very sympathetic in that case; but Mr Goldsworthy repelled the suggestion with scorn.

"Certainly not. I never borrowed money in my life. I struggled and scraped and saved, as best I could; I endeavoured in vain to augment my small income by little speculations—harmless little dabblings in mining shares; I—but I won't bore you with these disagreeables"— pulling himself up with an air of forced cheerfulness.

"But I want to know," said Deb. "You spoke of worries—Mary's worries —worries now; are you still—"

He spread his hands and wagged his head.

"I'd rather not talk about our troubles," he sighed. "I don't want to dim the sunshine of your—"

And suddenly his eye flashed and his brow contracted with annoyance. Mary—somewhat hesitatingly, to be sure—walked in.

Robert had insisted that the pater was all wrong in his idea that it was proper for him alone to receive the visitor, and for the mistress of the house to linger inhospitably after it was known that she must know of the visitor's arrival. Robert had coerced his mother into doing the correct thing. Politely he opened the drawing−room door for her— that, of course, was absolutely the correct thing—and escorted her forward with the aplomb of a man of the world, nicely blended with the respectfulness appropriate to a nephew and a school−boy.

"Ah, HERE she is!" Mr Goldsworthy exclaimed heartily.

The sisters were at once in each other's arms. Deb, pierced to the heart by Mary's aged and faded looks, was the most demonstrative of the two; Mary struck her after a moment as being a little reserved and chilly—as if on the watch to repel benevolence as soon as it should take tangible form. Deb understood, and was warned to be circumspect.

"And this is our boy—grown out of knowledge, eh?"

Mary stepped swiftly aside to let Robert come forward, and there was no mistaking the sentiments held in common by the parents with regard to their son. Their two faces were mirrors for each other, suffused with the same tender pride.

"Perhaps the child has reconciled her to the rest of it," Deb hazarded a hope. "She may be happy."

For Mary smiled and moved alertly about the room. She accepted her husband's ostentatious hand and chair, and when he resumed the conversation, or rather restarted it, on the subject of Robert's achievements at school, she followed where he led, so long as he did not seem leading towards Deb's pocket, backing him up in the most wifely manner. "Can it be possible?" Deb kept asking herself, glad at heart to see such signs, which yet lessened her pity for and interest in her sister. But Mary, with all the pride of the Pennycuicks in her, was not, one to "let on". Her skeleton was locked tight in the cupboard it belonged to when visitors were about—especially such a visitor as this—and also when they were not about, so far as she could have it so.

So that a sort of air of entertaining "company" pervaded the room. Deb felt a constraint with her sister, and that she was making no way with her mission. But Robert stepped into the breach. With Mary's son the impulsive lady of Redford was unexpectedly pleased. There was not a trace of Pennycuick to be discerned in him; nevertheless, he was a good−looking, intelligent and interesting boy. He sat by her on the sacred brocaded sofa while she brightly questioned him, brightly answering her with aptness and good sense; his parents beaming on the pair, even the father content to play second fiddle to give the son his chance. Here, at any rate, thought Deb, was material to hand for the work she had come to do.

"I love boys," she remarked—and so she did, as some people love dogs —"and Robert and I are going to be great friends; aren't we, Robert?"

"It is very good of you to say so, aunt," Robert replied, with characteristic propriety.

"But, do you know, I don't think I shall call you Robert," she went on. "It has a prim sound"—but it was the primness of himself that she wanted to break down—"and it doesn't suit a boy of your tender years. I think I'll call you Bob, if you don't mind."

"I wish you would," he adroitly answered her.

"What is your bent towards, in the way of a career, Bob?"

He said he thought the law—to be a judge some day.

"You don't care for station life?"

"Oh, he does," his father eagerly interposed. "He loves it. But he has had so few chances—"

"Which is your school, Bob?"

A seminary of no repute was named, and the father again intervened to regret that it was not one of the public schools. "But they, unfortunately, have been beyond our means—"

Here Mary broke in with praises of the seminary. It had such an excellent headmaster, was so conveniently situated—really better in many ways than one of the great schools—

And then Robert broke in.

"My dear mother!" he ejaculated, in a compassionate and forbearing way.

"Ah, Bob knows it is not better," laughed Deb. "And it isn't, Mary; you are no authority, my dear. Which of the public schools do you fancy, Bob?"

He mentioned his choice, and the University scholarships that were to be had there.

"Debbie!" implored Mrs Goldsworthy, under her breath.

"Hush−sh!" hissed her husband.

"You be quiet, Molly," Deb playfully adjured her. "This has nothing to do with you, or with anybody except Bob and me. You come and spend your next vacation with me at Redford, Bob, and then we can talk it all over together."

She nodded to him meaningly. He smiled with perfect comprehension.

"How can we thank you," Mr Goldsworthy murmured emotionally, for he also understood. "It is too, too—"

"It's all right, pater," the remarkable boy silenced him. "Aunt Deborah knows how we feel about it."

Mary sat in stolid silence, for once indifferent to her husband's dumb command; then tears welled into her tired eyes. She pocketed her pride for her child's sake. It had been her hopeless longing for years to give her darling's splendid abilities full scope.

"He will repay you, Debbie," she said.

"Ah, don't be so grudging—so ungenerous!" cried Deb.

Tea and cakes were brought in, and Bob, as he was thenceforth to be styled, waited upon his aunt in the correctest manner. He had by this time taken on an air that seemed to say: "You and I understand the ropes; you must excuse these poor parents of mine, who were not born with our perceptions." And Deb, no more proof against this sort of thing than meaner mortals, had a feeling of special proprietorship in him which she found pleasant, although he was not exactly the heir−on−probation that she could have wished; which, of course, it would have been preposterous to expect in a son of Bennet Goldsworthy's. Bennet Goldsworthy accompanied her to the gate when she went away, forbidding Mary to expose herself, hatless, to the wind. And there the benevolent aunt's "intentions" were more distinctly formulated.

"I wish to take entire charge of his education, if you will allow me. He is a very promising boy, and should have all his chances. Let me send him to the Melbourne Grammar after Christmas, and as a boarder, if you don't mind. There are such advantages, both in position and for study, in living at the school."

"I leave everything—everything, in your hands," murmured the grateful father.

"By the way"—as an after−thought—"what about your little girl?"

She was not a little girl now, and had finished with school; but, oh, the boon that a few good lessons in music and languages would be to her!

That matter was settled.

"Well, now," said Deb, "we must think about Mary. She is frightfully thin. I can see that she has had too many worries, as you say. She must be taken out of them. I want to have her at Redford with me—as soon as she can get ready—and give her a good long rest, and feed her up, and make her fat and strong."

"I only wish you could prevail on her," he sighed. "But I am afraid you will not get her to go anywhere without me. I have a devoted wife, Miss Pennycuick"—even if she had not tacitly forbidden "Deborah" in her poor days, he would not have ventured upon the liberty now that she was rich—"too devoted, if that can be. She insists upon sharing all my burdens, though I fain would spare her. I know well that, say what I will, she will never consent to leaving me to struggle with them alone."

"You have not told me what they are," said Deb, who saw that he was in dread of her going before he could do so.

"Oh, debts—debts—debts!" he answered, with a reckless air. "The millstone that we hung about our necks when we anticipated that she would have money, and lived accordingly, and were then left stranded. The eternal

trying to make a shilling go as far as a pound—to make bricks without straw, like the captive Israelites of old. But why do you ask me? I hate to talk about it." He made a gesture of putting the miserable subject aside.

"It was very hard on you," Deb said gently—contradicting the Deb of an earlier time and different state of things—"to have those expectations, which were certainly justified, and to be disappointed as you were. I feel that we Pennycuicks were to blame in that—"

"Oh, dear, no!" he earnestly assured her.

"And that an obligation rests on me, now that I have the means, to make some compensation to you—to Mary, rather."

"It is like you to think of that. But really—"

"And I put a blank cheque in my pocket, and a stylographic pen—and will you let me"—she drew forth the articles mentioned, and made a desk of the top rail of the gate—"will you do me the favour to accept from me—what shall I say?—five hundred pounds? Would that relieve you—and Mary—of the immediate worries?"

He said it would, with the mental reservation that it did not amount to what he had been defrauded of by Mr Pennycuick (she had made a mistake in the designation of her gift); but the slight coolness of his acknowledgement quickly gave place to grateful fervour as he realised what the immediate five hundred pounds would do for him, and read in her words an implication that the sum was but an instalment of what she felt to be his due. He was incoherent in his thanks and benedictions as he slipped the cheque into his pocket.

"And you will let me have Mary at Redford?"

"Oh, yes! She will not want to go, but I shall make her."

"And do not tell her more than you can help about this little private transaction. She might feel—"

"I will tell her nothing that is likely to vex her."

"Do not—PRAY do not. Only take these sordid worries off her shoulders, and give her what she needs, and don't let her toil and moil. Remember, it is for her I do it." There was a little sting in that last remark, but he was too happy to feel it.

CHAPTER XXII.

Now, what to do for Rose.

Rose had written warm congratulations to her sister, without mentioning any desire for a personal interview. Ever since her marriage, she had refrained from giving invitations to her family, leaving the initiative in social matters to them—a mark of consideration and good taste on her part which they had quite approved of; and intercourse had been limited to afternoon calls, more or less affectionate and informal, but stopping short at meals in common under the roof of either party. Now, however, Deb craved for a fuller sympathy with the sweetest−tempered and kindest−hearted of her sisters, and now it seemed so perfectly easy to go to her house in pursuit of it. She despatched an impulsive note:

"DEAREST,—I want a quiet talk with you about all that has happened. May I come to lunch tomorrow, so as to make a long afternoon of it? If not convenient, fix a day to lunch with me; but I am not so tied as you are, and besides, I should like to have Peter's advice on one or two little matters of business, if it would not bother him—of course, after he comes from town. Don't keep him at home on purpose."

To which Rose replied by telegram:

"Shall expect you early tomorrow for a long day. Peter delighted to place himself at your disposal."

So Deb set off next morning, full of benevolent intentions, to gather poor humdrum Rose and her (in his way) truly worthy husband into the sphere of her golden prosperity. Also, incidentally, to warm herself in the light of faithful and familiar eyes. Since her final dismissal of Claud Dalzell—although she was satisfied with that act, and ready to repeat it again, if necessary—she had been conscious of a personal loneliness, not sensibly mitigated by her crowd−attracting wealth. "Someone of my own" was the want of her warm heart.

And Rose, with no petty grudge for past short−comings, answered that need with open arms. Never was hostess more cordial to honoured guest. Peter also was at home. He had been to town and back again, and now stood upon his spotless doorstep, and anon upon his handsome drawing−room hearthrug, determined that his house should lack nothing befitting the great occasion. It was all in gala dress—newly−arranged flowers, festive lunch−table, the best foot foremost; and yet, whereas there was no hiding the self−seeker in the ingratiating Bennet Goldsworthy, there was no finding him in this proud host and husband, whose desire was only to do his dear wife credit.

Neither of them said, in word or manner, "Why didn't you come like this before?" Deb knew that her welcome would have been the same, and had hard work not to show too frankly her sense of their magnanimity. As it was, she nearly kissed Peter in the hall—such a nice, warm, comfortable, hospitable entrance to as comfortable a home (in its undeniably middle−class style) as she had ever been inside of—the more striking in its effect by contrast with Mary's. Peter's cuffs were like the driven snow; he was charmingly fresh and clean, well barbered and well tailored; grown quite handsome, too, now that he had filled out and matured. As for Rose—"I hear," Frances wrote from Paris, "that poor Rose has become a perfect tub." Mrs Peter was almost as broad as she was long. But what health in the sunny face! What opulent well−being in the full curves of her figure, gowned in a fashion to satisfy even Deb's exigent taste.

They did not tell her it was good of her to come to see them, but they told her in all the languages of courtesy that they were mighty glad she had come. She was taken into the drawing−room—full of soft chairs and sofas that anybody might sit on, and with a fire of clear coals in a grate that glittered with constant polishing. But everything in Peter's establishment seemed to shine with pure cleanliness; he took after his mother, who, modest in other things, was fond of offering a sovereign to anybody who would find a cobweb in her house.

Deb was peeled of her furs by Peter, with the greatest deference and politeness, but with none of the obsequiousness that had sickened her elsewhere; he laid down her sable cloak with the reverence of one who knew its value, and he asked Rose in a whisper if her sister would like a glass of wine before lunch. The smiling matron shook her head, and whispered something else, which sent him out of the room. Then, while he skipped about in the background, attending to the wines and beers, she convoyed the guest to the very luxurious bedroom where head−nurse Keziah dandled the youngest of the Breen children. The rest had had their dinners and gone out

a−walking, so as not to be made too much of by a silly mother, if it could be helped. Warm was the greeting between Keziah and her late mistress, and many the questions about Redford and the old folks; but there was no hint that Mrs Moon hankered after the big store−rooms and linen−closets, the dignities and privileges of her former home. Her heart was with Rose's babies now.

"There, what do you think of THIS?" she demanded, as she proudly displayed her charge, and, being invited thereto, condescendingly laid it in Deb's outstretched arms.

It was a pretty, healthy creature, fat, dainty and about two months old, still in the whitest and finest of long clothes. "Little duck!" Deb crooned, and rubbed her cheek almost with passion on its rose−leaf skin. Robert's nose, indeed, was dislocated on the spot.

"Oh, Rosie," she presently blurted out, "I would like to have this child!"

"Would you?" replied Rose, all smiles.

"No, but, seriously and without joking, I really would, you know."

"I daresay," laughed the plump little mother, and her laugh was echoed by Keziah as she passed into the adjoining nursery—to leave the long parted sisters to themselves.

"Now, look here," the guest addressed the hostess, thoughtfully and deliberately, as soon as they were alone, "if you will give her to me, I will bring her up and educate her as perfectly as care and money can do it. She shall take the name of Pennycuick, and be my daughter, and my heiress, and the future representative of the family. And," she added, for her own inward ear, "we can live at home or somewhere, if necessary, where Breens and such will not have the chance to interfere with us."

"As if I would give my baby away," Rose sweetly jeered her—"even for a kingdom!"

"You have five more, and may have another five—or twenty−five. It looks like it."

"But none to spare. Besides, you won't want other people's children when you get your own. How about her being the heiress then?"

"I shall never have children of my own," said Deb, with tightened lips. "That is why I want to adopt one." Rose laughed the idea to scorn.

