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# AVERAGE CABINS

*A NOVEL*

BY  
ISABEL C. CLARKE

We mortals cross the ocean of this world  
Each in his average cabin of a life—  
The best's not big, the worst yields elbow-room.  
—*Robert Browning.*



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TO

MY THREE LITTLE AMERICAN FRIENDS

ESTHER, CHARLOTTE AND FRANÇOISE  
WISEMAN-MAC MURROUGH



# AVERAGE CABINS

## CHAPTER I

**D**ENIS LORIMER spent the winter succeeding the Armistice in Rome. During the final months of the War, after a long slow recovery from shell-shock, he had acted as interpreter on the Italian Front, where his knowledge of various European languages and particularly of Italian had proved extremely useful.

Rome had attracted him for two reasons. First, because much of his childhood had been spent there, and he had felt a strong desire to revisit those scenes once so familiar. Secondly, he had received a cordial invitation from one Pio Ascarelli, a young Roman Marchese, to come to his house as often as he liked. Denis had been able to render some small but, as it proved, important service to Ascarelli during the time when their paths had merged on the Julian Front.

As an English officer, apparently well supplied with money, and with the valuable if tacit testimonial which intimacy at Casa Ascarelli bestowed, Denis found the doors of many agreeable houses thrown open to him. Captious critics might have remarked that he avoided the society of his brother-officers and fellow-countrymen rather too scrupulously, but when charged with this he would smilingly assert that he had lived so long in Rome as a boy that he counted himself half an Italian, and felt

more at home in the society of Italians than in that of Englishmen.

Denis had volunteered for service in the first days of the War. Up till then he had acted for some years as agent to old Lord Farewether, a Catholic peer and owner of large estates in the North of England. It was commonly supposed that he had given up his "job" in order to enlist, a mistake which Lord Farewether had never attempted either to contradict or to rectify.

Denis was at this time a dark singularly handsome man of nine and twenty. He became rapidly popular, and Roman gossip freely whispered that his footing in Palazzo Ascarelli promised to become permanent. Donna Camilla, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the house, was aware of the services rendered to Pio in a moment of perilous emergency, and she smiled gratefully upon the stranger who gazed at her with eyes as dark as her own.

Donna Camilla, though only just introduced to society, was already renowned for her beauty, and more than one young man of wealth and position had timidly approached the old Marchesa on her daughter's behalf, but so far none of these overtures had met with success.

She was a slim strip of a girl with the small delicate features, the clear pale dark skin, the well-shaped patrician head, the tiny hands and feet of her race. Her father was dead, but her mother still lived, and guarded her treasure with jealous vigilance. The new freedom that in all lands had released women from their age-long captivity, had so far not penetrated within the walls of Palazzo Ascarelli. And in her watchful care the old Marchesa was supported by her two sons, Pio and Domenico, who were both nearly a decade older

than their sister and since their father's death had held a complete authority over her against which she did not dream of rebelling. She obeyed Pio—the head of the house and a strong-willed, autocratic, passionate man—as if he had been her father. She both loved and feared him. He had told her that she must be kind to Denis—to welcome him whenever he came to the house. Camilla very dutifully obeyed him. The path was made easy for Denis, the obstacles being, as it were, automatically removed.

There were fair and beautiful days in Rome that winter, and in their release from anxiety, people strove to recapture something of the old gay life with its dances and receptions despite the fierce and fatal onslaughts of the Spanish sickness that swept across the land, claiming its grim toll of victims as inexorably as the War had done. Pious people remembered the Pale Horse of the Apocalypse and dreaded lest the Black Horse of Famine should presently appear. . . . The epidemic entered Palazzo Ascarelli in February and carried off, after a few days' illness, the old Marchesa.

Denis Lorimer attended the Requiem Mass and left cards of condolence at the palace. Pio had been passionately attached to his mother; he felt her loss even more keenly than did Camilla. Denis could hardly recognize this grief-worn man when he met him one morning in the Corso. He hardly liked to approach him, but Pio stopped him and informed him of his intention of leaving Rome, and of spending some months at the old Villa Ascarelli in the Umbrian hills.

"Domenico and Camilla will of course accompany me," he said. Then he added, rather to Lorimer's surprise, "I hope that perhaps later on you

will pay us a visit there. There is not a great deal to do, but there are horses—you will have plenty of riding.”

Denis thanked him. He secretly hoped that the invitation might come before he was compelled for urgent financial reasons to leave Rome. Otherwise the idyll which had begun so promisingly and which had of late begun to affect him seriously, must inevitably come to an end.

Pio bade him an abrupt farewell, and Denis, pursuing his way along the Corso, felt slightly depressed at the thought that the old palace, whose doors had always been so hospitably opened to him, would now be left untenanted. Pio might forget his promise to invite him to his country house. A shadow seemed suddenly to have fallen upon Rome.

It seemed to him that since the Marchesa's death something of his intimacy with the family had slipped away. Immersed in his own grief, Pio had almost forgotten his new friend. Even to-day, while kindly and courteous, he had seemed like a stranger. He had not even suggested that Denis should pay a farewell visit to the palace; it had evidently never occurred to him that Lorimer had any special wish to see Camilla again. And yet—and yet—Denis could not help feeling convinced that he had at least awakened some slight interest in the young girl's mind. He had never been actually alone in her company, but the rooms at the palace were very large, and they had often talked together quite out of hearing of the old Marchesa, who generally sat knitting close to the open fireplace, where the great olive logs burned with such fragrant aroma. Once he had shown her a photograph of Sledwick, that ancient pile where he had spent three extraordinarily happy years, and when she murmured slowly: “That is your home in Eng-

land?" he had not contradicted it. He had only said evasively: "It was my home, but it's let now, for a term of years. Taxation, you know, is awfully heavy in England since the War, and it falls heaviest on the landowner."

Her interest in the picture had been pretty to see. Sledwick was nobly placed with great woods sheltering it from the north, and beyond them the famous moors where some of the finest grouse-shooting in England was to be had. Later on he had intended to tell Camilla that the house did not really belong to him, but that he had lived there on terms of intimate friendship with its owner. The Farewethers were not addicted to travel; they preferred their own country; it was only rarely that a more than usually pious member of the family would visit Rome in order to see the Holy Father. Denis felt pretty safe; there was little chance of his deception being discovered, and he had observed that Camilla and her brothers implicitly believed in all those advantages of wealth and position which he had tacitly represented himself as possessing. They had accepted him as their friend, had received him on terms that were almost intimate, and from that moment had placed complete confidence in his word.

Camilla had begged to be permitted to keep the photograph of that ancient stone edifice, with the Gothic tower of a small chapel rising from the extreme westerly portion of it. Brought up in the pious traditions of her house, it interested her when Denis further told her that all through the melancholy, tragic days of religious persecution in England, the Light before the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel at Sledwick had never been extinguished. She had never been in England, and had always pictured it as a dreary sunless country wrapped in fog, but Denis had corrected this impression and

had awakened within her a strong desire to go there. She knew her own country fairly well and had visited most of the important cities in it; she had spent several summers in Switzerland and a few weeks in Paris. But she felt that in all her travels she had never seen such a beautiful house as Sledwick. That haunt of ancient peace seemed to have cast a spell upon her, as perhaps indeed Denis intended that it should. He felt that his own significance had increased in her eyes. And although he was never quite happy or at ease with himself when he remembered the little episode, he little dreamed that it would affect his future so mercilessly.

Some weeks passed, and Denis had already begun to regard his dwindling store of Italian *lire* with anxiety and dismay, when Pio's letter arrived, confirming his invitation and even asking him to come as soon as he could conveniently do so. "It is very dull up here," he wrote, "and Domenico has had to go away on business to the North. My sister and I are alone. It is not, I fear, very amusing, but the country round here is very beautiful, and we shall be able to show you all the neighboring hill-cities."

It was in March, and Easter would not fall for another month. No arbitrary limit was fixed for his stay, and Denis hoped that if he played his cards well he might be invited to remain at least until Lent was over. Fortune seemed for once to be smiling upon him, for Pio's letter had only just arrived in time and had relieved Denis at a highly critical moment.

Beyond these sordid considerations lay his desire to see Camilla again. She had been gone rather more than a month from Rome, and if her heart had any secret to tell her, she must by now have learned it.

"Of course he is after her money. She will have a large fortune," said the gossips of Rome. But although Denis certainly wanted money and wanted it badly, he felt that he would have loved Camilla just as passionately if she had been penniless. Sometimes hope ran very high, and then his courage would fail a little when he remembered that he would first have to approach Pio. Italian usage did not permit a man, as in England, to approach the girl herself with an offer of marriage, a declaration of love. And there was always something within him that secretly feared Pio. He was a just man but a very hard one. When you looked at his finely-cut face, with its precise and definite outlines and sternly-molded lips and chin, you felt that it would be easier to win compassion from him than forgiveness. . . . Some such thoughts as these were in Denis's mind that fair spring afternoon when the Roman train rolled into the little Umbrian station.

Pio was on the platform, wrapped in a short but voluminous fur coat, his face slightly reddened from exposure to the wind. He came quickly up to Denis and held out his hand with a smile of greeting. They went out into the road beyond and found a big red automobile awaiting them. Denis's suitcase and bag were speedily brought and placed in the back of the car. Pio was driving, unaccompanied. Like many of his race he was a highly-skilled mechanic.

The scenery that lay outspread before them was wild and very beautiful. Spring was less advanced up here than it had been in Rome, and only a faint impalpable mist of green showed upon the woods. Olive-yards that were silver-colored and shone in the breeze that had sprung up, clothed the slopes of the hills, and here and there groups of giant cypresses lifted their inky-black spires to the sky.

In their rapid traveling they sometimes passed shining glimpses of Lake Trasimeno, lying like a blue jewel within its incomparable setting of hills. Sometimes a little brown hill-city, perched perilously, as it seemed, upon a ledge of rock, frowned defiance at them. In the distance they could see the towers of grim Perugia outlined against the sky, a formidable stronghold.

"That's the Villa over there," said Pio suddenly, indicating the direction with a nod of his head. Denis lifted his eyes a little and saw a great square stucco house standing magnificently in groves of superb ilex-trees, with a background of still leafless oaks and chestnuts beyond. A broad terrace stretched in front of the house, and below, the olives and vines flowed away from terrace to terrace into the plain.

"It's been in our family a long time, and it's rather falling to pieces," continued Pio; "but now the War's over, I mean to have it done up. I am very fond of it, and so is Camilla."

He dropped into silence again. And very soon, as it seemed to Denis, the car was climbing the steep winding road that led from the plain to Villa Ascarelli. It only then occurred to Denis that Pio had wished to make some kind of apology for the dilapidated state of his villa to the owner of Sledwick. The thought made him extremely uncomfortable, and he had a strong wish to acknowledge the false position in which he had wilfully placed himself. It would not do, however, to endanger his chances with Camilla by any premature or precipitate disclosure of the kind.

Donna Camilla, a slight figure in deepest mourning, was waiting on the terrace to receive them. Black was not becoming to her; she was too dark to wear it to advantage; nevertheless she looked extremely beautiful. Pio kissed her in a kind

almost fatherly fashion, and she greeted Denis with a charming smile of welcome. Walking between the brother and sister, Denis Lorimer passed through the great *portone* into the fine hall beyond.

## CHAPTER II

THE days passed peacefully, if a trifle monotonously, at Villa Ascarelli. An aged priest, Father Antonio, who lived in some remote region of the old house and looked almost as if he were a part of it, said Mass every day at half past seven. The chapel shared in the general air of dilapidation, with its tarnished gilding, its dim frescoed walls, its moth-eaten hangings from which all color had departed. Every member of the household, including all the servants, and a young man called Signor Basi, who seemed to act as secretary and agent to Pio, invariably attended this early Mass. Donna Camilla, her head draped in a thick black veil which tantalizingly hid her face, always knelt by her brother's side on one of a row of prie-dieu chairs set apart for the family. When Mass was over, she disappeared to her own apartments and Denis seldom saw her again till luncheon time, unless some expedition had been planned for the morning. Pio was often too busy to arrange anything of the sort, but when possible he would go out for a couple of hours accompanied by Denis and Camilla, to visit some city or church in the neighborhood.

Denis had always suspected that Pio was completely master in his own house, but he had not quite realized until now, how absolute that rule was. Nothing was done—even the ordinary affairs of

housekeeping—without ultimate reference to him. Denis wondered sometimes if Donna Camilla ever chafed under this rule. Perhaps she was too young. Perhaps her will had never come into definite antagonism with Pio's. She seemed deeply attached to her brother, and he to her. Pio was proud of Camilla, of her beauty, of her intelligence. He was as indulgent towards her as his nature permitted. But he was something of an autocrat, something too of a tyrant. To oppose him would be like resisting a stone wall.

Only once did Denis in those first days perceive the slightest disagreement between them. Camilla had a young maid called Ilda, who accompanied her whenever she went out for a walk and was nearly always in attendance on her. Camilla was fond of Ilda, and Denis had often heard them laughing and talking together. She was the only young thing in the place except Camilla herself; it was natural, he thought, that they should enjoy each other's companionship. Once or twice it had passed through Lorimer's mind that if he ever found courage to speak to Camilla of his love, regardless of national prejudice and custom, he might find in Ilda a useful and helpful ally. Not being accustomed to Italian servants, he thought she sometimes addressed her young mistress too familiarly, as if unaware of the class-barriers that divided them; he was also astonished one day when Camilla had reproved her rather sharply for some act of negligence, to see her go up almost immediately and kiss Ilda, as if to show that she was forgiven.

One evening at dinner Camilla came down with red eyes. She scarcely touched her food, and Denis perceived that she could only control herself with difficulty. When Pio addressed her, he did so in tones of icy politeness. Clearly there had been some quarrel or scene, and Denis as a third person,

presumably neutral, felt the awkwardness of his own situation.

Suddenly Camilla broke down altogether, hid her face in her hands and burst into passionate sobbing. Pio for a moment looked disconcerted; then he said:

"My dear Camilla, remember we are not alone. If you can't control yourself, you'd better go up to your room!" His dark eyes flashed.

Had the two wills, the two fiery southern natures, come into conflict at last? . . .

"Oh, Pio—I can't bear it without Ilda! You must write and tell her that she may come back . . . it's cruel to send her away. . . ."

Pio's face hardened.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he said sternly; "I sent Ilda away because she didn't obey me. Giulia can act as your maid; she is old and faithful."

Camilla continued to sob. It was almost a relief when she rose from the table and left the room. Pio turned to his guest.

"She is still such a child," he said half in apology, "and at times like all children she is very unreasonable. It had been my intention for some time past to send Ilda away. She was too young and frivolous, and Camilla ought to have some one older who can look after her better. I have been waiting for an opportunity, and to-day Ilda was not only insolent, but she disobeyed me. I sent her back to Rome to her mother at once." He spoke rather sulkily, as if determined to defend his own action, which at first sight might appear hard and a little cruel.

"Your sister was very fond of her. Naturally she feels parting with her," Denis ventured to say.

"Oh, she will soon forget all about her," said Pio, "and I sometimes think Ilda did not have a good

influence over her. Once or twice I detected a tendency in Camilla to . . ." he hesitated, "to dispute my word, in little things. I think Ilda encouraged her to do so."

Camilla did not appear again that evening. But Pio left Denis alone directly dinner was over, and presumably he went upstairs to reason with his sister. When she appeared the next day she looked very pale and as if she had not slept, but there were no traces now of those tempestuous tears which had so wrung Denis's heart. He had been secretly furious with Pio for what he considered his harsh high-handed action in thus summarily dismissing Ilda. No doubt he had good reason for doing so, and as a watch-dog she was, even in Denis's opinion, entirely inadequate. Still, he considered that Pio had been unnecessarily stern and unsympathetic.

Somehow the little incident with its accompanying glimpse into their intimate family life made Denis feel less like an honored stranger and much more like an old friend. He even ventured upon a few words of consolation and sympathy to Camilla herself when next he found himself alone with her. Her eyes filled with tears, and she seemed too much overcome to reply. Pio's entrance put a stop to the little interview, and Denis purposely distracted his attention lest he should perceive his sister's tears and inquire into the cause of them.

"I wish you would take Camilla for a ride this afternoon," Pio said to him just before luncheon; "it will distract her and prevent her from thinking too much about Ilda."

"I shall be delighted," said Denis, unconsciously imitating something of his host's courteous rather formal manner. Never before had it been suggested that he should ride with Camilla unattended by a third person. Pio was evidently bent on relaxing discipline for the moment, perhaps actu-

ated by some obscure desire to make amends to Camilla for robbing her of her companion.

"I am too busy to go myself," said Pio; "you can't imagine what a number of things there are to see to in a place like this. When I am in Rome, things seem to go perfectly well here, but as long as I am living on the property, no one will stir a finger without consulting me."

So there were disadvantages in autocracy, after all, reflected Denis. Pio's presence would no doubt rob all his dependents of such initiative as they might possess. Denis could not but perceive certain side-lights that were thrown upon the character of Pio, now that he saw him at such close quarters, and almost unconsciously there sprang up in his heart an antagonism that began to color all his thoughts of him.

He was riding with Camilla that afternoon, when he said suddenly:

"You must miss Ilda. . . ."

"Yes, I miss her. But Pio has forbidden me to think about her any more—he even advised me not to speak of her." Her delicate face assumed rather a hard set look.

"And do you always obey Pio?" said Denis, rather daringly.

"I try to. You see he is so much older—so much wiser. And I have no mother now to advise me."

"You are very good," said Denis, and this time he threw some little warmth of admiration into his voice.

"Oh, no," said Camilla quickly, "I'm not at all good. You wouldn't say that, if you knew me better. At first I was angry with Pio and bitter and rebellious—it quite shocked him. He had never spoken so sternly to me before. He sent Father Antonio to me. And then I went to confession—"

She broke off. "I'm going to try and do as Pio says and not think about Ilda any more."

Denis was aghast at the little recital. It showed him how completely Camilla was ruled and controlled by her brother, the kind of submission he extorted from her. When he thought of the absolute independence and freedom from all control, parental and otherwise, possessed by most girls of eighteen in England, he felt profoundly sorry for her. Yet she spoke quite calmly, almost like a child reviewing its own past naughtiness, recognizing it while deeply regretting it.

"But I think Pio was to blame for sending her away without even consulting you. It seemed to me an unjustifiable thing to do, and cruel into the bargain." There was indignation in his tone, and his dark eyes flashed. He was angry with Pio for exercising this complete ascendancy over his sister, and yet he secretly envied him for possessing it. It showed him so clearly the real love she had for Pio, and her complete confidence in his judgment even though it made her suffer. Her words had given him an intimate insight into her character and mode of life. Intimate, yes, and poignant. . . .

Camilla turned to him suddenly.

"You mustn't think I'm unhappy because I cried last night at dinner. I was unhappy then, yes, and angry—I felt I couldn't live without Ilda. Now I can see that Pio was quite right." It seemed almost as if she discerned that Denis was still wholly unconvinced of the rectitude of her brother's action. "You must try to forget all about it," she added brightly. "Now I'm going to take you for my favorite ride. Just through those woods and down to the Lake. Pio will never come that way—he says there's no place to gallop. But when I'm riding with you, I don't want to gallop—I like to ride slowly and talk." She made this announce-

ment quite simply, perfectly unconscious of its effect upon Denis.

They emerged at last from the shadows of the ilex-wood to a grassy space that looked down upon Lake Trasimeno, bright as a mirror and colored faintly blue under the wonderful March sky. They could see Cortona hanging upon its rock, with its many towers soaring skywards. There was a sense of spring in the air, and patches of wild anemones reddened the grass with their chalices. Camilla gazed at the view for a little in silence. She wished that Denis would speak.

"Do you like it?" she said at last.

"I wish I could tell you how much. I think this would be my favorite ride, too," he answered.

"I wish Pio liked it. We hardly ever come here," said Camilla.

A pale mist of green, impalpable as flame, hung over the chestnut woods. The growing wheat showed like spaces of emerald beneath the olive-trees. The vines, with their twisted knotted stems, as yet showed no sign of their perfumed blossoms, their golden buds. In the distance the Apennines lifted dazzling silver peaks against the sky.

"We must come here often—whenever we're allowed to ride alone together," said Denis.

"Yes—that will be perfect!" cried Camilla.

When they returned to the villa the swift spring dusk was beginning to fall, wrapping the world in its blue mantle soon to be strewn with stars. Pio was waiting for them on the terrace. As they approached him, Denis fancied that he glanced from one to the other with an interrogative, almost suspicious look. But he only said:

"You've been out a very long time, Camilla. I hope you're not tired. I was beginning to think something had happened."

Camilla slipped down from her horse, and the groom led it away. She linked her arm in her brother's.

"We had a beautiful ride. I showed Mr. Lorimer my favorite view of the Lake. It was lovely to-day, and he admired it, too." She smiled up into her brother's face, and Pio's grim features relaxed a little.

"But you must be careful not to overtire yourself," he said.

And as he looked at Denis, who had just then joined them, it seemed as if his eyes held something of reproach.

Denis felt suddenly chilled. The *rapprochement* between the brother and sister was obviously very complete, and there was a curious tenderness now, in Pio's manner to Camilla. He laid his arm possessively across her shoulders, and Denis fancied that she crept closer to him as if in response. And yet there was nothing abject in her submission, nothing that warred against that fine pride of hers. . . .

Denis saw that the little episode now happily ended would effectually destroy all hope of Camilla's listening to any kind of clandestine love-making on his part. She would certainly be careful for a long time to come not to offend or to disobey Pio. And in this avoidance of anything likely to disturb their present amicable relations, Denis knew that she would not be actuated by fear or any such servile sentiment. She loved Pio; she recognized his authority, she had supreme confidence in his judgment and decisions. It was her pleasure as well as her duty to do his will.

Denis, seeing all this, felt that his obscure and latent antagonism towards his host was likely to increase rather than to diminish. While Camilla was in this mood of renewed submission and contri-

tion, it would be obviously foolhardy to approach her with any revelation of his own feelings towards her.

"Another time when you ride with Camilla, you mustn't stay out quite so late," Pio told him that evening. "She isn't very strong, and the air after sundown is treacherous in Italy, especially in the winter and spring."

"I'd no idea it was so late," said Denis, writhing inwardly at the faint rebuke in the other's tone. "We were looking at that superb view. I do hope your sister won't be any the worse."

Pio looked mollified. He had not yet begun to suspect that Denis had fallen in love with his sister. Perhaps he considered the difference in their ages too great. Perhaps, regarding Camilla as a child to be petted and scolded, bidden and forbidden, he overlooked the fact that a young man might possibly see in her a beautiful charming woman whom he wished to marry.

His words, however, seemed to reassure Pio, who said almost apologetically:

"You see, I'm obliged to look after her very carefully. She has no mother." The shadow of his recent bereavement clouded his face. "It would have been happier for her if our parents had lived. A brother can never understand so well as a mother would have done. And it's my nature to be stern and harsh—these things wound her."

"I think if I had had a little sister—a pretty charming little sister—I should have been too indulgent with her. I'm sure I should have spoilt her," said Denis, with a smile.

"That would have been very foolish," said Pio, with a kind of withering contempt. "Girls have to be trained. As a guardian one has duties. But Camilla is a good little soul—and she really gives me very little trouble. She soon saw that I was

quite right about Ilda, and indeed certain things that I heard to-day have shown me that my action was more than justified. Of course one hates to seem harsh and tyrannical . . .” He paused and looked at Denis, whose dark face was singularly unresponsive.

“You’ve never had sisters?” Pio inquired presently. “You can know very little about women, then. I am always sorry for a woman when she marries a man who has never had sisters. And when he has lost his mother at an early age as well, I am still more sorry.”

“But you are describing my own situation,” said Denis, with a smile; “I was an only child and my mother died when I was two years old. Yet I think I understand women. . . .”

“You would probably always expect too much or too little of them,” said Pio, “and both attitudes are fatal. Perhaps, as you say, you would be too indulgent, and then when the day came for your indulgence to be exhausted, you would go to the other extreme and find no excuse for their conduct—your disillusionment would be complete and very bitter—you would probably consider yourself cheated.”

He did not wait for Denis to reply, but rose from the table and followed his guest into the great drawing-room, chilly and bleak on this cold March evening despite the great fire of logs that burned on the hearth.

Camilla was reading, but she sprang up at her brother’s approach and came eagerly towards him.

Pio stooped and kissed her forehead lightly. Something in this action, tender, possessive, soft with mutual understanding and forbearance, made Denis turn abruptly away.

He told himself that he loved Camilla far better than this harsh stern-faced man could ever do.

And he longed to make his love known to them both so that he might at least hear the worst of what Pio had to say. . . .

### CHAPTER III

FOR some time, no opportunity was offered to Denis wherein he might reveal that love for Camilla which daily became more ardent as his intimacy with her increased. Pio often permitted her now to ride alone with him, and they were careful never to stay out too late or too long. Denis's prudence in thus keeping silence to Camilla herself, was based on a very real fear of endangering his position and perhaps terminating his visit. Pio never referred to his leaving them; he seemed to take it for granted that he would remain with them as long as he chose. But Denis was aware that one false move would abruptly end in a departure no less summary than Ilda's had been.

He had been at the Villa nearly a month, and Easter was approaching when he found the desired opportunity of speaking to Pio. It was one evening, unusually warm for the time of year, when he was sitting out on the terrace with him after dinner. Both men were smoking. Camilla was in the big *salotto*, and through the open windows they could hear the sound of very soft music. She had a passion for music, and played well.

"I shall have to think about a marriage for her next year," said Pio suddenly. "She will be getting on for twenty then. It is a great responsibility."

Denis moved his chair a little. Then he said in a curiously strained tone:

"I suppose you would never consider me a worthy match for your sister? I'm not a rich man but . . . I love her."

In the moonlight Pio's face looked more than usually grave and stern. He waited a little before replying. There was a sudden crash of chords from within. Denis feared that Camilla would come out and join them, and interrupt their conversation at this critical moment. Then the music began again. . . . It was tender, pleading, and there was something of sadness in it.

Perhaps Pio was not greatly astonished at Denis's revelation. The possibility of such a sequel had not been remote from his mind when he had invited him to stay at the Villa and received him on such friendly and intimate terms. He had had his own reasons for so doing. The photograph of Sledwick, duly shown to him by Camilla, had made a highly favorable impression upon him. And lately he had begun to suspect that Camilla herself was not wholly indifferent to the young Englishman.

He had given great reflection to the matter, had settled that the young couple should spend nine months of the year at Sledwick and the remaining three in Rome. In this way he would not be completely separated from his sister. Denis was a Catholic, and thus there was not the religious barrier that usually exists between English and Italian. And personally he had always liked Denis. . . .

It would, however, have been unlike Pio to make his first comment a very encouraging one. He only said, after a pause in which Denis's heart throbbed with almost sickening force:

"I must think it over. I'm not in favor of interracial marriages myself. The War has shown us how dangerous they may prove to be. And in any case nothing could be settled until the period of mourning is over."

Denis was secretly astonished to find that a young man like Pio, who was absolute master of his own actions, should thus voluntarily submit to the ancient tyranny of a "period of mourning." Perhaps it did not seem such an anachronism up here in this ancient dilapidated abode, half villa, half castle, situated on the slopes of the Umbrian hills amid surroundings that could scarcely have altered since the fourteenth century, as it would have done in Rome or in London. From a person of an older generation such a sentiment would probably have elicited no surprise in a country that clings to ancient usage and tradition. But Pio had fought gallantly through three years of bitter warfare, and he should have at least permitted himself to grasp the various kinds of freedom and emancipation that War had brought so harshly into the world.

Pio, however, saw not the slightest reason for wishing to depart from the time-honored usage of his country. After his father's death he could remember that his mother had led a secluded life up here for nearly two years, clad in the deepest mourning.

"So you see there's plenty of time. And Camilla is very young. She won't be nineteen till Christmas."

"And I am twenty-nine," said Denis. He seemed to be looking at Camilla across those last ten years of his life. The reflection was not a very pleasant one. If Pio knew . . . but Pio would never know. No one had ever known except old Lord Farewether, most magnanimous of men. At least that ghost could never arise to startle them. Denis felt safe enough, yet when he looked at Pio now, he feared. Feared, too, the year that must necessarily elapse before anything could be "settled."

Camilla's music was torturing him. . . . It

seemed to him to be pleading for them both to an obstinate merciless Pio. . . .

"I thought you were older," said Pio frankly. "But men of our generation look older than they are. It isn't to be wondered at. We have suffered more than any other generation since the time of the Napoleonic wars."

Denis felt far from satisfied at the progress of the interview. Had Pio really said his last word on the important subject of his sister's marriage? Did he intend that Denis should keep silence about the matter for a whole year, waiting with what patience he might for Ascarelli's ultimate decision? Denis felt that his chance of success would perish long before that remote epoch was reached.

Yet, without vanity, he believed that Camilla was beginning to care for him. But if he were to go away for a year, would she not forget him? Perhaps it was unreasonable for him, on the other hand, to wish that the wedding could take place soon after Easter in the little thirteenth century church whose brick campanile stood up above the huddled cluster of houses that formed the village lying just below them in the plain, and whose lights showed now so clearly and steadily. . . . But to wait a whole year! Denis was silent, not daring to argue with Pio, whose arbitrary manner made him feel as if discussion on his pronouncements was actually prohibited.

Denis feared to offend him. That would indeed be to destroy his slender chances of winning Camilla. He was a cold and, in many ways, a hard man, this Ascarelli, but beneath that grave stern exterior lay, as Denis was aware, the tempestuous, fiery, passionate nature of the Italian.

"Of course I can trust you not to mention the matter to my sister," said Pio; "when the time

comes I shall, of course, inform her myself. The ultimate decision will rest with her. I should never force her into a marriage against her will."

"I should hope not, indeed!" Denis was surprised into saying.

Pio looked at him coldly.

"If I thought a particular marriage desirable for her, I should endeavor to advise her, to persuade her that it would be for her happiness," he said. "Camilla is growing very reasonable. I am sure I should not have any difficulty. . . ."

So Denis was entirely in Pio's hands.

"In the meantime, I must beg you not to say a word to Camilla. I'm sure you will see that your remaining with us depends upon your prudence in this matter. I can have nothing hurried or premature under the circumstances. My mother has only been dead a few months."

"I shall be very careful," said Denis, moodily. He was not sure that he could accept such hard conditions. There flashed through his mind a belief that he could even persuade Camilla to consent to a secret marriage. . . .

"I have already trespassed too long upon your hospitality," he told Pio; "and I think I shall have to return to England soon. I only wish it had been possible for you to give your consent to our engagement before I go."

"My dear Lorimer, that's quite out of the question, as I've tried to show you," said Pio half impatiently. He always considered people unreasonable when they failed to fall in at once with his own views. "And I don't want you to hurry away. Stay at least over Easter. I've invited a compatriot of yours to come here then for a week." He paused and then said in a softer, more kindly tone, "We shall miss you—Camilla and I. We have enjoyed having you."

"Thank you," murmured Denis. He was not paying a great deal of attention to what Pio was saying or he would certainly have asked the name of this Englishman who was soon to visit the Villa Ascarelli. But nothing seemed to matter at the moment except that he would have to go away with all his love for Camilla still unspoken, as far as the girl herself was concerned. It seemed to him an unfair and almost cruel arrangement, and he wished he had had the courage to tell Pio so.