"Of course you will!" cried she. "You must. All the money in the world is nothing compared with a baby. I wouldn't give one of mine for twenty fortunes—not if I had to earn their keep at the wash−tub."

"Not even for the child's own advantage?"

"It is not to any child's advantage to grow up thinking that its mother did not care to be a mother to it," said Rose. "Nor yet—possibly—to grow up to look down on her."

"Rose!" Deb's guilty face flamed scarlet.

"Or on her father," Rose continued, with soft but firm persistence. "She must have a father too, Deb, and Peter would not give his job away any more than I would give mine. He thinks the world of them all. He is just as good a father as he is a husband," with a lift of head and lighting of eye. "Come to me, my precious!" as the baby whimpered. "Come to its own mother, then! No, no, Debbie dear, you be a mother yourself in the natural and proper way; you will find it a deal better than being rich. Marry some good, kind man straight away, before you waste any more of your young years. I am sure there must be dozens dying to have you."

"Dying to have the handling of Mr Thornycroft's money," said Deb, with a bitterness that surprised her sister.

"Oh, no," said she; "you are sufficient attraction without that."

"I shall never know it. But this," thought Deb, "is a very Breen−like turn that the conversation is taking. These people—and Rose has become one of them—have quite the tradesman's idea of marriage. Any 'good, kind man' will do. They cannot be expected to understand." She watched Rose billowing down into her nursing−chair, and pretended to herself that she was not envious. "It would have been a wildly−rash experiment to adopt this child, and I shall probably live to be thankful that my offer was refused," she inwardly argued, while her beautiful eyes melted at the spectacle of the happy mother snuggling the babe to her bared breast. "It is a charming little creature now, but it would probably grow up common, whatever its education and environment. Blood will tell. And if she took the name of Pennycuick, she could not pass it on. After all, a boy is best."

So Robert Goldsworthy remained in the position his gifts had gained for him.

After an admirable meal—in the course of which Deb made herself most charming to her brother−in−law, while Rose retired as much as possible from the conversation, in order that he might shine to the best advantage—those little matters of business that had been mentioned were discussed. They were trifles invented

for the purpose of compliments to Mr Breen, and the serious energy with which he applied himself to each case, and his exhaustive treatment of it, showed his thorough enjoyment of the part alloted to him by the distinguished woman who was so accomplished in the art of giving pleasure— especially to men. Frankly, Deb always preferred a man to talk to, and she was agreeably surprised to find that Peter was very intelligent, and acquainted with several things beside shopkeeping. Rose was simply enchanted to find herself 'cut out' by him. When she was not stealing from the room to leave the coast clear, she was beaming over her needlework in the background, still as a mouse. Not by word or look would she spoil his chance of proving to Deb what he really was—how mistaken in him she and the others had been.

It was Peter who escorted the guest round the garden and stables, Mrs Peter excusing herself. In the well−stocked greenhouse Miss Pennycuick, who was fond of flowers, obtained 'wrinkles' that she declared would be most valuable to her in the management of her Redford houses—which she implied that he must see; in the interview with the carriage horse —Rose had a little brougham, not, as her sisters supposed, for paying calls on other drapers' wives, which she had small leisure for, but for shoppings and airings and taking children to dentists and pantomimes— Miss Pennycuick was instructive in her turn, feeling legs and advising about firing and bandages with the recognised authority of an expert. Old Bruce, padding at his master's heels, was greeted by name, patted and shaken hands with, as if he had never abetted rebels; and the discovery of a litter of choice puppies gave opportunity for the making of a little present, which was graciously received.

After tea, Rose was invited to show her house—a further proof of her sister's tact and powers of divination. Now Peter was left behind—he used the opportunity to cut flowers for Deb to take away with her—and the little matron was in her glory. From top to bottom, and every cupboard and corner, and the numerous up−to−date appliances, and the stocks of silver, linen, china, the ample furnishings of every part, the solid goodness of every bit of material—all was displayed with modest pride, the complacence of one who knows there is nothing to hide or apologise for.

"Isn't it a nice home, Debbie? Could any woman wish for a better home?" she asked again and again, unable to restrain herself.

And Deb, with a few secret reservations, said "Yes" and "No" with kindly warmth, thinking to herself: "Happy child, to be satisfied so easily! How much happier than we who want the moon!"

"I often wonder why I am so blessed," Rose said, in the midst of the house inspection, "when poor Molly, who deserved so much more, lives the life she does. Ah, Deb—what a marriage!"

She spoke of it exactly as Bennet Goldsworthy had spoken of hers—in a spirit compounded of benevolence and contempt, the former element preponderating in him, the latter in her. At the moment she was exhibiting the complete appointments of Peter's dressing−room.

"My husband may be a draper," said she, "but at least he does not shave in my room."

The survey of the house ended at the nurseries. Rose had purposely left the best till last. Her throwing open of the door revealed a picture so charming that it persuaded Deb to accept an invitation to dinner in order that she might do justice to it.

"Oh, what a delightful room!" she cried, as her eyes ran round its pictured walls, glowing in the evening firelight.

"Not large enough now," the smiling mother objected. "We are going to build new ones—a wing at the back—and turn these into bedrooms for the elder children, who will soon be old enough to have their own."

"Oh, what little loves!" Deb then exclaimed, her eyes upon the young inhabitants—five little fat, white, vigorous creatures in various stages of preparation for bed.

"There is one absent," explained Rose, in accents of keen regret. "John, the eldest; he is paying a visit to his grandparents. This is Constance, the second"—a golden−haired girl, enjoying her nightly treat of nursing the new baby. "And this is Kathleen"—a chubby creature in a flannel dressing−gown, waiting for her bath; "and Lucy"—being rubbed down by the nursery underling, Jane; "and Pennycuick"— Deb started at the name, and was uncertain whether it pleased her or not in this connection—the baby but one, in the tub under the hands of old head−nurse Keziah. "ARE they not sweet?"

They really were. Clean−blooded, clear−eyed, well−fed, well−kept, full of life and fun—the pride of the maternal heart was amply justified. Deb plunged into the group delightedly, kissed them, teased them, tickled them, did everything a proper aunt should do; and Rose was in ecstasies.

"Oh, Debbie," she pleaded, "DON'T go yet! Stay with them for a little. Stay and see baby undressed—I always do it myself—and have a bit of dinner with us; you will, won't you? Give me my nursing apron, Jane."

As she tied the sheet of flannel over her smart gown, she whispered to Jane:

"Go down and tell Mr Breen that Miss Pennycuick is going to stay to dinner."

Then she turned up her sleeves, settled herself upon a low chair, and, with bath−tub and belaced toilet basket, and warming night−clothes around her, performed the task that made this hour the happiest of her happy day. As closely as the romping children allowed, Deb watched her, and marvelled at her quick skill and lightness of hand. Who would have thought that little Rose could be so clever? The healthy baby, so deftly handled, raised no protest, but curled her toes as if she enjoyed it; and when all was done, the snowy−robed, perfumed creature was laid to its young mother's generous breast, and sucked itself to sleep in five minutes. Deb, wistfully observant, began to dimly apprehend that to wish Rose's marriage undone would be about as kind as to wish back to earth the dead whom we believe in heaven.

Meanwhile, Peter had been bustling about after such dinner arrangements as he could attend to. Mr Thornycroft himself had never taken more pains to please this guest. Deb enjoyed strawberries for the first time that season, and a glass of wine that even Claud could not have carped at. Coffee was brought to the drawing−room, from which Rose slipped away for a whispered colloquy with her husband in the hall; the result of which was that they came in together to ask Miss Pennycuick to do them the honour of standing godmother to the baby. Deb put the crown upon the gracious day by promptly consenting.

"But that," she thought, with some chagrin, as she rolled homewards— or rather, bedwards—with Peter's flowers in the carriage beside her— "that is the extent of my tether in this direction. A christening mug, and a bit of jewellery on her birthdays—I shall be allowed that; otherwise I can be of no more use to them than if I were a workhouse pauper. They are independent of me and of everybody."

CHAPTER XXIII.

The years passed, and the destinies of our friend began to take final shape. The bread cast upon the waters returned. The chickens came home to roost.

One winter's morning Captain Guthrie Carey brought his ship into Hobson's Bay. The agents of his company sent letters to him there. He took one from the sheaf, and read it carefully—read it four times. Then he tore it into little pieces and dropped it over the side. The pilot and the first officer wondered at the concentrated gravity of his mien, at the faraway look in his cold blue eyes. Yet is was a very short and simple letter. There were no names inside, and it merely said:

"I returned by last mail, and am at the above address. I shall be at home tomorrow afternoon at five. Of course I am seeing nobody, so we shall be quite undisturbed. Be punctual, if possible."

The "above address" was the big house that had belonged to the late Mr Ewing. "Tomorrow afternoon" was but an hour off.

At five precisely Captain Carey shed his ulster in the palatial vestibule, and at the heels of a soft−footed man−servant, marched through the warm hall and up the shallow, muffled stairs to the familiar drawing−room—a long room, the lower end of which was in shadow, and the upper illuminated like a shrine, with rosy lamps projecting from a forest of chimney ornament, and a great bright red fire twinkling upon tiles and brass. The big palms were in their big pots, spreading and bowing over settees and cosy corners; every bowl and vase overflowed with the choicest flowers, although it was wintry June. And the tea−table was ready; the old seductive chairs and tables were grouped upon the Persian hearthrug in the old way, with the sheltering screen half round them. Indications of the desire of the mistress of the house to give him special welcome were too marked and many to be ignored.

He was left here to meditate in solitude for a few minutes, and he did all the meditating that was possible in the time. His heart thumped rather faster than was necessary, but his strong face was a picture of composed determination. Indeed, it was not easy to recognise the young Guthrie Carey of old Redford days in this stern, tough, substantial man, steady as a rock amid the winds and waves of incalculable fate. Just now he had the look of a military commander braced for a pitched battle. And the V.C. has been won for many a less courageous enterprise than that on which he was now engaged.

Leaning his broad shoulders on the ledge of the mantelpiece, and roasting his stout calves at the glorious fire, he watched the distant doorway with narrowed but keenly−glinting eyes. When he saw the dim curtain lift to let in the light from the landing and a slim woman's figure, he straightened himself, and set his teeth hard. It had to be faced and fought, he felt, and the sooner it was over the better for them both.

She came fluttering up to him, with both hands held out. How white they were against the crape! And how wonderfully her complexion and her hair were set off by the black robe and the fine lawn bands at throat and wrists! He loathed the mockery of the widow's weeds, but thought he had never seen her look so lovely.

"Oh, Guthrie! Oh, what YEARS it seems! Were you wondering what had become of me? But I couldn't—somehow I didn't feel that I COULD— before—"

She cast herself into his arms in the most natural way in the world. He laid one of them round her waist lightly, and kissed her brow; then, when she lifted it for the purpose, her mouth—the sweetest woman's mouth that ever made a pair of soft eyes omnipotent. After some seconds of silence, she looked at him questioningly, all a−quiver with nervous excitement. Her delicate cheek was pink like a La France rose.

"It was so good of you to come," she murmured humbly. "It wasn't—it didn't bother you? You were not wanting to do something else, were you, dear?" There was revealed in tone and manner the fact that even selfish Frances had come to care for something more than for herself.

"No—oh, no," he replied, rather breathlessly. "I WAS going up the country this afternoon, but fortunately I got your letter in time."

"Oh, if you had! What should I have done? I couldn't stand it any longer, Guthrie. It is four whole months—since—though it seems like yesterday—"

"And how are you?" he broke in, taking a fresh grip of the sword, as it were.

He held her off from him, glancing at her shoulder, her skirt— anything but her eyes, which were HER sword, two−edged and deadly.

"Oh, don't look at me!" she exclaimed, shrinking. "I hate myself in this horrible gown—I feel so mean and hypocritical—though I do mourn for him, Guthrie. You must not think I feel happy because he is dead—no, indeed; I wish I could! But one must conform to a certain extent, mustn't one? And every respect that I can possibly show to his memory—especially after the way he has treated me! I suppose you heard—" "What?" Guthrie had heard, but asked the question to fill time.

"Five thousand a year," said she, "at my absolute and entire disposal, with no restriction or condition of any sort or kind."

She made the announcement in a level tone, and without a smile, but he detected the triumph and satisfaction underneath; and, feeling much the stronger for it, he observed gravely that the dead man was a good man. "And I always knew it, Francie, worse luck!"

"Oh, so did I! Far—far too good for the likes of me. But—well, we need not talk about that now. We couldn't help ourselves, could we? And the past is past; everything is different now. Oh, Guthrie, what it is to kiss you without feeling that I am doing wrong!"

She kissed him as she said it, pressing him to her. Of course he kissed her back, but his hands on her waist were rigid, as if he wore an evening shirt, and was afraid of her crushing the front of it. She might have noticed this if she had not caught a glimpse of herself at the moment in a mirror behind him.

"One thing," she said, "I did draw the line at. I positively refused to wear a cap. I knew—I knew you couldn't have borne THAT!" Holding her charming head, rippled all over with goldenchestnut curls and coils, just in front of his eyes, she pleaded for confirmation of this statement. "You couldn't have stood seeing me in a cap, could you, Guthrie?" "As far as I can judge," he replied, "nobody asks you to wear caps these days, whether you're a widow or not. Why, the very grandmothers go about in yellow fringes and things, pretending they are thirty or forty, when everybody knows they are twice that, at the least. When I was a youngster, there used to be old ladies—my mother was one; but the race has died out."

"I, at any rate, am not an old lady," Mrs Ewing remarked, with a joyous smile. "My yellow fringes and things are all my own, and so is my complexion, and so are my teeth."

Her smile widened to reveal their pearly excellence. She took his hand, and rubbed the back of it on her downy cheek, and laid the palm on her soft, thick locks. Even yet she did not see that anything was the matter, confident in her still young beauty, and in the fact that he now knew for certain that the bulk of her husband's property was hers. How often she had wondered whether he knew or not, feeling sure that he MUST have heard the news at some of the many ports he had put into since it had become a matter of public knowledge, and why he allowed days and weeks, even months, to pass without making a sign. There had always been the cables, anyway. She put it down to his delicacy, his sense of the awkwardness of the situation, his consideration for her.

"We will have tea first," she said, touching the bell−button. "Then we shall not be disturbed any more. We can talk till dinner−time. Oh, how I wish you could stay for dinner, and a long, long evening! But it is better not to do things of that sort yet, don't you think? Better not to run risks of making scandal now that there's no longer any need for it."

"Much better," said Captain Carey firmly.