Camilla ceased playing and came out on to the terrace. In her deep mourning she looked like a shadow among the shadows. She stole up to Pio and stooping kissed the top of his head.

"What are you looking so solemn about?" she said, smiling.

Pio was silent: then he said, "I have been asking Mr. Lorimer to stay on here until after Easter. He tells me that he'll have to be going to England soon."

"Oh, shall you really?" said Camilla. Her face became grave as she looked at Denis, and he tried to believe that he could detect disappointment in her tone. "But of course you must stay till after Easter."

Pio looked at her approvingly. There was just as much kindness as was necessary in her voice and manner, and no more. Nothing to show that her interest in Denis was of a different nature from that which she would have readily bestowed upon any of her brother's guests. Her manner was perfect, he thought. All of a sudden he felt glad that a year must pass before any plans need be made for her to leave the old house and home. And during that year he could perhaps learn something more of Denis, who was really a comparative stranger to them. Money and property he certainly had, and these things possessed a good deal of attraction for

Pio, whose finances had been hard hit during the long years of War. Moreover, he liked Denis's frank charming manner and equable disposition. He had behaved, too, with prudence and discretion in regard to the proposed marriage. Many young Englishmen would have taken the matter into their own hands and approached Camilla without any reference to himself, according to the custom (Pio thought it a barbarous one) of their own country. Yes, there was a great deal to be said in favor of the match. . . . He watched them now, as Denis rose and strolled across the terrace by Camilla's side. Their two figures were sharply silhouetted in inky blackness. He wondered what they were saying to each other. But the thought did not trouble him; he had perfect confidence that Denis would continue to show reserve and prudence, and Camilla that frank friendliness towards him which was the proper attitude for a young girl to display towards her brother's guest. Pio was satisfied that no one could make a fresh move in the game without his guidance and consent. He had the situation well in hand. But his mind dwelt approvingly upon the proposed marriage, always supposing that the settlements Denis could make should prove perfectly satisfactory. Camilla's dowry was not a very large one, but if she made a marriage of which he approved, he was prepared to augment it within reason.

"It might take place next spring, directly after Easter," he mused. "When he's gone to England I might give Camilla a hint, but not before. It's always a mistake to discuss these things prematurely. I'm sure Camilla likes him—I should have no trouble with her."

Denis said little as he stood close to the balustrade of the terrace, looking out into the starry Umbrian night. Below them were the lights, some

clustered, some scattered, of the little village. The river was visible, like a pale riband, tortuous, twisting like a luminous snake. The monotonous croaking of the frogs made a weird accompaniment of sound, breaking the silence of that warm spring night, almost like some strange Futurist music. Suddenly a nightingale began to sing its wonderful song of liquid bubbling notes in a cypress-tree close to them. Denis and Camilla listened to it in silence. He longed to speak to her then, to tell her of his own hopes, but the thought of Pio deterred him. He would only forfeit his last few weeks here, and that was too heavy a price to pay . . .

He felt at that moment that he hated Pio for all the hard conditions he had so arbitrarily laid down.

He said slowly:

"I have stayed here a very long time, Donna Camilla. I hope you don't think it has been too long?"

Camilla smiled. "Oh, no," she said; "we are only too delighted that you cared to stay so many weeks. For it must be dull for you up here with nothing whatever to amuse you. And lately Pio has been so busy—I'm afraid you've hardly seen anything of him except just at meals and in the evening. It's very good of you to have stayed here so long."

"But I've loved it," he said, "every day of it—every hour of it! It's simply done me pounds of good. I haven't felt so fit for years. It's cured me of that hideous shell-shock. . . ."

"I'm so glad," she said. "I shall tell Pio that he must invite you to come back. Perhaps in the autumn, when England begins to get wet and cold. Would you come—if Pio asked you?" She looked up into his face.

"Yes—I should come," he answered gravely.

The nightingale continued its song in the old

cypress-tree. Below in the plain the frogs kept up their incessant chorus. Denis and Camilla stood side by side in silence. He did not trust himself to speak; he wanted so ardently to tell her the whole truth.

Pio's voice sounded suddenly across the terrace.

"Camilla, you must come in. The night is getting chilly. And besides it's very late."

Camilla moved swiftly towards her brother, and Denis followed. Pio was standing close to the window. She went up to him and he kissed her forehead in his grave formal way.

"Good night, Camilla," he said.

"Good night, Pio. Good night, Mr. Lorimer." She held out her hand to Denis, and then vanished through the open window. Pio turned to his guest.

"We'd better go in, too. I'd no idea it was so late. Have another cigar, won't you?"

They entered the house. . . .

## CHAPTER IV

EASTER had come and gone, and from day to day Denis put off his departure from the Villa Ascarelli. Whenever he referred to it, Pio would always say something that showed him he was still welcome to remain if he chose. There was no effort to speed the parting guest, and if Pio's invitations to him to remain a few days longer were not exactly cordial, they at least seemed perfectly sincere.

Denis had almost forgotten the fact that another guest was expected, when one day Pio said to his sister at luncheon time:

"You and Mr. Lorimer can ride this afternoon if you care to. I must go in to Perugia to meet

my friend who is staying there and wishes to come here for a few days."

"Oh, I thought he was to have come last week, for Easter," said Denis.

"It was the original arrangement, but he preferred to stay in Florence for Holy Week and Easter—he is very devout," said Pio.

No more was said on the subject. Secretly Denis disliked the prospect of the arrival of a fourth person. He would always be there, and perhaps they would be expected, as the only guests and as fellow Englishmen, to walk and ride together. He wondered, too, if he were young or old, and whether he would fall in love with Camilla. For Denis had reached the stage when he believed every man who saw her must inevitably fall in love with her. He began to feel jealous of this man he had never seen.

"Of course, we must go for your favorite ride to-day," he told Camilla as they set forth.

"But why?" she asked with a smile.

"Because I am afraid we shan't have many more rides alone together. This friend of your brother's is coming, and soon I shall have to leave for England."

"Oh, Pio's friend won't interfere with our going out together," said Camilla; "he's quite an old man. About sixty and rather ill. He used to be a friend of my father's when they were both young men."

"Does he often stay with you?" inquired Denis, somewhat relieved at her description of this man whom he had almost begun to hate as a possible rival.

"No. I think he used to stay with us in Rome when I was a little girl. But I've quite forgotten him."

"What is his name?" asked Denis.

Camilla laughed. "Ferring . . . Ferrington . . .

I've forgotten it again! And I promised Pio that I would learn it and not make any stupid mistakes when I saw him. Your English names are so difficult."

Ferrington? Ferringham? For a moment Denis gazed at her aghast. Then he recovered himself, drawing a long breath of relief. Of course this stranger would not prove to be Angus Ferringham, old Lord Farewether's nephew. Why should he suspect anything of the sort? And then, he had never met Angus—knew him only by name. And Angus knew . . . nothing . . .

He thought he had never seen the Umbrian landscape look so divinely fair as it did upon that afternoon of late April. It was a day of brilliant sunshine, and the sky had almost that deep violet look it has at midsummer. Some of the fields were already aflame with poppies. The vines trailed like great emerald garlands from tree to tree, and beneath the olives the young wheat made a green carpet. There were blue and purple shadows on the mountains, and below them Lake Trasimeno shone like a turquoise.

To-day he felt in a reckless mood. Generally it was at his suggestion that they turned homewards, but now he would not even look at his watch to see how time was going. He knew it was getting late, because the sun had already sunk behind the mountains, and the great hill upon which Perugia stands with her many towers, her great fortress, was outlined against a sky of crimson and gold. Very soon the short twilight would come to an end and darkness would fall upon the world. A scented darkness full of lovely color as the moon rose to illuminate it. The night of Italy with its fresh fragrant dew, its wandering bats, its stars, its wonderful nightingales, and perhaps an early firefly or two, dancing with lighted lamps among the vines. . .

"Oh, but we've come ever so far," said Camilla suddenly; "it must be getting very late. Why didn't you turn back before?"

There was reproach in her tone.

"I didn't think about it. It's so ripping out to-day," he answered. "The evenings are so warm now, I'm sure Pio won't mind."

"He won't like it. We must make haste." She gave the horse a light flick with her whip. They cantered over the level ground, Camilla going on a little ahead. It was evident that she feared Pio's anger.

The valley was in shadow now. They could hear the bells ringing the Ave Maria from the church tower below. Camilla looked over her shoulder. "It will take us at least half an hour to get home," she said almost fretfully, "and Pio expected to be back from Perugia not later than half past five."

"Perhaps he has been detained there," said Denis.

They rode more slowly up the long winding hill that stretched in front of them. Denis on looking back could never quite understand why he so suddenly flung prudence to the winds and spoke to Camilla. It did not seem a very propitious moment, for she was already perturbed at the thought of her brother's anger, and perhaps a little inclined to blame Denis for their tardy return. Nevertheless, he drew up his horse when they were still about a mile from the Villa and said very quietly:

"I am going away in a few days and before I go I want you to know that I love you—that I wish you to be my wife. I've asked your brother's consent—"

Camilla stopped her horse and gazed at him in surprise. If he had ever imagined that she had guessed anything of the intensity of his feeling for her he now knew that he was mistaken. Her face was turned towards him in the twilight—that

dreamy delicate face with its beautiful brown eyes, its finely drawn features.

"You—you want to marry me?" she said, in a tone of astonishment. "Why, Ilda said you did, and I wouldn't believe her! You have always seemed to me so much older—more Pio's age—you were his friend. . . ."

"Yes, I am ten years older than you, Camilla. But that doesn't make me quite an old man," he told her smiling.

"What did Pio say to you?" Camilla seemed so intensely interested in their conversation, that she had evidently forgotten all about the lateness of the hour and the growing darkness that was folding its swift dusky wings about them.

"He said that he did not altogether approve of inter-racial marriages, and that in any case nothing could be settled for a year—till the period of mourning was over."

"But . . . did he give his consent?" asked Camilla.

"Not exactly. He told me I must wait and not mention the matter to you. So you mustn't tell him . . . I shall have," and he smiled, "to throw myself upon your mercy! But I simply couldn't go away without telling you. . . ."

Camilla was silent. She was glad in a sense that he had disobeyed Pio. It seemed almost right that she should know of this love she had so unconsciously won. She suddenly thought that if she had not known of it, it would have been very difficult for her to bear Denis's departure, his long absence in England. She wondered why Pio had forbidden him to speak of it to her. No doubt he had good reasons but his action seemed—as so many of his actions did at first sight—a little harsh and autocratic, lacking, too, in any thought for the feelings of others.

Camilla sighed. To eighteen, a year is a very long time. And during that year Denis would be absent for many months, leaving her alone with Pio at the old Villa. She realized how very much she would miss his sympathetic companionship.

"Are you ready to wait?" Denis's voice broke in upon her thoughts just as they were beginning to grow mutinous and rebellious at Pio's harsh mandate. "Do you love me, Camilla?" He stretched out his hand and laid it upon hers. Camilla paused before replying, then she said:

"Yes, I love you, Denis."

"And you'll be my wife?" he said. His voice was hoarse now with emotion. A sensation almost of giddiness came over him.

"Yes," said Camilla, "if Pio approves."

"If Pio approves!" repeated Denis.

"Yes. I couldn't marry without his consent. But you're his friend—and he so seldom makes friends. He likes you—he is certain to approve." She spoke with a charming confidence which found no echo in Denis's soul. "And then he is very fond of me—he wouldn't be unkind—he's always anxious to give me what I want . . ."

"Have you forgotten Ilda?" said Denis, almost violently. "He was perfectly indifferent to all your tears and entreaties then!"

"Oh, but you mustn't judge him so harshly . . . Indeed he was quite right to send her away—he found out that she was deceitful—that she was behaving in a very wrong manner. Pio is never forgiving when people deceive him."

"And if he thought I had deceived him do you think he would forgive me?" said Denis bitterly.

"But such a thing as that's impossible," returned Camilla quite gravely.

She did not dream that her words had struck his very heart with a sense of chill, of foreboding.

"Oh, Camilla, I should like to take you across those hills and marry you to-morrow!" he exclaimed.

Camilla smiled.

"That sounds like a fairy tale. What a boy you are sometimes, Denis! When you talk like that you seem so much younger than Pio."

"Do I? I'm a year younger, I believe. Perhaps if he were in love and some one told him that he must wait twelve whole months he would speak as I do!"

She shook her head. "I could never imagine Pio in love. When he marries he will arrange everything his own way. No one can dictate to Pio. He has always been like that."

"What right has he to rob us of a whole year of happiness?" said Denis, and now there was anger as well as passion in his tone. "If you loved me—really loved me, Camilla—you wouldn't submit to him for a second!"

Camilla looked at him with a half-frightened expression in her eyes. She realized that Denis loved her and that he was suffering at the prospect of that long separation.

"We must be going home," she said faintly.

She was almost afraid of him in this new mood, but mingled with her fear there was a little thrill of joy that stirred her very heart and made her secretly agree with every word he said.

"No—not yet," he said quietly, and he slipped down from his horse and tethered it to an olive-tree, where it began contentedly to crop the young corn.

Then he went up to Camilla and laid his hand on hers.

"Won't you get down, too—just for a few minutes? I'm sure you can make it all right with Pio, and he'll have this friend of his there to distract his attention."

"No—no—it's too late," protested Camilla.

But she submitted when he put up his arms and lifted her down. They sat upon a ledge of rock, just above the road, half-hidden by the olive-trees. In the distance they could see the lights of Villa Ascarelli, shining upon the hillside. The cool purple shadows of the spring night deepened about them.

At intervals the dark hills around them were pricked with lights, some solitary, some clustering in groups that seemed to form fantastic shapes. A bat flew past them with its whirring flight. A few faint stars showed overhead. There was a faint chill of falling dew, a fragrance in the air of grass and flowers. . . .

Denis put out his arm and drew Camilla close to him with rough strength. He held her slim gloveless hand in his. They did not speak much. Once she lifted her face to his and he bent down and kissed her. She felt like one in a strange delicious dream. It was cruel of Pio to wish to separate them for a whole year. Denis might go away and forget her. She would need him so much when Pio was a little harsh with her, and when he scolded her as he had done the other day about Ilda.

Denis murmured words of love. They fell sweetly upon her ears. She was glad that he had had the courage to disobey Pio and tell her of his love. It was so wonderful that she felt her whole life changing and becoming curiously happier under his hand, his touch.

She was the first to spring up and say in a tone of alarm:

"I hear some one coming. Oh, we must go, Denis! Supposing it should be Pio?"

He felt that she was trembling. . . .

"I only wish it were Pio," he said between clenched

teeth, and his voice held an ugly little sound that in her terror escaped her. "I should like him to know. We might persuade him then to give his consent at once."

The road wound a little below them and upon its blanched surface they could dimly discern the blurred outlines of a man on horseback. He must have heard the murmur of their voices—Camilla's indeed had been a little shrill with alarm—for he stopped and called out:

"Are you there, Camilla? What are you doing up there? Is Mr. Lorimer with you? Has anything happened?"

It was Pio's voice, harsh with anger and anxiety. Camilla's hand clung to Denis's for a desperate second. Then without a word she ran down the path through the groups of olive-trees, leaving Denis to follow with the horses. He heard her cry out as she neared the road: "I'm here, Pio. Yes, Mr. Lorimer is with me—nothing has happened—we were tired—we were resting . . ."

"Come down at once!" commanded Pio's voice.

Denis smiled grimly to himself as he untethered the horses and led them down into the road. What was Camilla saying to her irate brother? He could hear their voices talking in rapid voluble Italian, Pio's angry with a furious passionate note in it. Camilla's shrill and pleading, breaking at times into what sounded almost like a sob of fear. Just like a child sobbing at the prospect of approaching punishment, Denis thought to himself. The punishment, whatever it was, would fall upon them both.

He cursed himself for a fool as he came nearer to them and perceived that Pio was almost beside himself with rage; he seemed to have lost all control over himself. He had dismounted and was standing in the road, waving his riding whip menacingly.

Camilla was now sobbing hysterically, her face hidden in her hands, her whole slight body shaking convulsively.

Denis drew nearer. He felt awkward, embarrassed, and yet slightly contemptuous. The cause of the tempest seemed too insignificant to have provoked anything so violent. In England, as he was aware, his action would scarcely have elicited comment.

“What have you been saying to my sister?” demanded Pio fiercely, as Denis drew near.

“I’ve only told her just what I told you. That I love her—that I wish to marry her. I couldn’t go away as you wished me to and leave her in ignorance of my feelings towards her. Our English ways are different and I think they’re better than yours! And we don’t want to wait a year. We want to be married as soon as possible.”

There was defiance in his tone, as he blurted out the truth. He had never feared Pio so little. He longed to take Camilla in his arms and console and comfort her, but the angry figure of her brother stood between them, whip in hand.

“You shall never marry my sister,” said Pio. “I’d rather see her dead. Get on your horse at once, Camilla. Mr. Lorimer can follow. I shall have something more to say to him later on.”

He bestowed a fierce look upon Denis—a look that seemed to hold both anger and hatred. But his voice, as he spoke, had suddenly become as cold as ice, and to Denis it seemed to convey a subtle menace.

Why should Pio’s friendship suddenly turn to hatred? Why should he tell him that he would rather see Camilla dead than married to him? Camilla’s own words came back to him with a new and terrible significance:

*"Pio is never forgiving when people deceive him. . . ."*

Camilla sobbingly obeyed. Pio almost lifted her on to her horse, for she seemed incapable of mounting. The scene—the fear and terror that possessed her, coming so swiftly upon the strange excitement that Denis's words and kisses had evoked within her—had physically exhausted her. She looked like a spent child, Denis thought. Pio seemed to handle her rather roughly as he seized her and lifted her in his arms. She gave a little moan of remonstrance but made no attempt to resist him.

The brother and sister rode on ahead. Sometimes Denis, who was following at a little distance, could hear Pio's voice raised in angry reproof. Only sobs answered him. Camilla was evidently making no effort to exculpate herself and Denis. She was as usual being bullied into submission.

But Denis could not feel that the mere fact of his remaining out a little later than usual with Camilla could alone have provoked this storm of anger. It could hardly have caused Pio to change all at once from an attitude of friendship to one of fierce hatred. Something must have happened during their absence to excite his suspicions as to the character and past of his English guest. Denis's heart sank. This elderly Englishman who had been expected to arrive that day—had *he* anything to do with this terrible change of front? Had he been in a position to reveal anything? Denis drove the thought resolutely from him. Such coincidences were impossible. . . . And yet it was difficult to reconcile Pio's words with anything but an exact and definite knowledge of something which had taught him that this man whom he had almost accepted as his sister's future husband was in no way worthy of her, and had invented an imaginary

position for himself to which he could lay no claim. Denis was certain that Pio had conceived a sudden and violent hostility towards himself, and he felt that there must be a good reason for the change. Pio was not a capricious man; all his actions were reasonable and considered, although he often erred on the side of harshness and severity. He even showed those qualities to Camilla, whom he loved so dearly.

Denis had a sudden impulse to turn his horse's head in the direction of Perugia and ride away, shaking the dust of Villa Ascarelli from his feet. The action of a coward? Yes, but conscience had made a coward of him, in accordance with time-honored usage. He envied men who had the fine free liberty of a clean record, which enabled them to look the world boldly in the face, conscious of their own honor, their own rectitude. And then the thought came to him that even if he now turned and fled from what promised to be the most horrible and disagreeable and humiliating scene of his whole life, not even excepting that parting one with old Lord Farewether, he would be wronging Camilla. He must not sacrifice her. She would have much to bear from Pio. He would make her suffer. Denis, by going away, could only add to that suffering. For he believed very firmly in Camilla's love; he was certain that once aroused—and had he not aroused it?—it would prove to be of a faithful steadfast quality. It was true that she had soon forgotten her little friend and maid Ilda, had quickly put all thought of her from her because Pio had bidden her to do so, had even come to recognize that his action was both wise and necessary. But surely the two cases were not in the least analogous. Camilla loved him. Not an hour ago she had promised to marry him. But Denis did not reckon upon the easy disillusionment

of the young when they are compelled suddenly to behold their idol's feet of clay.

The brother and sister had vanished from sight long before Denis rang the bell that hung by the great gate of Villa Ascarelli, and rode up to the house. There was no sign of them, but Pio's big red automobile was waiting near the front door, with the chauffeur standing beside it. The man stared at Denis as he passed, but did not seem to recognize him, for he offered no greeting. A groom stepped forward to take the horse.

Denis rang the bell, and the sound seemed to echo rather eerily through the old house.

He tried to brace his nerves for the inevitable scene with Pio, but physically he had not yet perfectly recovered from the effects of shell-shock, and it seemed to him that something of his old bright indomitable courage had forsaken him. He felt rather like a schoolboy about to receive a thoroughly merited thrashing, and the ignominy produced by this mingled sense of shame and fear seemed to humble him to the dust.

A light flashed out above his head, the door was flung open, and Denis entered the hall.

## CHAPTER V

THE electric light was carefully shaded in ancient iron lanterns, and the shadows were very dark in the hall, as Denis entered it. A huge log fire burned at one end, and before it Pio was standing, with brow as black as thunder. Near him stood an elderly, gray-haired, gray-bearded man whose face seemed somehow familiar to Denis, although he did not think he had ever seen him before.

There was no sign of Camilla. She was probably weeping up in her room, dismissed thither by her irate, implacable brother.

“Will you come into my study, Mr. Lorimer?” said Pio in an icy tone.

Resenting the peremptory nature of the request, which sounded far more like a command, Denis had little choice but to comply. The elderly man followed them in silence. No introduction had been made and Denis felt that the omission had been intentional.

Pio's study led out of the hall. All the other living rooms were upstairs, and this one was seldom used except as a kind of office where he transacted business with Signor Basi. There was a large table covered with papers and documents of all kinds. A great carved bookcase filled with books stood against the wall. A few high antique leather-covered chairs with heavily-carved backs and some smaller tables, comprised the rest of the furniture. There was no fire, and the room even on this warm April night struck chill.

Pio shut the door. On one of the smaller tables Denis perceived an oblong-shaped photograph. With a fresh sinking of the heart, he recognized it to be the one of Sledwick which he had given to Camilla in the first few days of their acquaintance. Simultaneously it flashed across his mind that this third person, this gray stranger, possessed a curious and striking resemblance to his late patron, Lord Farewether. . . .

What a fool he had been—what a reckless, incautious fool---to leave that piece of damnatory evidence in Camilla's hands! . . .

He felt the blood ebb away from his face.

Pio seized the photograph and with a violent gesture waved it close to Denis's eyes.

"Did you tell my sister that this was a photograph of your own house in Yorkshire?" he demanded fiercely.

Denis thought he had never seen any human being look so angry before.

"I daresay I gave her that impression," he replied guardedly.

"It was a lie!" said Pio violently; "you've been living here with us as our guest—our friend—under false pretenses! This gentleman is in a position to disprove your statements both with regard to this photograph and certain other things connected with yourself. Mr. Ferringham—you recognize this picture, do you not?"

Denis stared aghast as Mr. Ferringham stepped forward and took the photograph from Pio's hand. Ferringham . . . yes, that was the name of Lord Farewether's nephew, son of his only sister. The impossible had happened.

Fixing a monocle very deliberately in his right eye, Ferringham said in a drawling, supercilious tone which held something of both insolence and arrogance:

"Yes—it's a photograph of Sledwick—our family place in Yorkshire. It belongs to my cousin now, but when Mr. Lorimer knew it, my uncle, Lord Farewether, was still alive. He died a year or two ago and his only son succeeded him in the title and property." He turned to Denis, and now his manner definitely possessed something of that hauteur with which a man, conscious of his own social importance, will sometimes address a person of inferior rank. "You were my uncle's agent, were you not? And you left him ostensibly to volunteer?"

Denis bowed his head slightly in assent. He did not speak.

"Have you anything to say in your own defence?" inquired Pio.

"Nothing," said Denis.

He was beginning to feel that the scene was unreal and a trifle absurd. These men were making a fuss about nothing. They made him feel as if he were playing the part of the suddenly unmasked villain in some transpontine melodrama. He smiled faintly, as if in response to his own thoughts. Did not the villain always smile contemptuously upon the dull stuffy excellent people who had "found him out"?

And yet, there was something in Pio's attitude which bred a secret fear in his heart, and made him remember that he was no longer in his own country, but in one where men's passions ran high and caused them sometimes to take the law into their own hands and punish those who had wronged or insulted them. Yes, he was alone and friendless here, and entirely at Pio's mercy. Mercy? There was little suggestion of that suave quality in the Italian's hard handsome face.

"You came to our house representing yourself to be a person of wealth and position and good birth," continued Pio, reverting once more to his icy tones, "and it was because we believed your word, that we admitted you to an unusual intimacy in our house. Mr. Ferringham is in a position to deny your statements and he also affirms that you were dismissed summarily from Sledwick just before the War broke out. Is that the case?"

Denis shrugged his shoulders.

"This gentleman seems to have an intimate if inaccurate knowledge of my private affairs."

"You took advantage of your position here—of the friendship we had shown you—to make love to my sister. You have even extorted a confession

of love from her, although I forbade you to mention the subject to her," continued Pio, with rising anger.

There was a knock at the door and Signor Basi came into the room. He went straight up to Pio and said something to him in a low tone. They left the room together, Pio shutting the door after him. Denis thought he could discern the sound of movement, of voices, in the hall. Was Camilla there? What was Pio saying to her? What did he mean to do with her? Then the great door was shut heavily; he could hear the bolts being drawn. and outside, beyond the windows, there was the sound of a motor-car moving swiftly, the throbbing of machinery, the shrill grating sound of changing gear as it mounted the hill to the gates.

Did it mean that Pio had sent Camilla away?

Pio came back into the room and his face was pale and slightly agitated. The parting scene between brother and sister had been brief but poignant. Camilla had not wanted to go, she had clung to him in frenzied appeal, and Pio's answers had been harsh and stern. He had not any pity for her. No one, least of all this beloved sister, was permitted to rebel against his authority. And Camilla had lent herself too willingly to Denis's little intrigue. She should have repulsed his declaration of love instead of listening to it—and responding. She had let this infamous adventurer take her in his arms and kiss her. Pio ground his teeth at the thought. But he was determined to avenge his sister's honor. Denis should learn a painful salutary lesson before he was permitted to leave Villa Ascarelli.

Ferringham and Denis were still standing there in silence. Denis did not look up when Pio came into the room. Had he done so he would have seen

that there was a little smile of triumph upon his face. He had dealt with his sister, and now he intended to deal with Denis. . . .

"I think I have said all that I need, Mr Lorimer," he said coldly. "For the rest, Mr. Ferringham will communicate with you presently."

The words struck upon Denis's ears with an almost sinister significance. What did Pio mean by this enigmatic announcement, uttered in a tone that was slightly menacing? There was, however, no mistaking the gesture of dismissal that accompanied the words, and Denis slunk out of the room without saying another word. He was painfully aware of the abject nature of his withdrawal, but he felt too weak and nervous to go on playing a part before these two men who had, so to speak, unmasked him. The scene had exhausted him, had given him a return of his physical trouble; he could almost feel the deafening shells whizzing past him, to be followed by that dreaded explosion reducing men and beasts to shattered fragments . . .

He walked unsteadily across the hall and mounted the wide marble staircase that struck so cold to his feet to-night. At the top he paused for a second and listened. No sound came from below. He entered his own room and closed the door.

He switched on the electric light—a modern luxury which always seemed a little out of place at the Villa Ascarelli—and then sat down by the window, first opening it so as to let the spring air flow into the room. It was very dark outside, and the wide Umbrian valley, the great mountains, were all blotted into one immense shadow that seemed to envelop the whole world, broken only by those distant lights that pricked it here and there as if with fallen stars.

The cool spring wind revived him, and for the first time he was able to collect his thoughts and to

envisage the situation with something like clearness. Somewhere out in that darkness Camilla was traveling to an unknown destination, out of his sight, out of his ken. What were her thoughts towards him? Had Pio told her everything? Did she, too, regard him as an adventurer who had deceived them in order to obtain this intimate footing in the house, a position he was to use to try and win her for his wife? He would have given worlds to know then exactly what she thought of him and his deception. Perhaps she shared Pio's anger, was shamed to think she had so readily responded to his words of love, his eager caresses. But he could hardly believe that. Most surely had she loved him when she had sat close to him in the gathering darkness.

He would follow her to Rome. He would start as early as possible on the following morning. He would circumvent Pio—he would not submit to his overbearing tyrannical decisions. He loved Camilla, and he was not prepared to let her go without a fierce struggle. For a moment he seemed to be sitting there with her among the gray olive-trees and the vine garlands and the fresh young wheat, with all the heavenly beauty of the Umbrian landscape spreading about them, and the golden light fading in the wide Umbrian sky. With a sense of overwhelming grief and despair he felt anew the touch of her hands, her lips, the pressure of her slight body against his arm. The full measure of his loss came home to him then, and the tears gathered thickly in his eyes.

A sharp knock at the door startled him.

"*Avanti!*" he called in response, but his voice broke on a hoarse note.

The door opened and Mr. Ferringham came into the room. His small *soigné* person was naturally so insignificant that he scarcely looked like an arbiter of destiny. Pio had said that Mr. Ferringham

would communicate with him, and Denis wondered idly what he would have to say.

No hint of the truth had revealed itself to him. If he thought at all about the nature of that communication, he imagined it would take the form of a request to him to leave the Villa Ascarelli as early as possible on the following day.

Mr. Ferringham held a card in his hand.

"I don't know if you're aware of the usages of this country, sir," he said in his slightly insolent tone, "but I must explain to you that you have offered an insult to his sister, which the Marchese Ascarelli is not prepared to overlook. It justifies him in challenging you to a duel to-morrow morning, and he suggests that Signor Basi should act as your second"—he went to the door, opened it, and made a gesture to some one who stood waiting on the landing. Signor Basi, silent, with immovable face, entered the room.

Denis stood there quite stupefied . . .

His whole soul revolted at the thought of fighting a duel. He was a slighter, less strong man than Pio. Pio would certainly kill him. Had he escaped death so often only to fall ignominiously in a duel at the last? He stared at Mr. Ferringham and Signor Basi, but his dry lips framed no words.

There was silence. Outside, a dog barked as if suddenly startled. He said at last:

"Signor Basi, you will make all the arrangements with Mr. Ferringham, and then you will come and tell me what you have decided."

The two men bowed and withdrew. Denis sat down and rubbed his eyes. He felt as if he were dreaming and had been forced to play a part in some hideous nightmare. He wondered whether Pio would shoot him or stab him. And he wasn't

in a condition to fight . . . It would be sheer murder. And he didn't want to die. He was still young, and he had survived great perils and dangers. He had seen men mown down all around him and had wondered that he himself should still be alive and unscathed. And had he survived only that he should be struck down by an angry man in this shameful manner?

Presently there was another knock at the door and Signor Basi returned. It was all arranged. The duel would be fought at daybreak, a little before six, on the following morning. The weapons would be swords. . . . A doctor would be in attendance. . . .

"The Marchese is a famous swordsman," added Signor Basi, almost apologetically, as if regretting that his master had had recourse to such extreme measures.

"And I'm not. I have never fought with swords or foils in my life," said Denis bitterly.

"But he is also one of the finest shots in the country," said Basi with a slight gesture that again seemed to convey regret.

Denis gave a little laugh that was rather ghastly

"I've no doubt of it," he said.

"Shall I come and call you in the morning?" inquired Signor Basi, his round black eyes fixed somewhat uneasily upon Denis.