"And, after all, there are lots of ways that we can meet without doing anything improper. I have thought of heaps. I can go to Sydney—I can go home, for that matter; I am a perfectly free agent. And we have now less than three−quarters of a year. Guthrie, I want you to let me have the twelve months good. It is a long wait, I know, but we should feel the benefit of it afterwards—"

"Hush−sh!"

She glanced down the room in alarm, and saw the door open to admit the servant she had summoned. He brought teapot and kettle, hot cakes and muffins, and arranged them with unnecessary carefulness on the little table by the fireside. Hostess and guest watched his slow manoeuvres with an impatient but fascinated gaze, and tried to think about something to talk about for his edification, and could not.

"Thank you, Willis; that will do, Willis. I'll ring if I want anything else. I don't know, Captain Carey, whether you are one of those people who despise tea and cake—"

They were alone once more. Captain Carey refused the proffered refreshment. Mrs Ewing, making no effort to persuade him, took a few mouthfuls hastily; then she set her cup down, and with a quick flirt of the hand, extinguished the two pink lamps. They were old−fashioned gas−lamps too.

"We don't want lights to talk by," she said, in a casual way. "The firelight is enough. I think firelight at this hour so much the pleasantest, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," he responded desperately, and indeed was glad of the shelter of a shadow on his face; but he said to himself, with clenched hands and a long indrawn breath, "Now comes the tug−of−war."

A very large and wide sofa, low, deep−seated, full of springs and down pillows, stood in the cosy firelight, a great, tall, curving screen behind it. Mrs Ewing—as she had done many times before—crossed over to this sofa, sank into its yielding depths, and looking up at her companion, patted the empty seat beside her. The man hesitated for an instant, and then—as he had done many times before—obeyed the significant gesture. But now the time for preparation, for hesitation, had expired; it was necessary to brace himself for the decisive deed. Even as she clasped her hands beneath his ear, he unclasped them, gently but firmly, and drew them down. With his back to the firelight, she could not see his face, but he could see hers, and the swift change in its expression. She was puzzled and surprised, but, as her hands were still held fast in his iron fists, resting on his knee, she was not conscious of the state of the case.

"My girl," he said, clearing his throat—she had allowed him so many liberties that this mode of address was quite in order—"you and I can speak plainly to each other. There's no need for us to beat about the bush, is there?"

"Of course not," she replied, all at sea as to what this portended, but jumping to the conclusion that he was going to be proud about the money. "It would be an odd thing if we took to being shy, at this time of day."

"It would, wouldn't it?" He cleared his throat again, and made a fresh start. "Look here, Francie—don't do that! Listen to me child—"

"I am not a child, sir. Allow me to inform you that I was twenty−nine last birthday." She was so pleased to think she was only twenty−nine, rich and free, with her life in her hands, and half a year−from thirty still, when she might have dragged on till she was old and grey, or in her grave! "And why am I not to do that? Since when have you lost your taste for kisses?" Then suddenly, with an anxious cry—"Guthrie! darling! what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," he said hastily—"nothing, of course, except that we must be serious and sensible, and—and talk things over quietly, dear. As you say, you are not a child. No more am I. We know the ropes, Francie, don't we? We've outgrown the delusions of boys and girls. We've had our experiences as man and woman—eh? You know what I mean. No need to mince matters—to go in for conventional nonsense—you and I. We can talk straight to each other at a time like this?"

As he laboured painfully to explain, without explaining, her face faded like a sunny landscape when a wet fog crawls over it. For, Francie though it was, she loved him—she loved him all she knew.

"Guthrie," she moaned piteously, "have you left off caring for me?"

"No, Francie. Of course I haven't."

"Have you—while I have been away, and in so much trouble—been putting another woman in my place?"

"Certainly not."

"Is it that you don't like to live on his money, Guthrie?"

"I should NOT like to live on it—decidedly not. But the fact is, I haven't given the money a thought." "Then why—why are you like this?"

"I'll tell you, Francie—I'll tell you plainly. It seems infernally brutal—but I'm sure you know I wouldn't say a thing to hurt you if I could help it."

"Oh, go on!"

There were red roses in her cheeks now, and a sparkle that was not all firelight in her eyes.

"It is this, dear—don't try to take your hands away, I am going to keep them; I must have you listen to me till I've quite done—it is this, Francie: Love, as we very well know—I mean our sort of love— is one thing, and marriage another—"

"WHAT? Oh, is THAT it? Ah, ah! I see now."

"Take your own case," said he, with a relentless air. "Haven't you proved it up to the hilt?"

"Proved what?"

"That marriage is a failure."

"Of course, marriage is a failure when it is blundered into as I blundered into mine, when I was too young and ignorant to know a thing about it. That is not saying it would be a failure now."

"It would be a dead failure, Francie. I am absolutely convinced of it."

"Because you have grown tired of me! Because somebody else has got hold of you behind my back! Because—oh, because you men are all alike, thinking of nothing but the amusement of the hour, sucking a woman's life−blood as if she were an orange, and throwing her aside like the useless skin—without honour, without constancy, selfish, heartless, treacherous—"

"Hush, Francie! Don't talk rubbish. I may be like other men—I've no doubt I am—but I'm not all that. When I make an engagement, I keep it. When I take obligations and responsibilities upon me, I do my best to fulfil them. Most men do—decent men; but they never have justice done them in these cases."

"In these cases!" she echoed scornfully. "Everybody knows what their conduct is in these cases. The world is well used to it. Oh, I ought to have known—if I hadn't been the most incredible fool! It was not for want of warnings. But you seemed so different! The idea that you could play with a woman in this way—compromise her—change all her life, and spoil it utterly—and then back out! Oh! oh! Can you sit there and tell me that you have incurred no responsibility in your dealings with me, Guthrie—making me love you as I did—making me a bad woman— unfaithful to my good husband—the most honourable, the most trustful of men—"

"Did I do that? Honour bright now, Francie."

"Oh, this is too much!" she burst out furiously, springing from her seat, and being dragged back by his iron grasp of her hands. "Let me go, sir! I have had insults enough—and in my own house—with no husband to protect me—"

"Sit down," he commanded. "And for God's sake don't—don't go on like that! I can't stand it. I am not insulting you, dear—not wilfully insulting you—not more than I am forced to. I only want us both to understand the case as it is; surely you and I are not afraid to speak out—to face the truth? You are not crying, Francie?"

"No, no! Indeed, I'm not! Don't you flatter yourself! I am not hurt, and I'm not the sort of person to go begging a man to marry me, either. I don't think—I really DON'T think that I am QUITE so poorly off as all that comes to." Here she laughed, but only for an instant. "If you were to go down on your knees before me, Guthrie, I would not have you now, after the things you have said to me."

The statement calmed and strengthened him. He felt able to say the rest.

"Quite right, Francie. Dozens of men will come courting you as soon as you go out again, and any one of them will make you a better husband than I should have done; but not a better friend. I hope you will always remember that."

"Many thanks. Will you be so very kind as to release my hands, Captain Carey? They ache."

"One moment. I want to make sure of the last chance I shall get to explain—to tell you exactly what I mean—you, who are old enough, experienced enough, to understand. I don't want to defend myself, Francie—not at all. I am not the cad to say, 'The woman tempted me, and I did eat.' I don't blame you, dear—I don't blame anybody. A woman is a woman; and a lovely woman like you—well, the way things are managed in this world, I don't believe she can help herself. But look here, Francie, a man is a man too, and a good deal more so. If you were a girl, I wouldn't say this; but you knew—you knew what you were doing when you laid yourself out to be sweet and— and kind to a fellow, as you were to me. Did you take me for an old maid or a Social Purity Society? You know you didn't. A man does his best, but he's too heavily handicapped—I won't say by nature— perhaps by habit, which is second nature—the habit of generations, inherited in his blood—and his case is not on all−fours with your case. And especially when he is a sailor—so cut off—so deprived— Very well. And so it happened—as it happened. Never mind about the right and wrong. What's wrong today may be right tomorrow; and in any case, no arguing can undo what's done. We'll leave that."

She sat before him, panting, and the roses in her cheeks were white. Happily, the fire had grown a little dull by this time.

"For myself," he continued, speaking slowly, as if trying to think things out—"for myself, whether I ought to repent or not, I don't—I can't. Theoretically, I know it is always the man who is in the wrong, and I should have been foully in the wrong—I should be unfit to live —if you had been an unmarried girl, Francie—or if I had been

the— the—"

"Oh!" she moaned bitterly, grasping his point of view, if not the plain justice of it. "But I have brought it on myself—I have only myself to thank. I made myself cheap, and must take the consequences."

"It is not that," he said kindly, but still feeling in his unsophisticated brain that it was. "I don't hold you cheap, my dear. I want to disabuse your mind of that idea, that I am throwing anything in your teeth. Good God, I should think not!—it would come ill from me. I have no conventional views about these things—none. But look here now: if you were my wife, I should never see you with another fellow without thinking—well, you know what I should think—and feeling myself like poor old Ewing—Oh, I AM a brute!" It was revealed to him all at once. "Do—DO forgive me!"

"Pray don't apologise!" she cried, in a high, shaking voice. "It is best, as you say, to speak plainly—not to mince matters—especially as there is no one to call you to account for what you say."

"And it would be worse for you, ever so much," he continued earnestly. "Having got into the way of—of this sort of thing—I'm afraid I might be tempted again—that I couldn't honestly promise—in short, the fact of the matter is that we are neither of us domesticated, so to speak—"

"There—that will do" she broke in, coldly furious, but with a volcano in her breast that threatened eruption and devastation shortly. "Will you let me go, Captain Carey? Or must I call my servants to my assistance? I have only servants now."

"Yes, yes"—and he released one hand—"I will, if you'll say you forgive me, Francie. I've made an awful mess of it, I know—"

They rose together, and the other hand was freed. It was the right hand, and she returned it to him immediately.

"Good−bye!" she said, between clenched teeth.

He held her tightly once more.

"May I come and see you again? May I write? I can say it better in writing."

"You have said all that needs to be said. There is no necessity to write. If you write to me, I shall return the letter unopened."

"But why? It is surely absurd for us to put on airs of dignity with one another. Francie, you don't mean us to part like this?"

She stepped quickly across the hearthrug and, with a passionate gesture, pressed the button of the bell—evidently to summon Willis to show him out. So he took up his hat, offended in his turn, and for the first time feeling fairly easy in his mind as to the way he was treating her. But the tragedy of the moment was turned to vulgar comedy by her alarm at the fact that she had struck the bell before relighting the pink lamps.

"Oh, where are the matches?" she whispered excitedly. "I can't find them."

"Here—here!" he cried, fumbling for his own pocket box.

And their flurried hands got mixed as she turned the taps while he applied the light to the burners.

The instant after they had restored the room to its normal condition, the butler appeared. Mrs Ewing turned to him with the amazing self−possession of a woman accustomed to extricate herself at a moment's notice from an awkward fix.

"Willis," she said sweetly—and even smiled as she spoke—"will you please have a cab fetched for Captain Carey? He is rather late for a dinner engagement." The butler acknowledged the order and withdrew. In the light of the pink lamps the late combatants looked strangely at one another.

"And you would have married MARY!" the woman commented upon the issue of the fight. It was both a taunt and an accusation.

The man lifted his brows questioningly, as at a loss to comprehend her meaning.

"Has that anything to do with it?' he asked. 'I don't see the connection."

The sentences were short, but signified many things.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Frances Ewing was a shady name thereafter, to those "in the know". Pennycuick blood and pride notwithstanding, she seemed to lose her own sustaining self−respect when she lost the respect of the man she loved —when he showed her with such barbarous and uncompromising candour the essential difference between a mistress and a wife. Of course, she "got over" that grievous affair, which, for a time, broke whatever heart she had to break. Her freedom and her money, her youth and her beauty, were still hers, and she made the most of them; and that most was a great deal. In her cosmopolitan sets she was a popular and distinguished figure. From one fashionably rowdy Continental resort to another she carried her rich jewels and trappings, and her personal magnetism, and sat down for the season to a campaign of social stratagem and sentimental intrigue—to the indulgence of her unbridled appetite for excitement and the admiration of men. And ever at the end, when it was time to move on to another BIJOU apartment in another place, there was a fresh scalp at her girdle, and nothing, as it were, to show for it, until at last her vanity was tempted with a title, and she married an Italian count, who, if all tales were true, paid the debt that his sex owed her with heavy interest. But those tales did not reach the ears of the sisters at home. To them—with the object of suitably impressing them—she wrote an occasional note, of which half the words were titles of nobility; and the humbler relatives accepted the fact of her unapproachable elevation above them. The Breens made easy jokes upon the subject; Mr Goldsworthy's jealousy of her was overcome by his pride in the connection. "We had a letter from my sister−in−law, the Countess, the other day," he would amiably remark, and proceed to repeat and amplify the fashionable intelligence contained therein, instead of taking away her character as he had been used to do. Deborah was the only sister with whom she can be said to have corresponded, and Deborah had a shrewd suspicion that all was not gold that glittered in Francie's lot. Deborah had the best means of knowing, being herself a world−traveller, and what is called a society woman, as well known in the resorts of such as Frances herself. But although they seemed to run so closely, and so much upon the same lines, there was as wide a gap of social difference and non−intimacy between them as between any two of their family. And Deb was not one to think evil of her own flesh and blood, if it was possible to think good.

She, too, might have filled her letters to Australia with titles of nobility—nobility of a firmer standing than the Countess and her friends could boast of—had she been inclined to do so. A baronial hall, dating from the Conquest—a ducal castle, not to speak of a Royal Presence Chamber—was nothing to Deborah Pennycuick after a while.

To see her on a crowded London staircase, laughing with a prince or a prime minister, was a common object of the season for a number of years; while varnishing days and first nights would have lacked charm for the society reporter who could not place her fine figure and her French gowns in his pictures of these scenes. Goodwood and Cowes were familiar with her striking face and her expert interest in horses and yachts; Highland shooting−lodges, English hunting−fields, claimed her for their own. Southern Europe, the Nile, Bayreuth—in short, wherever social life was bright, comfortable and select, there she turned up promiscuous, as the spirit moved her, to be welcomed open−armed as a matter of course. Men, young and old, continued to pay her homage, which was not just the sort of homage they paid to Frances; proposals of marriage were, or might have been if not nipped in the bud, almost as plentiful as invitations to country houses in the autumn. And she relished it all with singular enjoyment—until she began to feel the approach of that winter and evening of life which has so sharp a chill for those who have loved the sun.