"Yes, please. At five o'clock. I don't want to keep the Marchese waiting."

Signor Basi bowed and withdrew.

Downstairs Ferringham was saying in his supercilious arrogant voice:

"That man don't look fit to fight, Pio. He had a bad bout of shell-shock after the War—he was laid up for ages in my cousin's hospital in London. They thought at one time he'd never come round,

and he doesn't look a bit normal yet. I can't help wishing you'd give him a jolly good thrashing and have done with it."

"That is not our custom," said Pio loftily, "and surely that would be a far greater degradation for him than any punishment one can imagine. It is more honorable for him to fight. I have chosen swords on purpose. I shall give him a sharp lesson—one he'll always remember. But I don't want to kill the scoundrel." His brow darkened.

"What are you going to do with your sister?" inquired Ferringham.

"Camilla? Oh, didn't you know? I've sent her away with Giulia—an old servant who has been in our family for a number of years."

"She has gone back to Rome?" asked Ferringham, flicking the ash from the end of his cigar.

"Oh, no—he would be certain to try to follow her. I have sent her to my aunt in the Abruzzi—she will be most carefully looked after there."

"Do you think she really cared about Lorimer?" pursued Ferringham.

"She may have thought she cared. . . . But Camilla is very reasonable. She often makes a scene at first, just as she did this evening when I brought her back to the house. But she has great confidence in my judgment," added Pio with some complacency. "I was never greatly in favor of the match. And now I shall see that she marries young Prince Forli. He is very rich and a charming young man, and his mother is most anxious that he should marry Camilla. I may let her marry early in the New Year now instead of waiting till after Easter."

Mr. Ferringham had finished his cigar, and his face wore a perturbed look. He rose, went up to Pio and said:

"Pio, my dear chap, think better of it! The man isn't fit to fight. It—it isn't cricket! Tell him to go—" His tone was urgent.

Pio stared at him in astonishment and then broke into an ironic laugh.

"I mean to give him a pretty sharp lesson before I've done with him," he said, "but as I've told you, Ferringham, I haven't the slightest intention of killing the reptile. He thoroughly deserves all I shall give him."

Ferringham paused for a second, then he said:

"He's not altogether a wrong 'un, you know, though he's done some pretty bad things in his time. My uncle always liked him—treated him as a son—wouldn't hear a word against him, even after he'd found him out most gorgeously! I'm not telling you this because I like him, for I've got the greatest contempt for him. But I don't want you to do anything you may be sorry for later on."

"Look here, Ferringham, I know you were my father's friend and all that, but I can't be dictated to by you now. I know my own business best, and I'm not going to have Camilla insulted by a needy adventurer and then let him go unpunished. I shall give him just what he richly deserves and no more. If you don't care to be my second, I'll send over to Villoni and get him to come."

There was decision in his tone.

"Oh, I'll be your second if you insist upon making a fool of yourself, Pio," said Ferringham, taking advantage of his position as an old family friend to speak with brutal frankness.

"I am very busy," said Pio, going over to his writing table; "I have several things to see to. Perhaps you would prefer to smoke upstairs?"

He flung open the door and Ferringham, a little heavy-hearted, had no choice but to leave him.

## CHAPTER VI

DENIS saw no one that evening except Signor Basi, who brought him some dinner, which he scarcely touched. He did not go to bed till a late hour, and spent the intervening time pacing his room like a restless spirit.

His position struck him as appalling and yet a trifle absurd. He had a vague wish to go to confession, but he knew that Father Antonio could not give absolution either to himself or Pio under the circumstances. The whole thing was an anachronism. He did not wish to fight, and then he was no skilled swordsman like Pio, who had probably fought other duels and regarded them as a matter of course. He had no wish to die here in a foreign country. There was no one to mourn him, unless Camilla loved him enough to do so, but penniless and at the end of all his resources as he was, and labeled for the second time with the stigma of dishonor, he yet clung to life for its own sake. But to refuse to fight would brand him as a coward, and Denis was not a coward. He only felt the whole thing to be so futile, so unnecessary. . . .

"I've got myself into a most confounded mess," he said ruefully.

To steal out quietly and leave Villa Ascarelli forever, was another course which for a brief moment attracted him. But that would mean that he could never see Camilla again. He would have to leave Italy, a fugitive. And his determination to marry Camilla was very strong. There was weakness in her character and he would play upon that weakness. And in marrying her he would punish the haughty pride of Pio Ascarelli, who from being his friend had suddenly become his bitterest,

most implacable foe. He had made enemies before, but never with such disastrous results. Some men—such as old Lord Farewether, for instance—had found it easy to pardon him, to give him a fresh start. The thought of his former patron made him remember Mr. Ferringham's guarded words to Pio. What did Ferringham know? Had he found incriminating documents among the papers of Lord Farewether, who had died rather suddenly? He thought of Ferringham as the very impersonation of a malignant destiny.

Denis spent a restless, almost sleepless night. He woke even before Signor Basi came to call him by knocking tentatively at his door. The first gleam of silver in the east revealed a broad bank of mist lying across the whole length of the valley. From it the higher slopes and summits of the mountains emerged, painted in dark sombre pansy-colored tones. They looked like aerial hills riding upon the white clouds of mist. They seemed apart and separated from the earth as if their summits had become detached and were soaring skywards. As the dawn brightened, this white bank of mist was touched to a pale rose color flecked with pure liquid gold. Nearer the house the woods showed but dimly; the trees were like furtive spectres indefinitely outlined. He was to go into those woods this morning and perhaps he would never emerge therefrom alive. It was a strange thing that he should so cling to a life he had deliberately wrecked and ruined. . . .

Denis shivered and his teeth chattered. He emptied a flask of brandy into a glass and drank it off. The fiery liquid seemed to course through his veins, warming his whole system and revitalizing it. He took up the rapier with which Signor Basi had provided him, and examined it carefully, feeling its sharp point, its finely tempered edge. Of course he had no chance with Pio, and he believed, too.

that Pio intended to kill him. He must not attempt to attack, only to defend himself from that practised sword. . . .

It was a quarter to six, and Signor Basi was again knocking at the door. Denis opened it and handed him an addressed envelope. "If anything happens to me will you write or telegraph to this address?" he said.

Of all that followed, Denis never retained any clear or succinct remembrance. He had a series of nebulous impressions, but often he had difficulty in recapturing even these. He could remember going out into the chill yet fresh morning air, with Basi walking beside him; he could remember, too, that the very fact of Basi's presence had braced him to a calm, almost callous exterior composure. They went together across the terrace, their faces and clothes drenched with the wet mist, and into the damp wood of ilex and cypress and gaunt stone-pine that lay beyond. The spot had always seemed to him like a classic woodland in its austerity, the formal disposition of its trees that never lost their leaves. To-day they looked as if they had put on mourning, and Pio's words "*the period of mourning*" rang irrelevantly in his ears. He could not remember that he had felt any fear from the beginning to the end of the encounter; his principal sensation had been only that he was going "over the top" for perhaps the last time. But he could recall feeling a mortal coldness that seemed to penetrate to his heart and brain, even to his very bones . . . A coldness that must have been induced by the physical chill of that damp clinging mist that wound about the world that day like a white cruel serpent. All sounds and sights had been alike rendered muffled, indistinct, and almost monstrous by that mist. He could remember coming to the open space somewhere near the middle of the wood and

seeing Pio already standing there, a tall, determined, powerful figure beside whom Mr. Ferringham looked small and shrunken. Another man was with them, probably the doctor of whom Basi had spoken. Mr. Ferringham had evidently not perceived Denis's approach, for he was saying in his dry supercilious way:

"You'd far better have given him a sound thrashing. Thrashed men never tell tales. You can't hide a dead or a wounded man—" He stopped short as he suddenly observed Denis walking towards them, and wondered if that "skunk" Lorimer had heard any part of the speech. But Denis's face was pale, cold, immovable. His dark eyes were dull and heavy. He showed no sign of any emotion at all.

He could remember, still vaguely and as if the memory had been half-suffocated by that clinging blinding mist, standing on the spot designated by Signor Basi, whose face seemed unaccountably terror-stricken. He could remember, with slightly increased accuracy of detail, seeing the tall form of Pio Ascarelli looking huge, monstrous, almost distorted, beside the malevolent little figure of Ferringham. That Ferringham should have urged Pio to thrash him instead of fighting, had touched Denis's pride to the quick, had braced his muscles and nerves to strange effort. "*Thrashed men never tell tales.*" He could remember thinking he would far rather wound or kill Ferringham than Pio. For after all Pio, until yesterday, had been his friend, his host, showing him, too, innumerable little acts of courtesy and hospitality . . . But Ferringham had come into the house, on purpose as it seemed, to precipitate disaster. Those little finicking hands of his had caused the Sword of Damocles to fall . . .

He grasped his sword. He tried pluckily in a brave, wholly unskilled way, to resist the swift and

deadly attack of Pio, in whose practised hand the sharp rapier became like a living sentient thing, responding to the slightest muscular movement of supple wrist. And then he remembered no more, for the mist thickened about him and blotted out all sight of his adversary, and descended like a curtain, first white and then deepest black, upon the whole world. . . .

Of course there had been pain just before the mist played that curious trick upon him. A sharp cruel pain that made him feel, during that brief interval of consciousness, as if his left arm had been almost severed from his body. Then oblivion came, a sinking, as it seemed to him, into the very arms of death. . . .

When Denis came to his senses, he was traveling rapidly down hill over a very rough road that jolted and violently shook the conveyance in which he was lying with his legs outstretched before him. He had not the least idea what had happened nor whither he was going; he was only aware of the utter discomfort of his position. The rumble of wheels, the whirr of machinery, seemed to torture his nerves and accentuate the physical pain which perhaps had brought him back to consciousness and to the world of sensation and suffering. He opened his eyes. That pale gray lining did not certainly belong to Pio's great red automobile, which was upholstered in dark blue . . . A man sat opposite to him whose face he could not see. At first he thought it was Pio, but the silhouette drawn against the window was that of a much smaller slighter man. Not Ferringham? He could not see very well, but the man wore no beard, his face was clean-shaven. . . . He remembered seeing him once before in a wood . . . perhaps he was the doctor. . . .

The hideous pain that seemed to rack his whole

body with its excruciating suffering, now gradually concentrated itself in his left arm, that was bound up in a kind of splint and secured in a sling. It was pain of a tormenting kind, and a sudden jolt over a particularly bad piece of road increased it to such a point that Denis gave a little scream. The scream relieved him and he screamed again, though even to his own ears it was a horrible shameful sound. But it wasn't pain one could bear, even with clenched teeth, he assured himself. And anyhow, why did they let him suffer like that? Far better put him out of his misery at once. He gave another scream and the automobile stopped. The man rose to his feet and bent over him. Denis felt a smart little stab administered with sudden violence. The drug worked quickly and he relapsed into that merciful oblivion from which pain had dragged him forth so mercilessly. . . .

When he next awoke, the car had stopped, and he saw that he was lying in bed in a lofty bare airy room, with a woman dressed as a nun sitting beside him.

He had been hurt, then. His left arm . . . Yes, pain was tearing at his left arm, gripping it with red-hot fingers, stabbing, burning, twisting the tortured nerves, the torn flesh, the severed muscles, eliciting a response that ran through his whole body, making it the very home of tormenting devils.

He bit back the cry that rose to his lips. The nun gave him something to drink—it was cool and refreshing, he drank it eagerly. Then he tried to think back, to remember exactly what had happened to bring him to this pass, but the events still lay buried in his subconsciousness. He wondered if he were in France. . . . the feeling that he had gone "over the top" was curiously enough still with him. He even hoped that his regiment had done well. A fine set of fellows—the best in the world. He

wasn't fit to be among them, but he had at least tried to "make good."

But slowly, slowly, the mind traveled back, lifting the veil a little, pushing aside the mist as if it had indeed been a curtain that had shut him away and blotted out the classic woodland that rose behind the Villa Ascarelli. There had been something a little shameful . . . *Thrashed men never tell tales.* . . . He could hear Ferringham's arrogant voice pronouncing those very words. Yes, he had urged Pio to thrash him, as if he had been doing him too much honor to challenge him to a duel. He felt the blood rise to his face. The mist came back. He saw Pio and Mr. Ferringham in the study, looking at a picture. Then mist again, trailing over everything like a cold white serpent, thick, suffocating, in its clinging cruel embrace. A flash of swords cleft it for a moment; he could hear the touch of steel upon steel. Then something shot out and struck him with sickening force, inflicting a pain that was surely unto death. . . . A cry escaped him. He hoped that he had fought well until that "burning moment" came. He hoped that he had shown no fear before that swift, practised, deadly attack of Pio Ascarelli. He was almost glad he had heard Ferringham utter those words; they had acted upon him as the touch of a whip acts upon a spirited thoroughbred.

"Is . . . Pio alive?" he said, in English.

But even as he spoke, memory returned, vivid and accurate in the picture it held up for his contemplation. He had only been called upon to defend himself, stubbornly, if clumsily; it was Pio who had attacked with strange ferocity and had sent this mad demon of pain into his left arm. Pio had surely suffered no hurt. . . .

The nun shook her head. She knew no English.

But she rose and went out of the room, returning almost immediately with a man, tall, youngish, wearing a long black cassock. Above the cassock and round white collar there was an English face, blond, serious, with shining blue eyes that were gazing down upon him with pitiful compassion.

"John—how did you know?"

"Some one called 'Basi' sent me a telegram," said the priest gently.

Denis put out his uninjured arm and touched the priest's hand with his own. A sense of comfort in the midst of desolation stole over him. He was no longer alone. John Ponsford, best and dearest of men, was with him. The only Englishman in Rome for whom he had felt anything like friendship. A man silent and guarded always in his comments upon other men, as if he feared ever to trespass across the boundaries of charity. A man wholly given over to his sacred calling, who only saw in his fellow men souls to be succored and saved. He possessed indeed in full measure that strange burning zeal which in all ages the Catholic Church has been able to evoke in her sons.

"What did Basi say?"

"Just, that you'd met with a bad accident and were hurt and that you'd asked him to send for me."

Denis gave a faint smile.

"You see, I don't know where I am," he said, almost apologetically.

"You're in Florence. If you could look out of your window, you'd see the Dome and Giotto's Tower."

"Should I? I don't think I want to look at anything to-day."

"How did it happen?" asked Father Ponsford.

"I was at Ascarelli's place in Umbria . . . the

accident happened there. I'd rather not talk about it. It was very good of you to come." He looked up wistfully into John's face.

"Oh, of course I came as quickly as I could. I left Rome last night."

"Shall I lose my arm?" asked Denis.

Yes, he knew now that this had been the thought that had haunted him ever since he recovered consciousness. Would he bear the mark of Pio's fierce wrath to his dying day? Would he have continually to endure questioning as to "how it had happened," answering always with careful evasion of the truth?

John Ponsford's face was very non-committal.

"Indeed I hope not, my dear Denis!"

"But what do the doctors say?"

"They have said very little indeed, so far."

"But it's a bad wound . . . The pain . . ." His face was momentarily distorted with agony. He longed to scream as he had screamed upon his journey. But John's presence gave him courage.

"Yes, yes . . . But try to bear it, Denis."

"You mustn't leave me. . . ."

"Not till you're very much better."

Father Ponsford stood up, made the Sign of the Cross over the prostrate body of his friend and murmured the words of a Latin blessing. "Now I'm going into the next room and you must get some sleep. If the pain's very bad you shall have another injection. So much depends, you know, upon your keeping perfectly quiet."

He touched Denis's hand lightly and went out of the room. Then the nun came back and took up her old position by his bedside. Her lips and fingers moved. Denis caught a glimpse of shining metal. She was saying her rosary. Perhaps she was praying for him. Praying that he might have strength to bear the pain that was devouring him.

Praying that the great lesson of suffering might not be lost upon him. . . . She had an old smooth face, wise and kind. Her hands were knotted and gnarled as if with age and rheumatism and hard work.

Denis fell asleep. . . .

## CHAPTER VII

FATHER JOHN PONSFORD had known Denis fairly well and had seen something of him, too, during the first part of his visit to Rome that winter. They were acquaintances of some standing, having met first at Sledwick, where Denis had been treated with the greatest kindness by the late Lord Farewether, rather, so the priest had understood, against the wishes of the rest of the family. Exactly what had happened to terminate this ideal state of things, Father Ponsford had never ascertained, and for some months he had lost sight of Denis, only to meet him again in a French hospital. He himself was then acting as chaplain in France. He had helped Denis spiritually and materially, and had heard later that he had been invalided home with shell-shock. After the Armistice he had reappeared in Rome, where John was continuing his studies, interrupted by the outbreak of War.

John had always liked him, for there was something attractive about Denis's personality which drew other men to him and easily won him friends. Yet on looking back he knew that he had never felt sure of him. His mode of life in Rome had been decidedly astonishing for a man who had always seemed poor and often struggling. He had come thither with wealth at his disposal, and he had gained admittance, possibly through Pio Asca-

relli, to several very exclusive houses. John wondered what events had led up to this mysterious wound, but he at least suspected the truth. Pio Ascarelli was a man of violent temper, and there had been rumors for some time past that Denis had shown great attention to his young sister, Donna Camilla. Perhaps Pio had discovered something of the affair. Denis had never been famed for prudence.

It had been so odd, so mysterious, that curt telegram he had received, summoning him to Florence, signed by a name that was quite unknown to him. Father John had packed his bag and started forthwith, as indeed he would have gone to any fellow countryman in distress, but what he had found had only puzzled him still more.

There was no word of any quarrel, nothing but this vague allusion to an accident. Yet this sword-cut, laying bare the arm from elbow to wrist, cutting down to the very bone, could hardly have been the result of an accident. It was the work of a man who knew how to use a sword with skill and deliberation and violence. The wound was a pretty bad one, so the surgeon had informed him, but if no complications supervened it was in a measure curable.

"He'll never have the full use of that arm again," he had said, "and your friend is not in a good state of health to bear the shock of it too well. But he's young—his constitution is fairly good, or was probably before the War."

"I believe he was invalided for many months with shell-shock," said the priest.

"Was he? I'm not altogether surprised. There are one or two puzzling features. This inability, for instance, to give any succinct account of how the—accident—occurred."

He broke off sharply. The young doctor who

had accompanied Denis Lorimer to the private nursing-home in Florence had forthwith vanished. Had he taken him to a hospital, he would have been detained and interrogated; the police would have stepped in. He had merely said the wounded man was a British Officer, and that the hurt in his arm was a bold affair which had unfortunately become troublesome. . . .

"We didn't touch him at first," the surgeon continued. "I only looked at the wound to-day and saw it was a fresh sword-cut. Probably there was a duel and they want to hush it up lest a lady's name should appear!"

"He won't say anything to me either," said Father John, "but then he's always been a reserved sort of chap. Not given to talking about himself. There's no danger is there?"

The doctor paused and then shook his head.

"Not—unless complications supervene, and then it would be awkward for us all. Hiding it up, I mean, in this fashion." He looked slightly perturbed. "Don't you think you'd better tell your consul?"

"Not—at present—" said Father John. He was unwilling to act without first consulting Denis, who was scarcely fit to be worried with formalities just now. "Does this clinic belong to you?" he inquired.

"No. It was a hospital for officers, run by private people during the War, and since then we have taken other patients, chiefly surgical cases. I've been running it lately for another man who is away on leave. We were short of nurses so I sent for a nun. The young man who came with Mr. Lorimer left a large sum for expenses."

This item of news astonished Father John. But the whole story was mysterious and then, too, it had been hushed up with extraordinary skill. This sud-

den arrival at night—the bringing in of a half-drugged man purporting to be suffering from an old wound that had broken out afresh, the swift disappearance of his companion with the automobile, the roll of notes slipped into the surgeon's hands “for all the expenses”—these were details that the doctor was able to relate, and which threw but little light upon the origin of the crime. For crime, in the doctor's opinion, it undoubtedly was.

“A violent blow—if it had fallen anywhere else, it would probably have killed him. There was a fresh hemorrhage early this morning—he lost a lot of blood, poor chap. That was when I first saw the wound.”

“If there's any danger, I must be told at once,” said Father John. “He's a Catholic, you know.”

“I thought so. There's a medal round his neck—Madonna and the Sacred Heart. Do you wish to communicate with his people?”

“I don't think he has anybody belonging to him. His parents are dead—he was their only child. I've never heard him mention any relatives.”

“*Poveraccio!*” murmured the doctor.

He took leave of the priest then, for he had other patients who required attention, although none that intrigued him so much as this mysterious young Englishman. He had hoped that Father Ponsford, arriving so speedily from Rome, would have been able to throw some light upon the adventure, or at least upon the events that had led up to it. He was very little wiser, and he questioned the desirability of keeping silence to the authorities about the matter. The crime should surely be denounced to the *Questura*.

“If he had had that hemorrhage on his way here, he would certainly have died,” thought the doctor, as he went off upon his ceaseless rounds. “It was touch and go as it was.”

It was about a fortnight later, when Denis Lorimer's wound had almost healed, that Father John made plans for returning to Rome. He had stayed away as long as he could; his patient was now convalescent, having made a far more rapid recovery than could possibly have been foretold, and he did not feel that to prolong his own stay in Florence would serve any useful purpose.

But when he told Denis of his intention, he was horrified to perceive that the tears had gathered in his eyes. In another moment he was sobbing hysterically, almost like a child.

John Ponsford had an inborn aversion to anything that savored of lack of control. He was himself self-disciplined to a most unusual degree, and thus he had complete command over himself, his actions, gestures, and speech. No one had ever seen John Ponsford angry.

As he looked at Denis now, he had no contempt for his weakness; he had seen too many stricken nerveless men for that . . . But an immense compassion welled up in his heart. Denis was clinging to him as a man suffering shipwreck will cling to the only plank that offers him aid.

"You see, I've got my work to do. Otherwise I'd stay on. But you will be going to England now, won't you, Denis? If I were you, I should clear out as soon as possible. This has been an unfortunate business, and though your—friends—" he paused before uttering the word, "did their best to hush the whole thing up, there's always a danger of people talking."

"I'm not going till I've seen Camilla and heard from her own lips that she doesn't care for me any more!" Denis cried angrily through his sobs.

"I think I should leave Donna Camilla alone," said Father John.

"She may be very unhappy—she may be waiting

for me to make some sign! I can't be such a cur as to go away—without a word!"

"Donna Camilla is very young. And she is entirely under the control of her brother. It's sometimes said that he's harsh with her—I know nothing of that."

"And I could tell you," said Denis, "just how cruel and harsh and tyrannical he is!"

Almost unconsciously, he glanced significantly at his still-bandaged arm.

"Was that Pio Ascarelli's doing?" asked the priest.

"Yes—curse him! He's taken Camilla from me—he's tried to kill me!"

"Hush," said Father John very quietly. "You'll only make yourself ill if you go on like this. Ascarelli will never let you marry his sister if this is the way he's treated you. You must have offended him, for he showed you great hospitality in Rome."

Denis relapsed into silence.

"So the best thing for you to do is to leave the country as quickly and quietly as you can. If I can help you in any way—" He paused.

"Well, if you could lend me something—" said Denis, in a slightly awkward tone. "I've about come to the end of everything, you know."

He smiled—that charming attractive smile which so often allayed the very suspicions that his conduct or words had excited.

"But, my dear Denis—you were living *en prince!*" Father John expostulated.

"Yes, I know I was. I thought I'd have a run for my money for once. But these joy rides are short and sweet. Some of 'em play pretty high there, you know, and I'd won a bit when I was convalescing at Mentone. Dear old John," he went on, "there are no workhouses in Italy, and I'm not old enough to be eligible for the Little Sisters of the Poor!"

They both laughed.

It was not the time to deliver a lecture on thrift. Not many hearts would have been found hard enough to reprove the poor Cigale as callously as did the industrious Ant in the fable. And John Ponsford had a very kind and compassionate heart. Men who are most stern with themselves are often least so towards others. He was sorry for Denis, knowing that this confession of pennilessness must have hurt his pride.

"I'm going to be a beast, my dear Denis, and make conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Yes. I'll lend you the money with all the pleasure in the world, only you must promise me faithfully that you will leave Italy at once—directly you're able to move. You'd better not try to oppose Pio Ascarelli—or you may get something worse than he's given you already."

"I promise," said Denis reluctantly. "Many people," he added, with a rueful smile, "wouldn't attach much importance to my promises."

"But I, on the contrary, believe you implicitly," said Father John.

"Dear old John—that's awfully nice of you," said Denis with a grateful look.

"Perhaps you'll be able to go back to Sledwick eventually, now you're demobilized. You know the present Lord Farewether, don't you? He may be able to do something for you."

Denis shook his head.

"Oh, he was never a pal of mine. He's a hard beast—not a bit like his father—we never got on. And besides, I never knock at the same door twice."

John took out his check-book and a fountain pen and proceeded to write. The sum of money was a large one—larger than he could well afford, for he had been extravagant in almsgiving that year. It

would certainly necessitate the sacrifice of a journey to England in the summer, and he had greatly wished to go to Wanswater, where his mother and sister lived in one of the most delicious parts of the Lake district. He had not been there for several years, and lately he had received some rather imploring letters from Janet, who lived alone with their mother at the old Grange. But he might manage a short visit later on—in the autumn perhaps. And in any case he would not send that order for books he had just completed. There were lots of ways in which he could retrench. . . .

He handed the check to Denis, who looked at it and then flushed up to the roots of his dark hair.

“John! It’s too much—I can’t take it. . . . You’re a good Samaritan and no mistake.”

“You’ll want it,” said John; “things are pretty expensive in England now, and you may have to wait a bit before you find a job. Well, make haste and get well, Denis, and if you want anything you must always write to me.”

He left for Rome on the following day, feeling anxious and still a little worried about Lorimer. The wound had left him very weak, and he was not the man to find employment easily.

“I suppose he isn’t quite straight, and that’s why he’s always getting let down,” he thought to himself. And then this crowning folly of his, to try and marry Donna Camilla Ascarelli! Pio no doubt had been deceived by that appearance of wealth which Denis had displayed during his sojourn in Rome last winter, and had admitted him somewhat imprudently to an intimate footing in his house. It had all ended most disastrously for Denis, and he would probably carry the disability consequent upon his wound, until his dying day.

Denis was not a good correspondent. He wrote one or two brief letters to John Ponsford, giving him

details of his progress towards recovery. One of these was posted at Florence, the second at Paris, as if to show him that he had faithfully fulfilled the condition laid down by John. And then the letters ceased, and Father John in the midst of his studies in Rome found time to feel very anxious about Lorimer. He wondered what he was doing, what had become of him. He was the kind of man who so often goes under.

In Rome, too, John heard the wildest rumors concerning Denis's visit to the Villa Ascarelli, and of the subsequent events that had occurred there. He had tried to elope with Camilla because Pio had refused his consent to their marriage; they had been discovered just in time, and a duel had been fought between the two men in which Denis had been severely wounded. This was the favorite version, and it was further reported that Camilla, having discovered the hour and place of the rendezvous, had appeared upon the scene and tried to fling herself between the two men. But there were other versions no less disquieting. It was said that Pio had smiled upon the young Englishman till he had discovered something disgraceful in his past life, and then had insulted him, telling him to leave the house. Angry words had passed, Denis had struck at his host, and a duel had been fought in the ilex-wood above the Villa at an early hour on the following morning. Denis, in a dying condition, had been spirited away almost immediately in a hired automobile, and the whole affair had been cleverly concealed from the authorities, lest Camilla's name should get into the papers.

John could not believe that any of these versions was strictly accurate, but he felt too that there must be a substratum of truth in them which in no way reflected creditably upon Denis Lorimer. But sometimes he saw Donna Camilla driving in the Borghese

Gardens or on the Pincian Hill in the evening and was struck by her youth, her beauty, and her air of pensive sadness. Then he heard of her betrothal to a young Italian Prince, and the wedding took place in the early autumn, very quietly, owing to the comparatively recent death of the bride's mother.

John wondered if Denis had heard all this news from Rome. But Denis had completely vanished and gave no sign. . . .

## CHAPTER VIII

**D**USK—the warm rich-colored dusk of late autumn—had fallen upon London. Blue and orange in that deepening veil struggled for the mastery. There was still a glimmer of amber light in the west. The streets were crowded; the noisy traffic pursued its swift endless way; the pedestrians jostled against each other, old and young, rich and poor, in that fine democracy of the Road.

The nearer approaches to a great railway terminus were blocked by a long line of cabs, taxis, carriages and motor-cars. Rows of porters stood there in readiness to deal with the luggage, handling trunks and boxes of all sizes and weights with the same admirable ease that they might have accorded to a parcel. Trucks were rapidly filled; men, women and children descended from their various vehicles and were swiftly lost to sight in the crowd. A sense of hurry and nervous rush seemed to affect most of these departing passengers, as if they feared that however early they might be, they were still not early enough to secure the best seats—those corner seats facing the engine which every self-respecting Briton demands for himself when traveling.

It was a characteristic scene and a significant one, for few people set out on a journey without some sense of anticipation, some latent excitement.

A man dressed as a priest, carrying a bag in his hand, came thoughtfully along the platform towards the book-stall. He was young—still probably in his early thirties, and his face and movements were alike youthful. He was tall, with very blue eyes that seemed to be half-unconsciously observing something that was far off. It had been John Ponsford's look since boyhood, and it gave to his face an expression that was at once attentive and slightly mystical.

He was stopped on his way to the book-stall by a hand laid suddenly upon his shoulder, while a man's voice exclaimed: "John! What a piece of luck!"

The electric light was slightly obscured by the dark deposit of London smoke which clung to the great globes that enclosed it. For the hundredth part of a minute John was puzzled. The face looking down into his was shaded by a soft hat drawn low over the brows. He was aware of dark smoldering eyes gazing into his with a pleasant friendly expression that yet held something sardonic in it.

"Why, Denis?" said Father Ponsford. He held out his hand and grasped Denis's warmly. "I'd no idea you were in England. I think you were quite the last person in the world I expected to see." He walked on with Lorimer by his side, wondering why he felt so little glad to see him again.

"I want to get some papers. I'm on my way home—to Wanswater," he remarked, as they approached the book-stall.

There are certain names which, apart from any beauty or music of their own, are apt to haunt our memories with a joy or sorrow that can alike be poignant. Lorimer could always remember the way

in which John uttered the word "Wanswater." He knew, from his manner of doing so, that it held what must be very dear to him.

"I shall sleep at Kenstone, so as not to keep them up late, and go on home in the morning," continued John.

"Lucky chap!" said Lorimer, smiling still.

John was selecting papers—a heterogeneous lot, as Denis, watching him, decided. *The Tablet*, *Universe*, *Catholic Times* and *Country Life*, together with some evening papers of varying hues . . . He stopped and then added the *Queen*. He remembered that Janet liked the *Queen*.

He looked up quickly and said:

"Lucky?"

"I mean—to have a home—people waiting for you. All the sort of thing we often hate when we've got it, and yet when we haven't it's—!" He shrugged his high thin shoulders.

"I've always loved Wanswater," said John simply. "But of course it wouldn't be the same thing without my mother and Janet."

"Janet?"

"Yes, my sister, the only unmarried one. She lives with my mother, you know—the only one out of all the eight of us that does."

He gathered up his papers and flung down a ten shilling note. Then he put the change loose into his pocket and turned away.

"You've not told me yet where you're going to," he reminded Denis.

Lorimer's face was almost tragic then, in its sudden bitterness.