Claud Dalzell was likewise a denizen of the great world that was hers and not Francie's, and, close corporation as it is, they were never far off each other's beat, seldom in ignorance of each other's whereabouts. At the same time, they also did not touch. It was known throughout the great world, which is so small, that there was a deadly feud between them; and tactful hostesses took pains not to bring them into juxtaposition. In public places, when meetings occurred by accident, only the most frigid bows were interchanged.

For, in quite early times, when the Australian heiress, as she was improperly styled, was taking London more or less by storm, she chanced to overhear a brief colloquy not intended for her ears.

"Who is that glorious woman that came in with the duchess? I don't see her just now, but she had a red frock on, with black lace over it— dark hair and diamond stars—not half as bright and fine as her eyes, by Jove!"

"It must be Miss Pennycuick—an Australian lady. She is with the duchess's party."

"Oh, is that Miss Pennycuick? Well, now I can believe what I've heard of her being so charming. She carries it in her face."

"She WAS charming—until she came into her money. That has quite spoilt her."

It was Claud Dalzell who said it, and Deb heard him say it. She moved off out of the press that had brought her within reach of his cold voice—not to be mistaken by her for any other voice—and she vowed through clenched teeth that never again would she come within that distance of him, if she could help it.

The years as they passed only strengthened this determination. Each proud inclination of the head, each ceremonious lift of the hat, added bitterness to their mutual resentment—to his feeling that she was spoiled by her money, and to her feeling that he wilfully misjudged her. The breach was widened by their unconcealed flirtations—a description mentally applied to the most ordinary man−and−woman acquaintanceships on either side, but not inappropriate in all cases. Claud ever loved the company of handsome women who appreciated him; Deb naturally inclined to nice men in preference to the nicest women; and each liked to show the other that he or she was still of high importance to somebody. Rumours of impending marriage were continually being wafted to his ears or hers, but nothing came of them. He was confirmed in luxurious bachelorhood; she was aware of many fortune−hunters, and could not bring herself to value any of her disinterested suitors at the price of her freedom. So the one−time lovers drifted more and more apart, until somehow they lost sight of each other altogether; and meanwhile the years made them old without their knowing it.

She was unreasonably upset on one occasion by the offer of a specific for grey hair from a fashionable London hair−dresser. It was absolutely permanent, harmless and undetectable, he said. "But I am not grey," she indignantly informed him. Whereupon she saw his keen professional eye wander about her brow as he murmured something about the faint beginnings that might as well be checked. At home she studied the matter carefully in a strong light, and called Rosalie, her maid, to aid her. The little Frenchwoman assured her that a microscope was needed to detect a white thread in that beautiful mass of dark nut−brown. With a microscope, no doubt, as many as half a dozen might be discerned dimly, just where it waved back from mademoiselle's face.

That same afternoon she and Rosalie left town for one of their country−house visits. It was a weepy autumn day, and she was not as fresh as usual—the hair−dresser, combined with some troublesome shopping, had tired her—and the disquieting suspicion laid hold of her that she was more easily fatigued than she used to be. While reading her novel in the train, she counted her years, and compared herself with the women she knew whose ages were recorded in the Peerage, and who could therefore be proved to be as old as herself. Some of them were wrinkled hags. Carelessness or ill−health, doubtless, she reflected; and neither charge could be laid at her door. Heigh−ho! That horrid man!

It was dark night when they reached the little station belonging to the mansion that was their goal. A dozen other guests and their servants and baggage crowded the platform, and half−a−dozen carriages and luggage−brakes the yard behind; and Deb was at once in charge of a tall footman, Rosalie struggling through the press with jewel−case and dressing−bag, chattering French to one of her familiars in the rear. Distracted stationmaster and porters uncovered to the stately woman as she passed. It was all a matter of course to her these days.

She was too late for the big tea−party; the men had gone to the smoking−room, the women to their own firesides. After a brief but affectionate interview with her titled hostess, Deb was soon at hers, slippered and dressing−gowned, sipping the jaded woman's stimulant, warming the damp and dismalness out of her, assuring herself confidently that she was not an old woman, and had no intention of becoming one.

Certainly, when Rosalie had dressed her, she was entitled to an easy mind. The best of everything tonight, in vindication of her still unimpaired beauty and potency. Shimmering brocade of her favourite red, and lace like fairy work; and then that magnificent satin−white breast and massive throat, and the stately head crowned with the famous five stars, whose flashing made the eye wink, and which yet were dimmed by the light of her dark eyes. She surveyed herself with full content when the last touch had been given her, and her slow sweep a−down corridors and grand staircase was a triumphal march. She knew that her entrance into the crowd downstairs could no more fail of its customary effect than could the appearance of the sun next morning— or, one should rather

say, the announcement of dinner to the tired and hungry shooting men.

She was met at the foot of the grand staircase by her host, and immediately surrounded. In the close press of friends she did not notice the strangers; time was too short and they were too many. A lord of her acquaintance, who still hoped to make her his lady, took her into dinner, and called upon all her powers of wit and repartee to meet his conversational tactics during the meal. It was an exhilarating encounter, and of sufficient interest to keep her "eyes in the boat". Moreover, the table was immense, and the chief of the strangers sitting on her side of it, a long way off.

After dinner there was little comedietta played on the boards of the toy theatre belonging to the house. Many of the ladies were in their places before the men, still craving repose after their hard day's work, could hoist themselves from their chairs in the dining−room. Deb, having helped to coach one of the amateur performers, was early in her seat in front. Some of her admirers did manage to squeeze in beside and behind her from time to time, but the particular stranger haughtily held aloof.

Then, when the play was over, there was an impromptu dance, for the theatre was an ANNEXE to the ball−room. It was the young folk who began it, but older ladies joined in, and all the men but the hardened sportsmen, who saw a chance to sneak to their snuggery and gun−talk before the time. The really old women, obviously past their dancing days, sat around, and looked on and gossiped to one another. And for a time Deb sat with them.

She was certainly tired—for her—and the fact struck her that she had not danced for a long time. She had shirked balls, having only too many entertainments to choose from. She thought it likely that she would be stiff and heavy on her feet from want of practice—a horrible idea to her, who had once danced like a feather in the wind. A good stone had been added to her weight since she had last waltzed with satisfaction to herself; that also was not a pleasing thought. So when her dinner lord essayed to entice her, she shook her head. A dozen other men, and the cream of them too—there was comfort in that— followed his example, and made her charming compliments when she said laughingly that she was "too old for these frivolities".

"Too old—gracious heavens!" they apostrophised space. It was heart−warming to hear them.

But they went off easily, and were soon dancing with the young girls— sylphs as airy and agile as she had once been. And by degrees she drew apart from the old ladies and their talk, which she hated to seem, even to herself, to belong to, and presently found herself in the extraordinary position of sitting alone. She leaned back in her chair, and with eyes half shut, looked at the whirling couples, and dreamed of the days—the dances—the youth—that were no more.

She saw, not this splendid saloon, but a shabby small room in an old bush house—the walls not panelled with paintings by R.A.s and starred with clusters of electric lights, but with wreaths of homely evergreens and smelly kerosene lamps. And amid the happy throng that jostled for room to dance there, a girl and a young man, newly betrothed, anticipating an immortal paradise in each other's arms.

And she looked up, and saw Claud Dalzell watching her.

He was horribly aged—illness, it seemed—and had grown quite white— that splendid lover with whom she had danced, as no girl here knew how to dance, in the golden prime of everything! Their eyes met, and there must have been in both pairs something that neither of them had seen before. He crossed to her side at once, and she did not freeze him when he got there.

"How do you do? I have been wondering if you were going to recognise me."

"How do you do? I didn't know you were here. I never saw you until this moment."

"I have been standing there for ten minutes."

"I did not notice. I was thinking—" "You were—deeply. I was trying to guess what you were thinking of."

"I wonder, did you?"

"I wonder. Was it, by any chance"—he dropped his voice—"Five Creeks?"

She was quite startled and discomposed by this extraordinary divination; having no time to decide how she would take it, she filled the embarrassed moment with a laugh.

"Goodness! I'd no idea that my face was such a tell−tale. I believe I was. That funny old room, with ridges in the floor, and the ceiling nearly on your head—how DID we manage to dance in it?"

"Well, we did manage somehow, didn't we?"

They gazed at the figures wheeling past them, blankly unresponsive to casual stares and smiles. They seemed

to hear the rotten flood−gates, shut so long ago, creak on their rusty hinges.

"Heard anything of the Urquharts lately?"

"Yes. Alice was married the other day—to a widower with fourteen children. She has not been very happy at home, I fear, with Harold's wife. Harold has the place now, you know. Jim gave it up to him when he married."

"When who married?"

"Harold."

"What's Jim doing?"

"He is my manager at Redford."

Mr Dalzell smiled darkly. "He likes that, I suppose?"

"I don't know whether he likes it or not, I'm sure, but I do. I know that everything's right when he is there."

"Married?" "Lawks, no! The most confirmed old bachelor on the face of the earth."

They fell silent again, still gazing into the room. Deb lay back and fanned herself; Claud leaned forward and nursed his knee. He ought now to have asked news of her sisters, but he avoided mentioning any of them.

"Been back lately, Deb?"

"Not for years, I am ashamed to say."

"Anybody living at Redford?"

"Miss Keene and a few servants only. Too bad, isn't it? Oh, I must go soon and see the old place. But this European life—somehow, the longer you live it the less you feel you can live any other."

"I used to feel that. But now—one gets awfully tired of things—"

"Oh, I don't!"

"But then you keep so horribly young, don't you know."

He turned and looked at her. She flushed up like a girl.

"Thank you. That's a very pleasing compliment, although I know you cannot mean it."

"I'd like not to mean it. I'd like to have found you as old as I am myself."

"How cruel of you! Not that you are such a Methuselah as you would try to make out—"

"There are not five years between us," he broke in sharply.

"I know."

Back went memory in a flash to a succession of childish birthdays, their love−tokens and festive celebrations. His was in November, and his "party" was usually a picnic. Hers was in May, and was "kept" in the house, with big fires and a tea−table crowned with a three−tiered iced cake, and blind−man's−buff and turn−the−trencher in the evening. She recalled wild contests with an imperious little boy, who could never conquer her except by stooping to it; and the self−conscious silliness of their behaviour to each other when they grew from children into boy and girl.

"Not much fun in birthdays now, Deb." He seemed to comment on her thoughts.

"Oh, well!" she sighed vaguely.

And at that instant the music stopped. Someone gave the signal to retire from the ball−room, bedwards. They were parted by the crowd that gathered about them when the dancing ceased, and he did not find her again even to say good−night.

CHAPTER XXV.

The shooting men were up first, to their early breakfast. It seemed to Deb a matter of course that Claud would be of this virile company; it was his saving grace as a man, when he was young, that he was a keen and accomplished sportsman. After an indifferent night, she rose lazily and late; found, as she expected, only a few more women in the breakfast−room, and ate her own meal alone at one of the little tables. The hostess drifted in amongst the last, and stopped a moment to shake hands and exchange a word.

"It seems a beautiful day," she said, "and we shall be making up a party by−and−by to go out and lunch with the guns. You will join us, of course?"

But Deb thought of Claud amongst the guns, and of the horrible risk of appearing to run after him; and she replied sweetly that, although she would have loved the outing, she was afraid she must stay at home, owing to important letters that had to be written for the afternoon post.

"All right," said the hostess, "I'll stay too—there are plenty without me—and we'll have a drive later on."

She passed to her breakfast−table, and Deb rose and went upstairs, to see what she could find to attend to in the way of pressing correspondence.

She had the status of a married lady in this great house, as everywhere; that is to say, a sitting−room of her own—a very cosy place between tea and the dressing−bell. Just now, however, Rosalie was busy in it. The maid offered to retire to the adjoining bed−chamber, but Deb said, "Oh, never mind; go on," and gathering her blotting−book and papers, went downstairs again to make herself comfortable in the library. She loved a good library to sit in, and generally found privacy therein at this time of day.

The library here was magnificent in stately comfort—books in thousands, busts, old masters, muffling Turkey carpets, a great, bright, still fire, and armchairs so big and soft that it was strange they could stand empty. She drew up one of them and sat awhile, toasting her feet and turning precious leaves—it was the interval covered by Claud's breakfast—and then set herself to the business she was supposed to be engaged in.

"Dear Francie,—I tried at half−a−dozen shops to match your Chinese satin, but nowhere could I get the exact shade. If you like I will try again when I go back to town, but if I were you I would not attempt to make it go with any modern stuff, which could not help looking crude beside it; I would have quite another material and colour. What do you stay to—"

She paused reflectively, the tip of her pen−handle between her teeth, her eyes fixed absently upon the green park beyond the open window, composing a gorgeous costume in her mind. Before she could even decide whether to advise a ball−dress with CREPE DE CHINE, or a tea−gown with Oriental cashmere, one of the noiseless library doors swung back, and a man came in. Without noticing her still figure, he strolled over to a certain shelf, opened a book that he wanted, and stood, with his back to her, turning over the leaves.

So he had not gone with the men. How horrid! And what a nuisance that he should find her here! Well, she was not going to put herself out for him. She lowered her pen softly, and began to scratch the paper, over which she bent absorbedly. He turned round. "Oh, I beg your pardon—"

"Oh, it's you, Claud! Good morning! Why, I thought you would be out with the guns this fine day."

"Fine day, do you call it? There's a wind like a knife. And you sit here with the window wide open—"

He marched towards it, and shut it with violence. It was a great glass door between stone mullions. Above it and two fellow−sheets of glittering transparency, three coats of many quarterings enriched the colour−scheme of the stately room. She watched him with the beginning of a smile upon her lips. The humour of the situation appealed to her.

"I like an open window," she remarked mildly. "If you remember, I always did."

He came towards her, looking at her gloomily, looking himself thin and grey and shivery—but always like a prince.

"You have more flesh to keep you warm than I have," said he, quite roughly.

"Thank you!" She bridled and flushed. Her massive figure, for a woman of her years, was perfect; but of course she was as sensitive as the well−proportioned female always is to the suspicion that she was too fat. "You

have not lost the art of paying graceful compliments."

"I meant it for one," said he, replying to her scoffing tone. "You put me to shame, Deb, with your vigour and youthfulness. I know how old you are, and you don't look it by ten years. And you are a beauty still, let me tell you. It may not be a graceful compliment, but at least it is sincere. Even these girls here—"

"Nonsense about beauty—at my time of life," she broke in; but she smiled behind her frown, and forgave him his remark about her flesh. "You and I are too old to talk that sort of stuff now."

"Do you think I am so very old?" he asked her, standing before her writing−table, as if inviting a serious judgment.

She glanced quickly over him. His moustache was white, his ivory−tinted face scratched with fine lines about the eyes; he stooped at the shoulders, and his chest had hollowed in. Yet she could have returned his compliment and called him a beauty still. He was so to her. Every line and movement of his body had a distinction all his own, and "What a shame it is," she thought, "for that profile to crumble away before it has been carved in marble."

"We are in the same boat," she answered him. "There are not five years between us."

"Five years put us out of the same boat," he rejoined, "especially when they are virtually fifteen. Deb, I know you think me an old man—don't you?"

"What I think is that you are a sick man," she said kindly. "Are you, Claud? You used to be so strong, for all your slenderness. What is the matter with you?"

"Everything—nothing—only that I feel old—and that I haven't been used to feeling old—and that it's so—so loathsome—"

"I'm sure it is," she laughed, rallying him. "I can understand your being sick, if you have come to that. But why do you let yourself? Why do you think about it? Why do you own to it—in that abject way? I never do. I'm determined not to be an old woman—until I am obliged. And I don't paint, either," she added, "and my hair is my own."

He seemed to study her cheek and her hair. She coloured up, dipped her pen, and looked at her unfinished letter. He wandered off a step or two, and returned.

"Do you know this thing of Hamerton's?" he inquired, in a casual way, extending the volume he held.

She took it, laying down her pen. A considerable literary discussion ensued, during which he fetched more books from the shelves to show her. It began to appear that he meant to spend the whole morning with her, possibly taking it for granted that it was her desire to have him. That idea, if he entertained it, must be corrected at once. She resumed her pen with a business−like air.

"Deb," said he then, "do you mind if I read here for a little while? I won't disturb you. It's so nice and quiet—away from those chattering women—"

"Oh, certainly!" she politely acquiesced. "But don't you think they'll want you, with all the other men away? Now's your opportunity to be made much of."

"I don't care to be made much of just because I am the only man."

"Oh, but you would always be more than that, of course."

"I'm not more than an old fogey when the young fellows are around. They will take no notice of me at tea−time. Well, I'm getting used to it. I'm getting to know my place." "If that was your place, you would soon vacate it."

"How can I vacate it?"

"When people begin to take me for an old fogey, they'll not have the honour of my company in their houses."

"That's very well for you—wait till the time comes. And I suppose you like it, anyhow. You seem to enjoy all this"—waving a hand around— "as if you were a girl who had never seen anything. I'm sick and tired of the whole show."

"Then don't have any more to do with it. Go home."

"Home! What home have I?"

"A lovely flat in town, they tell me, where you give the best dinners, and ladies' theatre parties and things—" "Pshaw! I am hardly ever there. I hate the racket of London in the season—I'm not up to it nowadays—and you wouldn't have me stranded in Piccadilly at this time of year, I presume? I'm obliged to spend the winter down south—and by the same token I must soon be getting off, or these east winds and damp mists will play the deuce with my bronchitis—"

"Oh, it's bronchitis, is it? I knew it was something. I suppose you've been coddling yourself with hot rooms and all sorts of flannel things; that's the way people make themselves tender, and get chills and chest complaints, and get old before their time."

"The doctors insist on flannel—the natural wool—all of them."

"The greatest mistake in the world. I used to wear it because I thought the doctors ought to know, and I was always getting colds. Now I never let a bit of wool touch my skin—haven't for years and years—and never know what it means to have a cold."

"That is contrary to all the traditions," he remarked seriously, addressing her handsome back; for she was still supposed to be writing her letter. "I can't believe that it is due to not wearing flannel, Debbie. It's your splendid vitality—your being so different from other people—"

"Nothing of the sort! You try it. Not just now, of course, with winter beginning, but when warm weather comes again—"

And so on. The hostess broke in upon their TETE−A−TETE while they were still engrossed in this interesting topic. She was drawn into it, and made a disciple of by Deb, who attributed all her own blooming health and practical youthfulness to linen underclothing, combined with plenty of fresh air. And after all, since letter−writing was hopeless, she did go out to lunch with the guns. Claud remained alone and disconsolate by the library fire. She was due to leave the house next day, and left, although conscious of a strange hankering to stay; and during the interval gave Mr Dalzell no further opportunity to talk about his bronchitis—and other things. He was not aware that she was to go so soon until she was gone; and then he found himself with livelier feelings than had stirred his languid being for many a day. He was not only annoyed and disappointed at being deprived of the refreshment of her stimulating society; he was incensed with her mode of departure, which seemed to imply an intention to evade him.

"Does she still think that I am after her money?" he asked himself, with scorn of her mean suspiciousness. "Just because I was magnanimous enough to ignore the past!"

He went down south, to play a little at Monte Carlo and cruise a little in the Mediterranean—to kill time through the detestable winter, which made itself felt wherever he was; and she went to London to see about Francie's gown, and up north to bracing Scotland, and down to Wellwood for Christmas, and back to the racket of London in the spring; and neither of them had spent a lonelier time in all their lives. Quite a fresh and peculiar sense of homelessness and uncomforted old age took possession of them both.

All through the kaleidoscopic transformation−scenes of the "season", through which she moved magnificently, old−maidhood notwithstanding, she was unconsciously seeking him. It was her impression, from all she had heard of his tastes and ways, that he could not keep away from that common rendezvous of his class and kind. She did not find him, but all the same he was there. He returned from his winter haunts sooner than his wont, while still the April winds were full of menace for him, exposed himself to those winds seeking her, caught a chill, neglected it—a most unusual thing—and fell into an illness that confined him to his bed for many weeks.

It was not until June that Deb heard of it. He was truly so much of an old fogey now in the society of which he had once been such a distinguished ornament that his disappearance was long unnoticed. And when at last someone noticed it, in Deb's hearing, the light and callous way in which his trouble was referred to went to her heart— knowing all she knew. One of her generous impulses came to her on the spot, and an hour later she was at the door of his chambers, inquiring after him.

His man—a very jewel of a man—received her at the door, gravely, cautiously, keeping it half shut. He reported his master mending, but still weak, and not able to see anyone. Females of all kinds were sternly discouraged by this prudent person, from force of old habit.

"Oh, of course not," said Deb off−handedly. "Just give him my card, please, and say I'm very glad to hear he is not as ill as I feared."

On pain of dismissal from the best service he had ever known—and he had known it now for a long time—Manton had to find the lady's address. As soon as it was supplied to him, Claud sent for her to come and see him.

"Are we not old enough now to dispense with chaperons?" he wrote; and the sight of his hand−writing after all these long years moved her strangely. "If you think not, bring the deafest old post of your acquaintance. Only DO come. I haven't had anybody to speak to for a week."

"Of course we are old enough," commented Deb, as she read the words. "The idea of fussing about chaperons and that nonsense at our time of life!" And she proceeded to array herself in her most youthful summer dress, which was also the choicest of her stock, taking the utmost pains to match toque and gloves, while full of indignation against his friends for so shamefully neglecting him.

Boldly she ascended to his sitting−room in the wake of tight−lipped Manton, who presently brought tea, and at intervals tended the fire, apparently without once casting an eye upon her. Claud was up and dressed in her honour, while fit only for his bed. In the midst of the refined luxury that he had gathered about him, he looked but the ghost of a man, worn with his illness and the fatigue of preparing for her. It was one of those English summers that never answered to its name, and he sat in a sable−lined overcoat—considered more respectful than a dressing−gown—in a heat that almost choked her.

But with swelling heart she hurried to his side, and, after greetings, drew a chair close up to his, took the hand he silently extended, and held it in a long, warm, maternal clasp. Manton retired and shut the door. The invalid lay back on his cushions, and closed his eyes. The visitor, watching him, detected an oozing tear—the first she had ever seen there.

"How did it happen?" she crooned, and followed the question with many more of the same sort; to which he replied as to a mother or a nurse.

"It's this beastly climate," he complained. "It upsets me every time— though this is the worst bout I've had yet. I really can't stand it, Debbie. Even in June, when you'd think you were safe—just look at it!"

It was raining slightly as he spoke.

"Well, why do you try to stand it?" said she. "Why not come back to your own country? You'd be safe there, if anywhere." "I've been thinking of it," said he. "It has been in my mind all winter—the thought of that good, soaking sunshine that we used to have and think nothing of. The Riviera isn't a patch on it. Aye, I'd get warm there. But what a life—now. I am not like you—I've got nothing and nobody to go back to—I should be giving up everything—the little that I have left. And God knows life is empty enough as it is—"

"Well, I'm going," she broke in. "And am I nobody?"

He sprang up in his chair. "You—YOU going?"

"Time I did," she laughed. "I haven't set eyes on my property and my two sisters since goodness knows when." He held out his shaking hands. His face was working pitifully.

"Debbie, Debbie," he wailed, like a lost child, "will you take me? Will you have me?"

She caught him in her strong arms.

"Dearest, we will go together," she murmured. And he fell, sobbing, on her breast.

It was not in the least what she had meant to say or to do; but the appeal was irresistible. It was too terrible to see him—HIM, her young prince of such towering pride and beauty—brought down to this.

But she soon had him out of his slough of despond, and climbing the hills of hope again with something of his old gallant air. The rapidity of his convalescence was astonishing. By the end of July he was well enough to be married.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The first letter signed "Deborah Dalzell" was addressed, strange to say, to Guthrie Carey—not to the commander of the SS APHRODITE, via his shipping office, but to Guthrie Carey, Esq., Wellwood Hall, Norfolk.

For a great change had taken place in the circumstances of her old friend.

One day, a few years earlier, he had been called from the sea— somewhere off the coast of South America—to take his place as a land−owner and land−dweller amongst the great squires of England; quite the very last thing he could have anticipated in his wildest dreams. Three sons of the reigning Carey had been capsized in a gale while out yachting. The reigning Carey, on hearing of the catastrophe, had been seized with a fit that proved fatal in a few hours. His eldest son's wife, as an effect of the same shock, had given birth to a still−born male infant—the sole grandson. One brother had died childless; another leaving daughters only; the third, Guthrie's father, was also dead. Thus the unexpected happened, as it has a way of doing in this world, and the t'penny−ha'penny mate of old Redford days had become the head of a county family.

His experiences had trained him for the change. He took it soberly, without losing his head. A bristling array of blood−enemies were gradually transformed into a circle of respectful friends; some of them assisted him to settle himself in his unfamiliar seat, to teach him the duties of his high station. He was teachable, but independent, not shutting his eyes and opening his mouth to swallow all the old−world creeds they chose to put into it, but studying every branch of the science of landlordism in the light of his own intelligence and beliefs. When he had fairly mastered the situation, he married one of his cousins.

He was in his robust middle−age, which comes so much later to men than to women, she was well on in her thirties—a comely, sensible, well−bred young lady, and a most excellent coadjutor to a squire new to the business. An eminently wise selection, said his brother squires, when the engagement was announced. The wedding was a great family function and county event. It meant that the Careys, instead of being split up and scattered to the winds, remained together, united in amity; it meant that the dignity of the old house was to be kept up. When, a year later, Wellwood rang bells and lit bonfires in honour of a son and heir, nothing seemed wanting to confirm the general impression that our Guthrie was not only a wise but a singularly fortunate man.

It was an impression that Guthrie shared. From the point of view that he had now reached in life, he believed himself favoured beyond the common lot. He loved Wellwood, full of the memorials of his ancient race; he enjoyed his settled and comfortable place therein, after the homeless roving of so many years—the feel of solid land under his feet and under his life, for which every sailor pines, despite whatever spell the sea may lay on him. He was proud of his perfect−mannered wife, who was also his good friend and confidante; he was egregiously proud of his handsome boy. And the day of the young romance—of the great passion—of those sordid "little fires" which beckon to men whose nature craves for warmth and whose "yule is cold"— that day was past. "Love is one thing and marriage another," he had once said, without really meaning it; but he had spoken truer than he knew. Moreover, the shocking statement was not nearly so awful as it seemed. The very conditions of married life are fatal to love, as love is understood by the yet unmarried lovers—insanely sanguine, of human necessity—asking the impossible, and no blame to them, because they are made so; but no matter. That thing which comes afterwards, to the right−minded and well−intentioned, and which they don't think worth calling love—that sober, faithful, forbearing friendship, that mutual need which endures all the time, and is ever more deeply satisfied and satisfying instead of less—is no bad substitute.

Yet how the world of imagination dominates the world of fact! How much fairer the unseen than the seen! How much more precious the good we have not than the good we have! In his private desk in his private study, Guthrie kept—just as old Mr Pennycuick had kept his valentine —a faded, spotted, ochre−tinted photograph of poor little Lily in the saucer bonnet with lace "brides" to it that she was married in; and when Wellwood was humming with shooting parties and the like, and its lady doing the honours of the house with all the forethought and devotion that she could bring to the task, the stout squire would be sitting in his sanctum under lock and key, gazing at that sweet girl−face which had the luck to be dead and gone. Lily in the retrospect was the faultless woman—the ideal wife and love's young dream in one. "I have had my day," was the thought of his heart, as he

looked across the gulf of strenuous, chequered, disappointing years to that idyll of the far past which her pictured form brought back to him. "Whatever is lacking now, I HAVE known the fullness of love and bliss— that there is such a thing as a perfect union between man and woman, rare as it may be." It will be remembered that he was married to her, actually, for a period not exceeding five weeks in all.

And Deborah Pennycuick, who would have made such a magnificent lady of Wellwood—who was, in fact, asked to take the post before it was offered to the cousin—she came to spend Christmas under his roof while still a spinster, on the tacit understanding that neither was a subject for "nonsense" any more. Deb and Mrs Carey were close friends. Deb was the godmother of the heir. The homelikeness of Wellwood was intensified by her intercourse, while there, with English Redford and the descendants of that brother with whom old Mr Pennycuick had been unable to hit it off—humdrum persons, whose attraction for her lay in their name and blood, and the fact that they could show her the arms and portraits of her ancestors and the wainscotted room in which her father was born. It was to Wellwood that she went to be married. From the old home of the Careys she was driven to the old church of the Pennycuicks, full of mouldering monuments to a nearly vanished race; it was buried in its rural solitude, far from railways and gossip−mongers and newspaper reporters, and the wedding was as quiet as quiet could be. Guthrie was acting brother, and gave her away. He never, of course, disclosed the secret that was his and Francie's, honest brother as he longed to be; but perhaps, even had she known it, and her own austere chastity notwithstanding, she might have been broad−minded enough to judge him kindlier than is the wont of the sex which does not know all, and have still held him worthy to be to her the friend he was. As she knew him, she loved him sister−like, and turned to him naturally when she needed a brother's services. And so it was to him that she wrote first, at the end of the short wedding−day journey—just to tell him that she and her bridegroom had arrived safely, and that Claud was standing the fatigue much better than they could have hoped.