"I only wish I could tell you!"

"But I mean—you must be on your way somewhere?" John glanced at the shabby suitcase his friend was carrying in his right hand. . . . He noticed, too, for the first time, that the left arm hung

stiff and straight from the shoulder, with an inert powerless look.

"I thought of looking up an old cousin of mine who lives in Cumberland. She may shut her doors on me when I get there, but I don't think she will. There's a tradition that she was once in love with my father!"

He said the words with a light contempt. Contempt for the woman who could have loved such an unworthy object as his own father so much as to be ready to bestow a sentimental and vicarious kindness upon his son. Contempt for himself because he was ready to use such sentimental weakness for his own ends.

"I was just going to spend my remaining substance on a third-class ticket when I caught sight of you. So I bought a penny one for the platform instead and followed you."

John stopped and looked at him.

"Haven't you been able to find anything to do?"

"Do I look fit to undertake any job?" Denis counter-questioned.

John observed him critically and felt assured that he did not. Lorimer's clothes were shabby, and he was very thin. His cheeks were hollow, and the bones on his temples were plainly visible.

"You're going by my train? We might travel together as far as Kenstone."

"It's a gamble of course. She may refuse to see me."

A thought suddenly occurred to John Ponsford. He was always on the alert to observe even in little things the guiding Hand of Almighty God, and ever eager to obey Its slightest gesture. What if Lorimer had been flung across his path to-night for a purpose? What if this were a sign that he should show solicitude for this straying sheep? John tried to put the thought from him; it was not a welcome

one. He was looking forward to spending some very quiet weeks at Wanswater with his mother and sister, of whom he had had but rare and brief glimpses since his ordination to the priesthood a few years before. He was a convert, had been the son of a Dean of the Church of England, and had even for a couple of years been a clergyman himself. His mother had disapproved of his conversion, and he knew that she feared his influence upon Janet. There were certain things connected with his homecoming that made him believe it would be far better to arrive unaccompanied by a stranger who was totally unknown to his home circle, and who, as a Catholic, was unfortunately not particularly edifying.

John was standing now in the compartment he had chosen, arranging his small luggage upon the rack. Below him on the platform stood Lorimer's tall lean rather gaunt figure. He felt the man was waiting for something. Perhaps—the offer of a loan . . . John colored slightly as the thought entered his mind, almost as if it had been a guilty one. Yet Denis was, by his own showing, down on his luck. A sudden pity welled up in John's heart for this forlorn failure; it broke down all those objections which had so recently seemed quite insuperable. He said, almost apologetically:

“Would you—would you like to come to Wanswater with me for a few days? I'm sure my mother will be delighted. . . .” John Ponsford spoke hesitatingly, but he watched Lorimer's face, now raised to his with an eager incredulous look. Then it was almost as if a veritable sob of relief escaped from him, for something seemed to catch his breath as he made reply: “Oh, do you really mean it, John? Shouldn't I be awfully in the way?”

“No—I shall love to have you. Look sharp and get your ticket. He took out a leather case and

drew forth some Treasury notes, thrusting them into Lorimer's hand.

Denis took them and rushed off to get his ticket. John sank back in his seat. His action had been swift, impetuous, and utterly against his better judgment, and yet he had felt that he could not refuse to hold out a helping hand to this fellow Catholic. But he was obliged to look the consequences of his action steadily in the face, and it was at best an uncomfortable process, full of misgivings and forebodings. There was no time to warn his mother. She had always been the soul of hospitality during his father's lifetime. "Open house" had been the order of the day; they had seldom been alone. But the company had been strictly and almost exclusively clerical. English clergy of all ranks and of varying views, from bishops to curates, had visited them, accompanied by wives of all ranks too, titled and smart, provincial and shabby. . . . The Dean, a man of liberal views and strong will, had welcomed them all in his hearty, slightly boisterous way.

But Mrs. Ponsford did little entertaining in these days. She was always ready to receive her sons and daughters, their wives, husbands, and children, whenever they wished to come, but apart from her own family she had few visitors. And what would she say to this shabby derelict? No doubt she would have preferred to see her son quite alone after an absence of several years. His first visit of any length since he had become a priest, and then to bring with him this slightly damaged-looking, out-at-elbows fellow Catholic! But the thing was done now, and he must make the best of it. If the situation proved intolerable he could make some excuse to go away for a few days, taking Denis with him. That occasional theatricality about the man secretly annoyed John Ponsford. It made him seem not quite genuine, and he could not blind himself to the

effect it would inevitably produce upon his mother. John was sensitive about his mother's opinion; he was a devoted son, and had been grateful to her because her disapprobation of the course he had taken had never permitted her to change in the least degree towards him. There had never been any storms of protest such as tore the hearts of so many converts; on the contrary, he had discussed the matter with her in each of its progressive stages. She had always known that he was unlike her other sons, Stephen, Giles and Curtis. He had none of the calm conservative tone that had characterized his father; he could never have faithfully followed a mere family tradition; he must seek for himself even if the quest promised anguish. John had reached this point in his meditation when Denis Lorimer reappeared. He put his suitcase on the rack, awkwardly in one-handed fashion, but resisting John's attempt to help him. Then he sat down in the corner seat opposite to Father Ponsford.

"What about food?" said Denis.

"We can dine on the train," said John.

As a matter of fact he had provided himself with sandwiches, for he was a man to whom personal comfort counted for little. But he spoke on the spur of the moment, having become suddenly and poignantly aware of the lurking appeal in Lorimer's eyes.

Hunger . . . Again he felt some confusion at his own readiness in discerning the man's thoughts with such peculiar accuracy. Body and soul were alike starving. He took down his bag and handed a packet of sandwiches to Denis.

"You'd better have some of those. Dinner won't be just yet."

There was a clamorous slamming of doors, and an ear-piercing shriek from the engine. With a faint tremor that shook that long line of linked carriages,

the train moved slowly forward, and then pursued its swift way through London, past lighted suburbs and into the long spaces of darkness that hid the northern fields from their sight.

And Denis was sitting there, devouring the food with an eagerness he did not try to conceal.

"I wonder how long it is since he had anything to eat," John thought.

All through the journey northwards, they did not speak of Rome. John had not the courage to ask him if he had heard of Donna Camilla's marriage to the young Prince Forlì. It was a relief to him when he saw Denis stretch out his long limbs and fall peacefully asleep.

## CHAPTER IX

**JANET PONSFORD** was restless, and her mother, aware of the fact, was exerting herself not to comment upon it. It was an exercise of self-control on her part, for anything that resembled the process she was wont to stigmatize as "fidgeting," wrought havoc with her own nerves.

The pale illumination of an autumn morning that was mild and sunny irradiated the square paneled room at Wanswater Grange in which Mrs. Ponsford usually sat. It was called the library, because the late Dean's books were arranged there and practically covered one side of the walls. They were not interesting books, nor did their solid gloomy bindings render them exteriorly attractive. They were chiefly theological; many of them, collected sermons of long-forgotten Protestant divines. A few were commentaries.

Mrs. Ponsford and her daughter were waiting for

John's arrival. In his letter, posted in London two days before, he had told them he intended to sleep at Kenstone so as not to arrive late at night. "Dear considerate boy," Mrs. Ponsford had murmured. John, the youngest of her eight children, was still in her eyes a child.

It was now nearly twelve o'clock and he had not come. Something must have delayed him in Kenstone. His non-arrival accounted for Janet's imperfectly restrained restlessness. She sat idle by the window. Mrs. Ponsford was near the fire, knitting. She glanced at her daughter from time to time. No doubt she shared that slight misgiving that was teasing her own mind with regard to John. He was to be with them this time in a new guise, that of a Catholic priest. Last time he had visited them, it had been only for a few hurried hours before his ordination. Would they find him greatly changed? Mystical adventures set their mark upon a man just as surely as physical ones. The strange impetuous energy, the flood of charity for others, the burning zeal of this the youngest and least typical of all the Ponsfords, would now be diverted to and concentrated upon the one channel. The impetus of the whole character would no doubt gather strength and purpose from it.

She had never discussed the matter with her daughter. But both had secretly determined from the first that John should see no difference in them. Both in their own way adored him. Janet's adoration had, however, a pathetic quality which her mother's lacked.

Mrs. Ponsford could have traced John's spiritual odyssey step by step. He possessed less of the family quality which Sara, Stephen Ponsford's brilliant American wife, had nicknamed "Ponsfordism" than any of the others. You could catch glimpses of it still, despite his sixteen years of married life

with such a singularly un-Ponsfordy person as Sara, in Stephen himself. It was strong in Curtis, too strong; it had helped him to embitter a life that had not been too fortunate. Strongest of all in Giles, now a Vicar in the South of Devonshire, but that was his wife's fault, Sara used to say. She had asked to be a door-mat and she had got just what she wanted. Mrs. Ponsford's daughters, the widowed Lady Bradney who had made the match of the family, Louisa Dacreson, and Margaret Fortune, all possessed something of it after their measure. In Janet's rather weak character there was no trace of it to be found.

John had begun, like Giles, as a curate in the Church of England. He had been soundly trained by his father in those Liberal Broad Church views which had made the late Dean—a typical Ponsford—so famous. He was at Oxford when his father died—the Dean had died rather suddenly—and while there, he fell in with a party of young High Churchmen who burned incense in their rooms and held a mysterious service called *Complin*. A confusion of ideas and aims became at once perceptible to John, who had drunk in so dutifully the Broad Church teaching of the late Dean. He had accepted it much as he had accepted his father's opinions on politics, free trade, and modern literature. The Dean had always spoken as if he really believed that no sane man could hold views different from his own, and perhaps it was this quality which lay at the root of all Ponsfordism. John was a little disturbed at first, to find himself with men who held entirely opposite views on the subject of religion, and were equally certain that they were the only plausible and possible ones. But he went on with his studies, did remarkably well both in "Mods" and "Greats," was considered one of the finest classical scholars of his year, and finally

went down with a passion of regret in his heart. He was ordained subsequently, and went to Brighton as curate. Brighton was ever the home of ritualism and John's position at first puzzled and then alarmed him. He found it difficult to convince himself, as other men seemed so easily to be able to convince themselves, that he could be a Catholic in a Protestant Church. Explanations and discussions only served to increase in his own eyes the extreme and perilous falseness of his position. After a year or two of unutterable misery, he went abroad to France and Italy, and in the ancient and splendid cathedrals and churches of those countries he found all that for which he had been unconsciously seeking. He gave up his curacy, vanished for a time, and when he next appeared at Wanswater he was already a Catholic. From the first, his eyes had been fixed upon the priesthood. He was ordained priest during the years of the War, acting first as a chaplain in France, and then returning to Rome to finish his studies.

Mrs. Ponsford disapproved, chiefly because she considered her son's action was a slur on his father's memory. Why couldn't he have been satisfied like Giles? But she was not narrow. She only feared the effect of his conversion upon Janet. They were to be together for the first time for any lengthy period since his conversion. They would have endless opportunities of seeing each other, of discussing the subject. Perhaps she had better give John a hint. But that would be to reveal her own fears.

She looked at Janet. Poor Janet—sitting there with her hands folded idly in her lap. She had already reached the age of thirty-five, and had always been considered too delicate to "think about marriage." Life had also withheld from her any experience of love. She was slightly old-maidish in appearance, and this made her look more than her

age. Her clothes were never quite in the fashion, for except just during the season, few smart people were to be seen in the environs of Wanswater. She had pretty hair, with a tinge of dark red in its brown, but she wore it dressed in a plain unbecoming manner. Her eyes were blue like John's, but they were more wistful than keen. They were unimaginative eyes, and had the innocent, unawakened look of a child's. She had never been considered pretty, yet there was something not wholly unattractive about her face; it had the peculiar refinement that springs from purity of vision and complete selflessness. John found her charming. He had always had a great deal to tell her, from the time when he had come home from his first school for the holidays, unfolding to her eager sympathetic ears his vast plans for the future. But he had had less opportunity of being communicative about those stormy spiritual experiences through which he had more recently passed to a safe shelter, and perhaps in her heart she had understood the reason of his silence concerning them.

It had never been a Ponsford habit to speak of intimate spiritual things. One went to church; one discussed the singing—how shockingly out of tune the choir sang this morning; and the sermon—what a tiresome monotonous voice the new curate had!—and that was all. . . . Only one sentence from John's letters had given Janet any clue to her brother's happiness after taking that step of which so many of the family had darkly predicted ill. "I have found all that I hoped to find, only so much, *much* more." Yet he had been brought up, as she herself had been, on the Dean's immense contempt for "Rome" and all that it stood for. How any one in their senses! . . . That was how he had invariably begun his energetic diatribes. But John had freed himself from the tyranny of ancient

prejudice. He would learn for himself. He went to the Door and knocked. And, as slowly the door opened to admit him to the freedom of that spiritual city, he found within an unimaginable holiness, a beauty, an unmeasured security. That first sense of complete and intimate approach to the One Whom for so many years he had tried blindly to serve, had never left him. And in security of faith there was a spiritual peace which the anxiety and fret of daily life could neither touch nor disturb.

“Janet, you are idle this morning. Haven’t you any needlework to do?”

Mrs. Ponsford looked over her spectacles at Janet. Her own white plump capable hands manipulating knitting-pins and white wool with extraordinary, almost mechanical rapidity.

There was something forlorn and uncompanionable about Janet, she thought. Something that, in moments of tension like the present, was apt to get on one’s nerves. So unnatural, too, for a young woman to sit with idle hands. Novel-reading was not permitted in the morning. It had been a wholesome schoolroom rule, and Mrs. Ponsford had never thought it advisable to relax it.

“No, Mamma,” said Janet. She was looking out of the window, her ears astrain for the sound of wheels. What would Johnny be like now? Would it all have changed him so very much? Those terrible scenes in France during the War? And then to be a priest—to say Mass . . . She felt as if he must have passed through deep, flooding, but withal comforting waters whither she could not follow him.

“You can go on with that crossover. The gray crochet one—it’s in my wool bag. You’ll find the hook there—the larger one of the two. You must think of the cold shoulders, Janet, the rheumatic

shoulders!" Mrs. Ponsford smiled at her daughter, but in the brisk stimulating tones one recognized the voice of authority—the voice of a woman who had ruled her eight children, her household, and her servants, kindly and wisely, but firmly. And every one had possessed complete faith in that governance except perhaps this sad-looking little daughter.

Janet rose with perfect meekness and fetched the crossover and crochet-hook from the capacious wool-bag that lived upon its appointed shelf in the delicate old Sheraton corner cupboard. Then, resuming her seat by the window, she began to crochet, slowly, clumsily, with unskilful fingers. She hated crochet, but it was easier to learn than knitting, although the dull monotony of it was loathsome. She disliked with an almost fierce aversion the "feel" of the coarse gray wool between her fingers.

Mrs. Ponsford glanced at her with an approbation that was blended with contempt.

"Poor Janet," she thought, "she's the only one without brains. Still, I can't have her idle."

A clock struck with deep reverberating chime. A quarter past twelve. Perhaps he wouldn't come home in time for lunch, after all. . . .

"John's late—perhaps he wasn't able to get to Kenstone last night," said Janet.

But even as she spoke, they heard a sound of wheels coming heavily over the moist gravel drive. There had been rain in the night. Janet had lain awake, listening to its eerie splashing against the windows, to the cry of the wind, so like a human cry sometimes.

She made a movement now as if to rise. She wanted to run out into the hall and greet John, and ascertain for herself that he wasn't changed—that he cared for her as much as ever. But Mrs. Ponsford did not move, nor did her hands cease their

rapid and practised and intricate activity. They heard voices, footsteps, the opening and closing of doors, then the library door was flung open and John Ponsford, looking very tall in his long black overcoat, came into the room.

Behind him was another figure, a man, taller even than John, and lean and spare. He wore his black hair brushed off his forehead in a singular manner, and his pale face was lit up by a pair of dark intelligent observant eyes.