She did not write to Frances until she had her husband on the high seas. She did not write at all to Mary or Rose, not wishing them to know of her marriage until she could personally 'break it' to them. It was not difficult to ensure this, since for many a year they had all been so separated by their respective circumstances that they were no longer sisters in the old Redford sense. The business of each was her own, and not supposed to interest the rest. Only such domestic events as were of serious moment were formally reported amongst them, and were never deemed serious enough to use the cable for.

The pair came home very quietly. Sydney was the port of arrival, and here Deb divined on the part of her husband a desire to be left in peace—to recruit after laborious travelling in the care of his devoted and accomplished man—while she went forward to "get the fuss over". Those sisters were the shadows upon his now sunny path, although he did not say so; he wanted to get to Redford without having to kiss them and talk to their offensive men−folk on the way. So Deb proposed to do what she felt he wished, and paid no heed to the dutiful objections which he could not make to sound genuine in her ears. She telegraphed instructions to Bob Goldsworthy to engage rooms for her and to meet her, signing the message "Aunt Deborah"—her only herald.

Bob was duly at Spencer Street—elegant in curled moustaches and a frock−coat—become a swell young barrister since she had seen him last. He was sure of the impression he would create upon his discriminating aunt, and had no notion that her first flashing glance at him was accompanied by a flashing thought of how her adopted son would too surely be ranked by her more discriminating husband with the "bounders" of his implacable disdain. On the platform—while explaining that he knew it was not the proper thing to do in a public place—he embraced the majestic figure in the splendid sable cloak. Deb said, "Bother the proper thing!" and kissed him readily—charily, however, because conscious of teeth that were not Pennycuick teeth, and perversely objecting to the faultless costume. But, looking at the frock−coat, she perceived mourning−band upon the sleeve. Another encircled his glittering tall hat.

"Not—oh, Bob!—not your mother?" she gasped.

He shook his head, and asked a question about her luggage.

"Aunt Rose—your uncle—?"

"Oh, Aunt Deb—don't! She is my aunt, I know, but he—" Bob spread deprecating hands. "They are both well, I believe. I think I heard that the fiftieth baby arrived last week. Is that your maid in the brown—"

"Oh, but, Bob—tell me—they haven't lost any of those nice children, I do trust!"

"I should hardly have been in mourning on their account. No—fat and tough as little pigs, by the look of them. It is my father, Aunt Deb. I thought you knew." "What!" She stopped on their way towards Rosalie and the

luggage van. "You don't say—"

"Yes—a couple of months ago. The mater wrote to you."

"I have been wandering from place to place—the letter never reached me."

"Pneumonia, supervening upon influenza—that is what the doctors called it; but it was really a complication of disorders, some of them of long standing. Between you and me, Aunt Deb, he took a great deal more than was good for him latterly, and that told upon him. His blood was bad. You know he was always a self−indulgent man."

Deb nodded, forgetting that it was a son who spoke. She was saying to herself, "Bennet Goldsworthy, whom we made sure would live for ever! Bennet Goldsworthy, of all people! What a relief that will be to Claud!" And then she thought of her widowed sister, with a rush of pity and compunction. He was her husband, after all.

Bob's light attention to the subject was already gone. He was staring at one of the great trunks covered with foreign labels. Rosalie was telling him how many more Mrs Dalzell had.

"Oh, yes," said Deb, confused and crimson, "I forgot to mention—I suppose you don't know—that I am married. To an old friend of our family—your mother will know him well. By the way, Bob, I must go and see her at once. We'll have some lunch first; I must wash and change my clothes. Then will you stay at the hotel and settle Rosalie, and see to things? No, I would rather go alone. Stay in town and dine with me— and don't look so shocked, my good boy, as if I'd cut you off with a shilling. My marriage will make no difference to you." "Aunt Deb!"— with dignified reproach. "As if I thought of that."

But somehow she felt sure he did think of it.

They had luncheon together at the hotel, and sat awhile to digest it and to talk things over. While they sipped coffee, he told her how he had furnished his bachelor rooms—the artistic woodwork, the curios, the colours, how he had hunted for the right shade of red, what he had given for a particular rug which alone would blend and harmonise. She was brightly interested in these things, and promised to go and see them. She was to go to lunch next day—he thought he could safely undertake not to poison her with bad cooking or unsound wine. He lived in chambers in Parliament Place. This engagement booked, she asked him for his mother's address.

Mary lived in a small street in Richmond.

"Such a slum!" said Bob disgustedly. "But she would do it, in spite of all that I could say. And rushed there, too, when he had hardly been dead a week. It was not decent, as I told her, to be advertising the sale two days after the funeral. But she is a peculiar woman."

"She is a Pennycuick," said Mrs Dalzell reprovingly. "She would not care to go on living in a house that she had ceased to have the right to live in. I should not myself."

"But she might have gone to another place."

"You must insist on her going to another."

"I am afraid my influence is not enough to persuade her."

"My dear boy, I am convinced that if you asked her to walk into a burning fiery furnace, she would do it to please you, without a moment's hesitation."

"She is that way in some things, poor dear; but in others—I may talk till I have no voice left, and she won't listen. And she was set on this scheme. She has a mania for—for that sort of thing. One would never believe that she was your sister. She would hate to live like other people. She simply loves to be a nobody. I can't understand it. You try your influence with her, will you?"

"Well, order a carriage for me, and I will put on my things."

He pressed her to allow him to escort her, which was obviously the proper thing. When she refused again, and went off, like any nobody, alone, he returned to his chambers, leaving Rosalie to the unimportant persons whose business it was to look after her.

Mrs Breen's house was in East Melbourne, and Deb directed the coachman to drive there first. She remembered the fiftieth baby that was but a few days old.

"I must see how the poor child is doing," Deb said—not alluding to the baby.

And soon she saw again the exquisitely−kept garden—large for that locality—and the spacious white house almost glittering in the sun. She had sniffed at the bourgeois villa—she thought it bourgeois still —but who could help admiring those windowpanes like diamonds, and that grass like velvet, and that air of perfect well−being which pervaded every inch of the place? As the carriage entered the fine, wrought−iron gates, a flock of little

Breens, attached to a perambulator, two nurses and five dogs, were coming out of it; and she stopped to accost and kiss them. Each child was as fresh as a daisy, its hair like floss silk with careful brushing, its petticoats as dainty as its frock, its socks and boots immaculate. There was Nannie, her godchild, shot up slim and tall from the dumpling baby that her aunt remembered, showing plainly the milky−fair, sunny−faced, wholesome woman that she was presently to become. Deb gazed at her with aches of regret—she had thought them for ever stifled in Claud's all−sufficing companionship—for her own lost motherhood, and of lesser but still poignant regret that she had not been allowed to adopt Nannie in Bob Goldsworthy's place. The joy of dressing and taking out a daughter of that stamp—of having her at home with one, to make the tea, and to chat with, and to lean on! Old Keziah came to the door—Keziah sleek and placid, like the family she served—delighted to welcome the distinguished traveller, but still more delighted to brag about the last Breen baby.

"A lovely boy, without spot or blemish," said Keziah, three times over. "And that makes eleven, and not one too many. And Miss Rose doing fine, thank you. I'll go and prepare her for the surprise, so it don't upset her."

Constance, quite a grown young lady, met her aunt on the stairs; Kathleen and Lucy rose from the piano in the drawing−room, where they had been entertaining their mother at a safe distance with their latest−learned "pieces"; they too had to be greeted and kissed—and sweeter flesh to kiss no lips could ask for. "My husband may be a draper," Rose had often said, "but I'll trouble you to show me a duke with a handsomer family."

Mentally, Deb compared the cool, flower−petal cheeks of her Breen nieces with her Goldsworthy nephew's mouth, covering those unpleasant teeth. It would have been fairer to compare him with her Breen nephews, but there the contrast would have been nearly as great. John, at business with his father, and Pennycuick, learning station management with the Simpsons at Bundaboo, had the fresh and cleanly appearance of all Rose's children; in physical matters they were as clean as they looked. Bob did not look unclean, but with all his excessive smartness, he looked unfresh. That look, and the thing it meant, were his father's legacy to him.

At last Deb reached her sister's room. It was another addition to the ever−growing house, and marked, like each former one, the ever−growing prosperity of the shop supporting it. The fastidious travelled eye appraised the rich rugs and hangings, the massive "suite", the delicately−furnished bed, and took in the general air of warm luxury and unstinted comfort, even before it fell upon Rose herself—Rose, fat and fair, and the picture of content, sitting in the softest of arm−chairs, and the smartest of gowns and slippers, by the brightest of wood fires, with a tableful of new novels and magazines on one side of her, and a frilly cradle on the other.

"My husband may be a draper," she had remarked at various times, "but he does give me a good home."

Deb, so long homeless amid her wealth, conceded at this moment, without a grudge, that Rose's humble little arrow of ambition had fairly hit the mark.

They embraced with all the warmth of the old Redford days. A few hasty questions and answers were exchanged, and their heads met over the cradle.

"You poor child!" Deb exclaimed, as a matter of form. "Haven't you done with this kind of thing yet?"

"Oh," said Rose, "I should feel lost without one now. And we wanted another boy—we have only three, you know. Isn't he a darling?"

Number eleven, fast asleep, was fished from his downy bed and laid in his aunt's arms, eagerly extended for him. His clothes might have been woven by fairies, and he smelt like a violet bed in spring.

Strange thrills—sharper than those that Nannie had set going—shook Deb's big heart as she cuddled and kissed him.

"The older I get," she confessed, "the greater fool I am about a baby. And you do have such nice babies, Rose."

"Yes," simpered Rose. "They ARE nicer than most, certainly—I'm sure I don't know why." Her eyes gloated on the white bundle; she fidgeted to get it back. "Ah, Debbie, I wish—I wish you knew—"

"I know you do, my dear," laughed Deb, a little queerly, and she returned the baby in order to hunt for her handkerchief. "And if you must know the truth, so do I. It's tantalising to see you with more than your share, while I have none—and never shall have, worse luck! Well"—blowing her nose cheerfully—"it's no use crying over spilt milk, is it? And I tipped the can over myself, so I can't complain. How's Peter?"

Rose told her how Peter was—"so dear, so good"—and then had so much to say about the children, one by one, through all the eleven of them, that it was quite in a hurry at last that Deb disclosed her secret. And Rose not only sustained no shock—which would have been bad for her— but could see nothing in the marriage worth

fussing about, except the fact that it came too late for a family. Such a sordidly domestic person was she! She mourned and condoled over this spilt milk—so sure that poor Deb was but hungrily lapping up drops with the dust of the floor—that Deb grew almost angry. She took back her own words, and said she was glad there were no children to come between her and her husband, who needed only each other. She implied that this union had a higher significance than could be grasped by a mere suckler of fools (nice fools, no doubt) and chronicler of small beer (however good the brew). She believed it, too. Love—great, solemn, immortal Love, passionate and suffering—was a thing unknown to comfortable, commonplace Rose, as doubtless to Peter also. They were dear, good people, and fortunate in their ignorance and in what it spared them; but it was annoying when ignorance assumed superior knowledge, and wanted to teach its grandmother to suck eggs. Was it come to this— that marriage and a family were synonymous terms? No, indeed, nor ever would, while intelligent men and women walked the earth. Deb reserved the more sacred confidences for Mary's ear. Mary had loved—strangely indeed, but tragically, with pain and loss, the dignified concomitants of the divine state. Mary would understand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Mary's house was a chill and meagre contrast to that of Rose, but there was nothing cold in Mary's welcome. To Deb's 'Darling! darling!' and smothering embrace of furs, the slim woman responded with a grip and pressure that represented all her strength. Deb, although not the eldest, was the mother of the family, as well as the second mother of Bob.

"Where is he?" were Mary's first words—and Deb smiled inwardly to see her as absurd in her mother's vanity and preoccupation as Rose herself. But this was a case of a widow's only son, and the visitor was thankful for such a beginning to the interview. "Where is he?" cried the anxious voice. "He was to have met you. And he never fails—this is not like him—"

"Oh," Deb struck in easily, "he was there all right, looking after his old aunt like a good boy. He wanted to bring me, but I told him he could be more useful looking after Rosalie and my things. I thought we'd rather be by ourselves, Molly—poor old girl! You know I never heard a word until he told me just now. Your letter did not reach me."

They kissed again, in the passage of the little house.

"You will send away the carriage, Debbie?" Mary urged, without visible emotion. "There are stables in the next street. You will take off your hat and stay with me a little?"

"Indeed I will, dearest, if you will have me. Are you alone?"

"Quite alone."

"Where's the old lady?"

"Oh, dead—dead long ago."

"And Ruby?"

Mary looked confused.

"Ruby? Ruby is—don't you know?—an actress in London. Doing very well, they tell me—"Miss Pearla Gold" in the profession."

"Gracious! Why, I've seen her! Burlesque. Tights. The minx! Well, she must be coining money, anyhow. I hope she doesn't forget to make some return for all the trouble she has been to you."

"She forgets everything," said the step−mother, "and we are thankful for it. Bob hates the thought; it is hard on him, who is so different. Don't allude to it before him, please; he feels it too keenly. Debbie, what did you think of my boy?" "Oh, splendid!" was the cordial response. "I could hardly believe my eyes."

"Is he not?" the fond mother urged. "And it is not only his appearance, Debbie—they say he is the cleverest lawyer in Melbourne. He is so learned, so acute! He has a practice already that many a barrister, well known and of twice his age, might envy."

The pale woman—for her bricky colour had faded out—thrilled and glowed.

"Yes, he told me," said Deb; "and it was good hearing indeed. But I always knew what he had in him.' To herself she said: 'Why, if he is so well off, does he let her live like this?"

Poverty—though decent poverty—proclaimed itself in every detail of the mean terrace−house, which stood in the most depressing street imaginable. It made the wealthy sister's heart ache.

"And how are you yourself, Debbie?" Mary remembered to ask, as she shut the door upon the departing carriage. "You look well. How is Francie? We want you to tell us all about her grand doings. Bob is greatly interested in his Italian aunt; he thinks he would like to take a vacation trip to see her some day. By the way, did he tell you that Rose has another? Isn't she a perfect little rabbit? And quite delighted, Keziah says."

As she talked in this detachment from her personal affairs, she led the way up bare stairs to her small bedroom. The resplendent woman behind her took note of the widow's excessive thinness, the greyness of her straight, tight hair, the rigid lines of a black stuff gown that had not a scrap of trimming on it—not even the lawn sleeve−bands widows use—and thought of Bennet Goldsworthy's old−time annoyance when his wife was proved to have fallen behind the mode. And as she expatiated upon the charms of Rose's eleventh baby, Deb's bright dark eyes roved about Mary's room, in which she recognised a few of the plainer furnishings of the nuptial chamber of

the past.

But not a trace of the person who had been so much amongst them once. His boots on the floor, his clothes on the door−pegs, his razors and brushes on the toilet−table were gone; so were a basin and ewer from the double wash−stand; so was the wide bed. In place of the latter a small one—originally Bob's—had been set up, at the head of which lay one large pillow fairly glistening with the shine of its fresh, although darned, linen sheath. Carpet and curtains, essential to the departed housefather, had disappeared; the bare windows stood open to what fresh air there was; the floor, polished, and with one rug at the bedside, exhaled the sweet perfume of beeswax and turpentine. It was all so pathetic to the visitor, so eloquent of loss and change, that she exclaimed, catching her sister in her arms:

"Oh, you poor thing! You poor, poor thing!"

Mrs Goldsworthy returned the embrace tenderly, but not the emotional impulse.

"You are so dear and kind," she said, in a gentle, but quite steady voice. "I am so glad you came—so thankful to have you; but we won't talk about that, if you don't mind. I think it is best not to dwell on troubles, if you can help it. Tell me about yourself. I suppose you have had lunch? Well, then, we will have a nice cup of tea. Take off that heavy cloak—what lovely fur! And your hat too—what a smart affair! You always have such taste. No, I am not wearing crape; it is such rough, uncomfortable stuff, and so perishable; and the rule is not hard and fast nowadays, as it used to be. It would be stupid to make it so in a climate like this. Do you want a comb, dear? How brown your hair keeps still! Then let us go downstairs to the fire."

The fire was in a little bare parlour, as austerely appointed as the bedroom. A tea−table was drawn up to the hearth, the kettle placed on the coals. There seemed no servant on the premises, but the neatness upstairs was repeated below; everything was speckless, polished, smelling of its own purity. Well, it was a good thing poor Molly could interest herself in these matters, and her resolve not to brood over her troubles—if it was genuine, and not only a heroic pose —both noble and wise. So Deb reflected; and such was the calmness of the emotional atmosphere, the cheering effect of tea and rest and sisterly companionship, the discursiveness of the talk, that she soon found herself telling Mary the secret that she was so sure the widow would hear with special sympathy and understanding.

"It is awfully selfish," she began, "to bother you with my affairs at such a time as this, but you've got to know it some time. The fact is— some folks would say there's no fool like an old fool, and perhaps you'll agree with them; but no, I don't think you will—not you, for you know...the fact is—don't laugh—but I'm sure nobody can help it —I have been and gone and got married, Molly. There!"

And, after all, it seemed that she had not come to the right place for sympathy and understanding. Mary did not laugh, but she stared in a wooden manner that was even more hurtful to the feelings of the new wife.

"Well?" she cried brusquely, after a painful pause. "Is there any just cause or impediment that you know of? You look as if you thought I had no business to be happy like other people."

"Oh, if you are happy! But I am so surprised. Who is it?"

"Guess," said Deb.

"I could not. I haven't an idea. Some Englishman, of course."

Deb shook her head.

"European, then? Some prince or count, as big as Francie's, or bigger?"

Deb wrinkled a disdainful nose.

"It is no use, Moll; you would not come near it in fifty tries. I'll tell you—Claud Dalzell."

"What—the deadly enemy!" This time Mrs Goldsworthy did laugh. Deb joined in.

"Funny, isn't it? I feel"—sarcastically—"like going into fits myself when I think of it, it is so screamingly absurd. And how it happened I can't tell you, unless it is that we are fallen into our dotage. I suppose it must be that."

"You in your dotage!" Mary mocked, with an affectionate sincerity that was grateful to her sister's ear. "You are the youngest of us all, and always will be. Do you ever look at yourself in the glass? Upright as a dart, and your pretty wavy hair—so thick, and scarcely a grey thread in it! Of course, I don't know how it may be with him; I have not seen him for such ages—"

"Oh, he is a perfect badger for greyness—not that I ever saw a badger, by the way. And he walks with a stick, and has dreadful chronic things the matter with him, from eating and drinking too much all his life, and never

taking enough exercise. Quite the old man, I should have called him a few months ago. But he is better now."

Mrs Goldsworthy gave a little shudder, and her unsympathetic gravity returned.

"I see," she sighed. "Your benevolent heart has run away with you, as usual. His infirmities appealed to your pity. You married him so that you might nurse and take care of him—"

"Not at all!" Deb broke in warmly. "And don't you talk about his infirmities in that free−and−easy way; he is no more infirm than you are. Did I say he was? That was my joke. He always was the handsomest man that I ever set eyes on, and he is the same still. No, my dear, I have not married him to take care of him, but so that he may take care of me. I'm lonely. I want somebody. I've come to the time of life when I am of no account to the young folks—not even to Bob, who would not give me a second thought if I was a poor woman. No, Molly dear, it is no use your pretending; you know it as well as I do. And quite natural too. It is the same with all of them. Nothing but money gives me importance in their eyes. And what's money? It won't keep you warm in the winter of your days—nothing will, except a companion that is in the same boat. That is what I want—it may be silly, but I do—somebody to go down into the valley of the shadow with me; and he feels the same.' Something in Mary's face as she stared into the fire, something in the atmosphere of the conversation, drove her into this line of self−defence. 'Oh, there is no love−making and young nonsense in our case—we are not quite such idiots as that comes to; it is just that we begin to feel the cold, as it were, and are going to camp together to keep each other warm. That's all."

Mary remained silent.

"Well, I must go," said Deb, jumping up, as if washing her hands of a disappointing job. "The carriage must be there, and Bob will be starving for his dinner. No use asking you to join us, I know. But you must come to Redford soon, Molly—or somewhere out of this—when you feel better and able. You shall have rooms entirely to yourself, and needn't see anybody. I will come tomorrow, and you must let me talk to you about it."

Mrs Goldsworthy was stooping to sweep a sprinkle of ashes out of the fender—she was like an old maid in her faddy tidiness—and when she turned, her face was working as if to repress tears. Deb caught her up, a moan bursting from her lips.

"Oh, what a brute I am! when you—poor, poor old girl!—have to finish it alone. But, darling, after all, you have had the good years— a child of your own—a home; we shall get only the dregs at the bottom of the cup. So it is not so very unfair, is it?" Then Mary's pent emotion issued in a laugh. With her face on her sister's shoulder, she tried herself to silence it.

"I can't help it," she apologised. "I would if I could. Debbie, don't go! Oh, my dear, don't think I envy you! Don't go yet! I want to tell you something. I may never have another chance." "Of course I won't go —I want to stay," said Deb at once.

And she stayed. The coachman was dismissed to get his meal, and instructed to telephone to Bob to do the same. The sisters had a little picnic dinner by themselves, washing up their plates and dishes in the neat kitchen, Deb insisting upon taking part in the performance, and sat long by the fireside afterwards. Fortunately, although the season was late spring, it was a cold day; for the clear red fire was the one bit of brightness to charm a visitor to that poor house. It crackled cosily, toasting their toes outstretched upon the fender−bar, melting their mood to such glowing confidences as they had not exchanged since Mary was in her teens. No lamps were lighted. The widow was frugal with gas when eyes were idle; her extravagant sister loved firelight to talk in.

But for a while it seemed that Mary had nothing particular to communicate. Deb did not like to put direct questions, but again and again led the conversation in the likely direction, to find Mary avoiding it like a shying horse. She would not talk of her husband, but interested herself for an hour in the subject of Guthrie Carey, Guthrie's wife, his child, his home, discussing the matter with a calmness that made Deb forget how delicate a one it was. Then Mary had a hundred questions to ask (probably on Bob's account) about the Countess, of whom she had known nothing of late years, while Deb had learned something from time to time, and could give an approximately true tale. Quite another hour was taken up with Francie's wrongs and wrong−doings, as to which Deb was more frank with this sister than she would have been with Rose.

"It is no use blinking the fact," she said straight out, "that Francie is no better than she should be. I can't understand it; no Pennycuick that ever I heard of took that line before. She has a dog's life with that ruffian, no doubt; and of course the poor child never had a chance to enjoy the right thing in the right way—though that was her own fault—"

"I don't think," Mary broke in, "that ANYTHING is ANYBODY'S fault."

"That's a most dangerous heathen doctrine, my dear, but I'll admit there's something in it. Poor Francie! she was born at a disadvantage, with that fascinating face of hers set on the foundation of so light a character. She was too pretty, to start with. The pretty people get so spoiled, so filled with their own conceit, that they grow up expecting a world made on purpose for them. They grab right and left, if the plums don't fall into their mouths directly they open them, because it gets to be a sort of matter of course that they should have everything, and do exactly as they like."

"And the plain ones—they are born at a worse disadvantage still."

"No, they are not. Look at Rose. Francie, with her gilded wretchedness, thinks Rosie's lot quite despicable; but I can tell you, Molly, she is the most utterly comfortable and contented little soul on the face of this earth. She would not change places with a queen." "But Rose is not plain. Rose is the happy medium. And THEY are the lucky ones—the inconspicuous people—the every−day sort—"

"What's luck?" Deb vaguely moralised. "I suppose we make our luck. It doesn't depend on our faces, but on ourselves."

"Ah, no!" Mrs Goldsworthy received the well−worn platitude with a laugh. "We don't make anything—we are made. It is just a dance of marionettes, Debbie. Poor puppets of flesh and blood, treated as if they were just wood and nails and glue! Who set us up to make a game of us like this? Who DOES pull the strings, Debbie? It is a mystery to me."

Then Deb waited for what was coming next.

"Possibly it will be cleared up some day," she murmured, putting out her strong, beautiful hand to touch her sister's knee. "Whether it is a fairy tale or not, one must cherish the hope—"

"Not I," Mary cut in swiftly—that same Mary who was once conspicuous in her family for pious orthodoxy. "No more experiments in human existence for me! A few years of peace and cleanness, as I am—as I now am—I hope for that, and for nothing more; I don't want anything more—I'd rather not. To be let alone for the rest of the time, and then to be done with it—that sums up all the hope I have, or need."

"Ah, my dear—"

"No, Debbie, don't look at me with those eyes—don't pity me in that tone of voice. I am only a heathen against my will—not so broken−hearted as not to care what happens to me, which I believe is what you think. I am not even sorry—I wish I was, but I can't be; in fact, I am so happy, really, that I am going about in a sort of dream, trying to realise it"

"HAPPY!"

"Perhaps 'happy' is not the word. I should say unmiserable. I am more unmiserable than I have ever been, I think, since I was born."

Deb's swift intelligence grasped the truth. "Ah, then she was not so insensate as we thought!"—but made allowance for what she diagnosed as a morbid condition of mental health.

"Are you happier than you were at Redford—young, and loved, and with everything nice about you—?"

"Yes. Because then, although, of course, I did have everything, I had no idea of the value of what I had. You can't be really happy unless you know that you are happy. I did not know it then, but now I do."

Deb's glance flashed round the poor room, and out of the window into the squalid street; she thought of Bob, who almost openly despised the mother who adored him; she calculated the loneliness, the poverty, the —to her—ugliness of the existence which Mary's "as I am" was intended to describe; and she groaned aloud.

"Oh, my dear, was it really so awful as that—that the mere relief from it can mean so much to you?"

"I am not going to complain," said Mary. "It was not awful by anybody's fault—certainly not by his. He did his best; he was really good to me. It could not have happened at all, except through his being good to me—doing what he did that night. I am not in the least bitter against him; he was as he was made just as I am. It had to be, I suppose. The maker of the puppets didn't care whether we belonged or not; the hand that pulled the strings, and tangled them, jerked us into the mire together anyhow—" "Oh, don't!" pleaded Deb. "Don't blaspheme like that! What is religion for if not to keep us from making blunders, and to help us to bear it when they are made—and to trust—to trust where we cannot see—"

Deb was unused to preaching, and broke down; but her eyes were sermons more impressive than any of the thousands that Mary had heard.

"Some day," said Mary, "when I get into a place where I cannot hear religion spoken of, nor see it practised, I

may learn the value of it. I hope so. I have a chance of it now—the way is clear. I am through the wood at last."

Deb drew her filmy handkerchief across her eyes.

"Yes, I know." Mary smiled at her sister's grief. "But it is only for this once, Debbie dear. I did want to let you know—to have the delight of not being a liar and a shuffler for once. I shall not say such things again. I am not going to shock anybody else, for Bob's sake. Bob, of course, must be considered; after all, it was his father. None of us, even the freest, can be a free agent altogether; I understand that. I shall hold my tongue. The blessed thing is that that will be sufficient—a negative attitude, with the mouth shut; one is not driven any longer to positive deceit, without even being able to say that you can't help it. Oh, Debbie, you have been a free woman— why, why didn't you keep so?—but with all your freedom, and all your money, you don't know the meaning of such luxury as I live in now."

Deb gazed at her sister's rapt face, glowing in the firelight, and wondered if the brain behind it could be altogether sane.

"To call that HAPPINESS!" she ejaculated, with sad irony and scorn.

"If you must fix a name to it—yes," the widow considered thoughtfully.

"After all, 'unmiserable' does not go far enough. I AM happy. For, Debbie"—turning to look into the dark, troubled eyes—"I'm clean now—I never thought to be again—to know anything so exquisitely sweet, either in earth or heaven—I'm clean, body and soul, day and night, inside and outside, at last."

"Oh, POOR girl!" Deb moaned, with tears, when she realised what this meant.

"Rich," corrected Mary—"rich, dear, with just a roof and a crust of bread."

"Well," said Deb presently, "what about that roof and crust of bread? Since we are telling each other everything, tell me what your resources are. Don't say it is not my business; I know it isn't, but I shall be wretched if you don't let me make it mine a little. How much have you?"

"I don't know. I don't care. I haven't given money a thought. It doesn't matter."

"But it does matter. You can't even keep clean without a bathtub and a bit of soap. But what am I thinking of?—of course, you will settle all that with Bob."

The little word of three letters brought Mrs Goldsworthy down from her clouds at once.

"Oh, no!" she cried quickly, almost fearfully. "On no account would I interfere with his arrangements, his career. He would do everything that was right and dutiful, I am sure, but I would sooner starve than take charity from my own child. But there's no need to take it from anybody. I have all I want."

"How much?"

"I couldn't tell you to a pound or two, but enough for my small wants."

"They do seem small, indeed. Where are you going to live? Won't you come to me, Molly? Redford is big enough, and it's morally yours as much as mine. You should have your own rooms—all the privacy you like—"

"No, darling—thank you all the same. I have made my plans. I am going to have a little cottage somewhere in the country, where there is no dust, or smoke, or people—where I can walk on clean earth and grass, and smell only trees and rain and the growing things. Alone? Oh, yes! Of course, I shall see you sometimes—and my boy; but for a home—all the home I can want or wish for now—that is my dream."

"I don't think," said Deb, "that I ever heard human ambition—and happiness—expressed in such terms before." It was the final result of Mary's experiment in the business of a woman's life.

Deb drove back to her hotel, thoughtful and sad and tired. When Rosalie had left her for the night, she wrote to Claud by way of comforting herself. She told him what she had been doing—described her interviews with Rose and Mary respectively, and the impressions they had left on her.

"Of all the four of us," she concluded her letter, "I am the only one who has been fortunate in love. I found my mate in the beginning, before there was time to make mistakes—the right man, whom I could love in the right way—and we have been kept for each other through all these years, although for a long time we did not know it. And now we are together—or shall be in a few days—never to part again. It is the only love−story in the family—I don't except Rose's, because I don't call that a love−story—which has had a happy ending."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Down the middle of the big T−shaped wool−shed, in two rows of six pens each, with an aisle between them, the bleating sheep were massed. They had been driven into that aisle and thus distributed, as a crowd of soldiers might be packed into their pews at church, and twelve little gates had then been shut upon them. Each gate had a corresponding one at the opposite end of the pen, opening upon a broad lane of floor, and facing a doorway into outside pens and the sunny paddocks of the background. Between gate and door, on his own section of the boarded lane, a sweating, bare−armed man with shears performed prodigies of strength and skill. Every few minutes he snatched a heavy sheep from the pen beside him, flung it with a round turn into a sitting posture between his knees, and with the calm indifference to its violent objections of the spider to those of the fly that he makes into a parcel, sliced off its coat like a cook peeling a potato. The fleece gently fell upon the floor, as you may see an unnoticed shawl slip from an old lady's shoulders, and before it could realise what had happened, the poor naked animal found itself shot through the doorway, to stagger headlong down the sloping stage that was its returning path to freedom. Twelve of these stalwart and strenuous operators, lining the long walls at regular intervals, six a side, were at it with might and main (payment by results being the rule in this department of industry), and attendant boys strolled up and down, picking the fleeces from the floor and carrying them to the sorter's table. One was the tar−boy, whose business it was to dab a brushful of tar upon any scarlet patch appearing upon a white under−coat where the shears had clipped too close. The sorter or classer stood behind his long table, above and at right angles to the lines of sheep−pens and shearers. Near him on either hand were racks like narrow loose−boxes, built against the walls; behind him the hydraulic press cranked and creaked as its attendants fed and manipulated it, and the great bales, that others were sewing up, weighing, and branding, were mounting high in the transepts of the building—the two arms of the capital T. The air was thick with woolly particles and the smell of sheep; the floor was dark and slippery, and everything one touched humid with the impalpable grease of the silky fleeces circulating all about the shed. Strict, downright, dirty business was the order of the day.

The manager—Jim Urquhart, grey−bearded, in a battered felt hat and a slouchy old tweed suit—stood by the sorter's table, his wide−ranging, vigilant eye suddenly fixed upon it. As each fleece was brought up, shaken out, trimmed, tested with thumb and finger, rolled into a light bundle, inside out, and flung into one or another of the adjacent racks, he followed the process as if it were something new to him. The shade of difference in the texture of the staple of one fleece as compared with another appeared of more concern to him than the absolute difference, which seemed to shout for notice, between Deborah Dalzell and the other features of the scene.

A snowy, lacy petticoat all but swept the greasy floor. An equally spotless skirt, fresh from the laundry, gathered up in one strong pendant hand, gleamed like light against its background of greasy woodwork and greasy wool. The majestic figure of the lady of Redford advanced towards him. Her lord strolled behind her. Often—but not for many a long day—had the vision of her beautiful face come to Jim in this fashion, a radiance upon prosaic business that it was not allowed to interfere with; now, for the first time, his eye avoided, his heart shrank from recognising it.

Then he lifted his gaze at last, for she was close beside him. And what a ray of loving old−comradeship shone on him from those star−bright orbs of hers, undulled by the years that had lightly frosted her dark hair. She put out her hand, and held it out until he had apologised for his greasy paw, and given it to her warm grasp.

"Why haven't you been to see me—to see us?" she asked him, smiling. "Didn't you know we came home last night?"

"I thought you might be tired—or unpacking," Jim lamely excused himself. "But whenever it is convenient to you, Deb—Mrs Dalzell—I am always close by; I can come at any time."

He looked at her husband.

"Claud, you remember Jim?"

It was so many years since the men had met that the question was not uncalled for. They nodded to each other, across the enormous gulf that separated them, while Deb explained to her husband what an invaluable manager

she had. Jim had grown homelier and shabbier with his advancing years; Claud more and more exquisitely finished, until he now stood, in his carefully−careless costume—his short, pointed beard the same tone of silver−grey as his flannel suit, his finely−chiselled features the hue of old ivory—a perfect model of patrician 'form'. Only there was plenty of vigour still manifest in the bushman's bony frame, while the man of the world wore a valetudinarian air, leaning on the arm of his regal, upright wife.

"Eh, isn't it like old times!" she mused aloud, as her eyes roamed about the shed, where every sweating worker was finding time to gaze at her. "I see some of the old faces—there's Harry Fox—and old David— and isn't that Keziah's grandson? I must go and speak to them."

She left her husband at the sorter's table, that he and Jim might get reacquainted—men never learned to know each other while women were in the way—and it seemed to them both a long time before she came back. Claud asked questions about the clip, and other matters of business; and he criticised the manager's management.

"Rather behind the times—isn't it?—for a place like Redford. I thought all the big stations sheared by machinery now."

"I've only been waiting for Miss—Mrs Dalzell's return to advise her to have the machines," said Jim, scrupulous to give Deb's husband all possible information.

"We must have them, of course. I believe in scientific methods."

Mr Dalzell did not ask Jim how his sisters were, and how his brothers were getting on—did not remember that he had any. And when Deb came back, to be gently but firmly ordered out of that dirty place by her new lord and master, the latter failed to take, although he did not fail to perceive, the hint of her eyes that Jim should be asked to dinner.

"No," said he, linking his arm in hers as they left the shed, "no outsiders, Debbie. I want you all to myself now."

And the words and tone were so sweet to her that she could not be sorry for the possible hurt to Jim's feelings. She was young again today, with her world−weary husband making love to her like this. That theory of their having come together merely to keep each other warm on the cold road to the grave was laughingly flung to the winds. She laid her strong right hand on his, limp upon her arm, and expanded her deep chest to the sunny morning air.

"Oh, Claud! Oh, isn't it wonderful, after all these years! You remember that night—that night in the garden? The seat is there still—we will go and sit on it tonight—"

"My dear, I dare not sit out after sunset, so subject as I am to bronchitis."

"No, no, of course not—I forgot your bronchitis. This is the time for you to be out—and this air will soon make another man of you, dear. Isn't it a heavenly climate? Isn't it divine, this sun? Look here, Claud, we've got some capital horses—or we had; I'll ask Jim. What do you say to a ride—a long, lovely bush ride, like the old rides we used to have together?"

Words cannot describe the pang that went through her when he shook his head indifferently, and said he was too old for such violent exercise now.

"Stuff!" she cried angrily.—

"Besides, I haven't been on a horse for so long that I shouldn't know how to sit him," he teased her lazily. "You wouldn't like to see me tumble off at your hall door, before the servants, would you?"

"Oh, Claud! And to think how you used to ride!"

But of course she knew this was a joke, and laughed it off.

"It's nothing but sheer indolence," said she, patting the hand on her arm—that shapely ivory hand, with its polished filbert nails—"and I see that my mission in life is to cure you of it. Come, we will make a start with a real country walk."

She began to drag him away from the bowered homestead, but he planted his feet, and took his hand from her arm.

"Not now, Debbie," he objected gently, but with that subtle note of mastership that had struck so sharply into Jim's sensitiveness; "it is mail−day, and the letters will be at the house by this time."

"What do letters matter to us?"

"That we can't tell until we see them."

They went in out of the sunshine to their arm−chairs in the shade. The English mail had arrived, and it was

very interesting. Letters from lords and ladies, piles of papers of fashionable intelligence, voices from that world which one of the pair had already begun to hanker to be back in, although not yet distinctly conscious of it. The bride fetched her work−basket, and busied herself with a piece of useless embroidery, while the bridegroom read aloud to her passages from the epistles of his titled correspondents, and from the printed chronicles of their doings here and there. She had dreamed of his reading again the sort of things that he used to read, while she sewed and listened; but in the life that he had lived and grown to there had been no room for learning and the arts. He had dropped them, with his health and his horsemanship, long ago. The coroneted letters and the MORNING POST occupied them until luncheon.

At luncheon, as at every other meal—despite the new husband's expressed desire to have his wife to himself—his valet was present as butler, watching over the dyspeptic's diet, and seeing that the wine was right. Neither master nor man trusted anybody else to do this. It was a large crumple in Deb's rose−leaf, Manton's limpet−like attachment to Claud, who seemed unable to do anything without his servant's help, and the latter's cool relegation of herself to the second place in the MENAGE. It was all very well for HER to give her husband the premier place—she did it gladly—but for Manton to take possession of Redford as a mere appendage of his lord's was quite another matter. It was still the honeymoon, and he might do as he liked—or rather, as Claud liked; but it was not difficult to foresee the day when the valet who dictated to her cook would become too much for the proud spirit of the lady of the house, with whom it had ever been dangerous to make too free—or to foretell what would happen then.

Claud dozed through the afternoon—like most idle and luxurious men, he drank a great deal of wine, which made him sleepy—and Deb took the opportunity to go all through her house and put everything in order. They met again at tea, and had a stroll about the garden, arm−in−arm and happy. Dinner was a rather silent function. Deb wished for Jim, and regretted her easy abandonment of him; Claud never talked when he was eating—the business was too serious, and Manton was there. But while her husband smoked over his coffee, serene and charming, she sat alone with him, revelling in his wit and gaiety, telling herself that he was indeed the splendid fellow she had always thought him.

Then they went up to the big drawing−room—he was used to big rooms— and he flung himself at full length upon one of the downy couches, and she put silk pillows under his head.

While she was doing it, he pulled her down to him and kissed her.

"It's nice, isn't it?" he murmured in her ear.

For answer, she pressed her lips to his ivory brows and his dropped eyelids. Her big heart was too full for speech.

"Now I am going to play to you," she whispered, and went off to the old piano, that the tuner had prepared for this sacred purpose.

What years it was since she had cared to touch piano keys! And never since the love−time of her youth had she played as she did now—all the old things that he had ever cared for, with the old passion in them. . . .

And while she played—he slumbered peacefully.

* * * * *

Jim, when his day of hard work was over, went back to his manager's house—all the home he knew—had a bath, put on clean clothes, ate perfunctorily of roast mutton, and bread and jam, and sat down with his pipe on the top step of his verandah, where he hugged his knees and watched the stars come out. He was a confirmed old bachelor now, "set", his sisters said, in his bachelor ways. None of them lived with him, to keep his house and cheer him up. It was too dull for them (with the mistress of Redford never there), and besides, he did not want cheering; for himself, he preferred dullness. An old working housekeeper "did" for him, cooking his simple meals—eggs and bacon alternating with chops for breakfast, and mutton and bread and jam for his tea−dinner, with a fowl for Sundays—keeping his few plain rooms clean and his socks mended. A hundred or two a year must have covered his household expenses; the hundreds remaining of his handsome income went to shore up the weak−kneed of his kindred, who had the habit of falling back on him when their funds ran out, or anything else went wrong with them.

He was a great reader. Books lined the walls of his otherwise meagrely furnished rooms—they represented the one personal extravagance that he indulged in—and newspapers and magazines came by every mail. In these and in his thoughts he lived, when not intent upon the affairs of the estate, which in the eyes of some appeared wholly

to absorb him. Tonight his thoughts sufficed. The latest parcel from Mullens' lay untied, the new American periodicals with wrappers intact. Deb was home again—that was enough food for the mind at present.

But, oh, what a home−coming! His own and only "boss" no longer, as heretofore, but subject to a husband who clearly meant to be his master, and as clearly meant him to have no mistress any more. Neither in the way of business nor in the way of sentiment could she be again to him what she had been throughout his life—the altar of his sacrifice, the goddess of his simple worship, his guide, his goal. He must not hope, nor try, nor even long for her now. That one last comfort was taken from him.

Well!...

He walked about, while the fiercest paroxysm racked him. As some of us in our pain−torments rush to lotion or anodyne, he sought the soothing of the starry night, the cool darkness that had so often brought him peace. To get away from the faintly audible tinkling of the shearers' banjo and their songs, he strolled in the opposite direction, and that was towards the dark mass of the trees encircling her house—her home, in which he had no part. Mechanically he noted a garden gate open—she had left it so—open to the rabbits against which its section of the miles of wire−netting fencing the grounds had been so carefully provided, and he went forward to shut it. Being there, he had a distant view of the big drawing−room windows, thrown up and letting out wide streams of light across the lawn. And while he stood to gaze at them, picturing what within he could not see, he heard the piano—Debbie playing.

And so she had an appreciative audience, although she did not know it. Below her windows, out of the light, Jim—poor old Jim!—sat like a statue, his head thrown back, his eyes uplifted, tears running down his hairy, weather−beaten face. It was the most exquisitely miserable hour of his life—or so he thought. He did not know what a highly favoured mortal he really was, in that his beautiful love−story was never to be spoiled by a happy ending.