"Mother—I've brought my friend, Mr. Denis Lorimer, with me. You said you and Janet were alone, so I knew there'd be heaps of room. Denis—my mother and sister."

John embraced his mother, and then Lorimer stepped forward, having watched the little scene with a kind of sardonic envy.

Now, it was Janet's turn. She felt herself gathered by John's strong arms as she lifted her face for his kiss. She even trembled a little with excitement. Oh, why had she tormented herself with this fear that he might have changed? It was one of those morbid imaginings of hers that he would have been the very first to condemn. She clung to him. . . . She had almost forgotten the presence of this stranger. "Dear, dear old Jane!" she heard him murmur.

Lorimer stepped gracefully across the room to where Janet was standing, holding the crossover of harsh gray wool in her left hand.

"How do you do, Miss Ponsford?" She heard Lorimer's voice then for the first time; it was languid, she thought, and rather womanish. She felt a little awkward and bewildered. John hadn't said anything about bringing a friend with him. And the name, Denis Lorimer—such a pretty name!—was quite unknown to her.

"Janet," said Mrs. Ponsford, "you must go and

tell Hodge to have the blue room prepared for Mr. Lorimer."

"Yes, Mamma," said Janet.

She went to the Sheraton cupboard, and replaced the crossover and crochet-hook in the capacious wool-bag. Everything in its Place—the nursery rule still held, and it had become second nature to her. Then she went quietly out of the room, glad to get away from the eager questioning gaze of those brilliant dark eyes. Amused, enthusiastic eyes that belied the slightly bitter expression of the well-molded lips. She had never seen eyes like that before. One might easily imagine them to be the windows from which an imprisoned soul looks out upon a world of suffering. Some curious fancy of the kind was in Janet's mind as she went out of the room.

Who was he? John had never mentioned the name in any of his letters from Rome. Was he perhaps a Catholic, too? Were all John's friends Catholics? Her curiosity concerning John's religion was passionate but secret; she was often afraid that her mother might discern it. Would John ever speak of it to her intimately? She longed to know more, to lift the veil that seemed suddenly to have dropped between them.

She went in search of Hodge, once nurse and now confidential maid and general factotum. Her faithfulness and devotion were constantly extolled by all the members of the family except Janet, to whom it seemed, indeed, that there was something sinister in those very qualities. It made her think of the ivy that clings to a tree, and slays even while it clings. That was, however, one of her secret wicked thoughts which she never breathed aloud even to John in those moments of desperate self-revelation when he had always known just what to say to soothe and comfort her.

"Hodge, Father John's brought a friend with

him—a Mr. Lorimer. He's to have the blue room, and yes, I think you'd better light the fire." She made the last suggestion timidly. But the day was chilly despite its fairness, and yesterday's rain had left a dampness in the air. She had an idea, too, that this man must be accustomed to comfort and would be little likely to share Johnny's austere views about mortification. Having given this order, received in silent acquiescence by Hodge, she went up to her own room.

## CHAPTER X

**A**FTER the death of her husband, a powerful, irritable, dominating man who had endeavored to set the seal of his own personality upon each of his eight children, Mrs. Ponsford had expressed a wish to return to Wanswater, in the Lake District of Westmorland, where her girlhood had been spent. It had been suggested by more than one of her children in the first days of her widowhood that a flat in London would make an ideal abode for herself and Janet. But Mrs. Ponsford had never lived in a flat, and indeed to many people of her generation there is still something almost lacking in dignity about such a circumscribed place of residence. Still less did such modern appliances as electric light, telephones, gas-rings, hot-water-circulators, and radiators appeal to her. She wanted a house, a roomy rambling old house with a large garden, and cedars on the lawn. She found these desiderata in Wanswater Grange, and thither she had departed some ten years before this story opens, accompanied by Janet, John (then at Oxford), Hodge, and a diminished staff of servants. Janet was to be the

companion of her declining years, for even at the age of twenty-five there had of course been no idea of Janet's ever marrying. It was quite characteristic of Mrs. Ponsford that she did not consult Janet's opinion in regard to the proposed change, although she was one of the principal people to be affected by it.

Mrs. Ponsford had settled down quite happily in her new abode, perfectly contented with the modified interests and activities it offered to her. Grandchildren came thither for change of air, or when their parents wished to go abroad, or to recoup after infantile maladies. In the early days Curtis's children, during the absence of their father in India, had spent their holidays at the Grange. There were two of them, a boy and a girl, and they were the eldest of all the grandchildren, for Curtis, the third son, had made a very youthful and imprudent marriage when he first went to India as a subaltern. His wife died soon after the birth of little Curtis, as he was still called in the family though he was now a full-fledged subaltern. Molly, the daughter, had been married now for some months to a young officer called Charles Firth. But even in those early days they had shocked their grandmother indescribably by the mingled dislike and contempt they had shown when speaking of their father, and of those particular qualities in him which made up what Sara had called "Ponsfordism." But Curtis was said to have been a harsh father, and Sara—ever averse to authority in its sterner aspects—took the children's part and was wont to say, "No wonder!"

Mrs. Ponsford did not feel quite at ease with her grandchildren, of whom there were a great many. They seemed to her so unlike, in disposition and outlook, her own well-trained, highly-disciplined children. They were for the most part modern and quite fearless, with bright engaging manners. With

the exception of Curtis's two they were on terms of friendly comradeship with their parents. There was scarcely a hint of Ponsfordism in the rising generation, except among Giles's brood, who were regarded as provincial by their cousins and rather despised for their lack of *savoir faire*.

Stephen, the eldest of the family, had married a wealthy American, and like Curtis he had two children, a boy and a girl. The latter, who was called Pamela, was perhaps the most modern and typically up-to-date of all the grandchildren. She was fifteen now, and had inherited her mother's beauty and something too of her wit, her clear vision, her inability to call a spade by anything but its right name. Janet had often found herself envying this lovely attractive child upon whom so much love was lavished, so much money spent. Her very education was conducted on the most expensive lines. She had a real gift for music, and during her holidays was often taken abroad to hear good music and to have violin lessons from celebrated players, in order to supplement the training she received in London, and the knowledge she acquired from a constant attendance at the opera in her mother's box during the season. Sara spent as much time and thought upon her daughter's clothes as upon her own. And Stephen, who had been brought up in all the traditions of a Ponsford, never interfered with any part of Pamela's education.

Louisa Dacreson, the eldest daughter, had half a dozen children, girls for the most part who possessed modern ideas about independence, and wills that were strong enough to put their theories into practice. Louisa had quite lost control over them during the War, when they had worked in offices, acted as V. A. D.'s in hospitals, and even driven motor-ambulances. The second daughter, Violet, Lady Bradney, having given her husband the re-

quired heir had ceased from further maternal effort. "Not at all a satisfactory boy," Mrs. Ponsford used to murmur, "but then Violet has always spoiled him. I warned her how it would be and so did your dear father." She preferred Giles's brood; they were, she used to allege, much more like what Stephen and Giles and Louisa had been, nicely-behaved children with a wholesome fear of parental authority. Margaret Fortune, the third daughter, had three girls, the most traveled and cosmopolitan of all the grandchildren, as their father had held several posts as military attaché at foreign embassies, and they could speak with perfect fluency several European languages, gifts which had obtained for them, despite their youth, excellent posts in the Censor's office during the War. "So much more dignified than driving a motor-van," Mrs. Ponsford used to say. Yet with them also—the children of wealthy and indulgent parents—the old lady felt secretly ill at ease. They shared the life of their parents and seemed to demand constant amusement, the means to follow expensive pursuits and hobbies; in a word, they belonged to a new world, costly, extravagant, luxurious. The compulsory economies and austerities and limitations brought about by the War had only served, as it seemed, to give these young people a keener zest for the pursuit of all those pleasures which peace permitted them to enjoy.

The difference between them and her own children seemed to old Mrs. Ponsford a vital and even a terrible thing.

She was now seventy years of age, being exactly twenty years older than her eldest son. She seldom left the Grange, having a preference for her own four walls, where there was certainly comfort of a solid antiquated kind to be found. She was rather in appearance like a comfortable sleek white cat that prefers its own hearth and would resist the

kindest attempts to dislodge it. Her habits were regular and had changed but little during the last fifty years, except that there were now no children to demand her care. Every morning, weather permitting, she took a walk in the garden and sometimes even went as far as the village, leaning on the faithful if bony arm of Hodge. Every afternoon she drove for two hours, in an open or closed carriage (according to the season) drawn by a single quiet horse and guided by an ancient coachman who was very deaf. Nor did Janet ever leave home except so rarely that it hardly counted. It was a tradition in the family that all excitement was bad for her, increasing that tendency to heart attacks from which she had now for many years periodically suffered. She had hardly ever been separated from her mother, and she did not even stay with her married sisters, although Violet Bradney repeatedly invited her to do so.

The Grange was a low and rambling white house, built of the dark slate that is so typical of Westmorland, but whitewashed because Mrs. Ponsford on first coming to live there had found its sombre exterior depressing. Sara had condemned the step unhesitatingly; she said one might just as well have whitewashed the Tower of London! . . . Originally it had been quite a small building, but it had been enlarged and developed from time to time to suit the needs or caprices of its various owners. Judging by the results, it might be conjectured that domestic rather than artistic reasons had determined these excrescences, or "wings" as Mrs. Ponsford preferred to call them. Much overgrown with creepers—always an insult to really beautiful architecture, while tender and often gracious in its softening effect upon inferior buildings—the Grange presented in these latter days an appearance that was rather charming. It stood on a low and partially wooded

eminence overlooking the lake of Wanswater at almost its narrowest point. In the distance the rugged shapes of the Eastern Pikes—that splendid range of inaccessible-looking mountains—were ranged against the sky, clear and beautiful in fine weather, dark and stern after rain, and often hiding themselves completely behind relentless seas of cloud that seemed to stoop to swallow them up. To the west the long and sloping shoulder of Wansdale Raise lifted itself from the green valley and ended in a remote blunt summit that at sunset was wont to display wonderful pansy tones against a golden sky.

The place was undoubtedly beautiful, set in perhaps the loveliest and most romantic scenery in England, but its solitude made itself felt—a solitude so intense it was almost sinister.

Certainly there was nothing to excite Janet in those remote surroundings. She might, when she first came thither, a grave wistful-eyed girl of twenty-five, have conceivably felt something of the restlessness common to young wild things enclosed in cages, but if she had done so, she gave no sign of it. She was silent too, as if something of the quality that so characterized her surroundings had fallen upon her. She was still a little afraid of her mother, for the complete control which Mrs. Ponsford had exercised over her in nursery days had never been relaxed. She had been still more afraid of her father, who had regarded her as obstinately and wilfully stupid. She was so unlike the rest of those gay, shouting, laughing, squabbling, irrepressible children, who were nevertheless so well-disciplined and subjected deliberately to privations in the matter of food and warmth such as only stern necessity compels children of the present day to undergo. Cold rooms and cold water, chilblained hands and feet, were the order of the day

in winter. The food was plain and not very appetizing, except to ravenously hungry people. To go supperless to bed was no rare thing. Janet could even now remember the long, long walks—far beyond her meager strength—which had been the daily torment of her childhood, when she had been constantly chidden by an irate Hodge for “lagging” behind. She often could not eat the food, and dreadful cold remains were put before her at supper by the same inexorable disciplinarian. And if she failed a second time, harsher measures were sometimes adopted. Or perhaps Hodge would say with pursed lips and a grieved expression to Mrs. Ponsford, “Miss Janet has been very naughty again to-day ma’am.” “Then I can’t kiss you good-night, Janet,” her mother would say. That was terrible—to see her mother coming in and going her nightly rounds when the children were in bed. First Janet could hear her go into the next room where Louisa and Violet slept. A little murmur of conversation, the sound of kisses, and then the brisk step would enter the smaller room, still called the night-nursery and shared by Margaret and Janet. Janet used to lie there praying passionately that her mother would relent just this once. But after lingering a little with Margaret—always a favorite with her parents—Mrs. Ponsford would leave the room without so much as a glance towards Janet’s bed. The door closed upon that retreating figure, and Janet would hide under the bedclothes and weep the facile tragic tears of childhood. Was it so very wicked not to be able to eat mutton fat, or to keep up with the others when one was so very tired? It wasn’t as if she’d told a story or quarreled with any one. . . . Mrs. Ponsford was an excellent attentive mother to her brood of strong vigorous normal children, but she did not understand this pale little changeling.

And just as Janet had accepted her lot in child-

hood, so she continued to accept it in this, the fourth decade of her life. Things had not really altered very much. The Dean was dead, and his loud voice (he had always addressed her as if she were deaf) could no longer startle and terrify her. But her mother was there and Hodge was there, and their watchful vigilance never relaxed. She had long ago given up dreaming that marriage would some day afford a way of escape. Her sisters had all married, not too young, with the solitary exception of Violet Bradney, who went off at eighteen, and Janet had envied that wonderful independence which marriage seemed immediately to bestow upon them. Louisa was supposed not to get on too well with Algernon Dacreson, a selfish, self-concentrated man, as much like a Ponsford as was possible for a person who had not had the advantage of being one by birth. But she had her children, to whom she was devoted. No one had ever asked Janet in marriage, and of course she was too old now—and too delicate. But sometimes she would remember how a brilliant gifted woman older than herself had been lifted from a sofa in a darkened London room, and borne away by the vigorous arms of a passionate lover, to find life and joy and strength in the sweet climate of Italy. Her family, with no thought of cruelty, had condemned their poetess to die upon that sofa. Perhaps she would so have died if there had been no Robert Browning to love and rescue her. And she was to know fifteen years of married happiness before she closed her eyes to that vision of earthly love.

Janet repressed such thoughts as these whenever they came to her; she did not dwell upon them, for she felt that they must be wrong. She had been taught to Do her Duty in that State of Life. . . . But whenever she thought of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, something within her rebelled. She was

not gifted, it is true; her education had been a little neglected because she was slow, and the succession of governesses had preferred to give their attention to the brilliant Violet, the industrious Louisa, the charming Margaret, rather than to waste it upon one who would certainly never do them any credit. But she was younger and stronger than the poet-woman whom Browning had rescued—she had not lain on a guarded sofa in a darkened London room for five years. . . .

But her life was normally so quiet, so free from any change, that even the coming of this stranger to Wanswater had disturbed her equanimity. His singular face and brilliant eyes had arrested her attention. She could feel his eyes still upon her, with their intent, searching, yet careless gaze. Perhaps he had expected to find John's sister a pretty, young, and well-dressed woman. Not a dowdy, plain, elderly spinster with country-made clothes and shoes. Janet was under no illusion as to her own aspect, except that she judged it too harshly and was blind to her own good points—the delicate modeling of her face, the large wistful blue eyes, the slightly downward curve of her mouth when she smiled, that often redeems quite a plain face, giving it an individual unusual quality. Janet only saw her unfashionably dressed hair, so much less bright than it used to be, her dull skin, her oddly-made clothes—the work of a village dress-maker.

She wondered how long this man would stay at the Grange. She hoped it would not be for many days, for it was such a long time since Johnny had stayed with them, and she wanted to have him all to herself. In any case she wouldn't see a great deal of her brother, for of course Mrs. Ponsford would claim the lion's share of John's leisure. And then there were her own little duties—she wouldn't be

allowed to forego any of them in order to see more of Johnny. There would be the dreadful, inevitable walks and drives, the long hours spent "sitting" with her mother in the library, doing that useless crochet. And then if Mr. Lorimer were there, too, to claim his share of Johnny, there would be very little left for her . . .

She wanted achingly to talk to Johnny.

There was a sudden knock at the door, and John himself appeared upon the threshold.

"Darling Jane," he said smiling, "may I come in? There's just ten minutes before lunch."

And he came across the room and kissed her.

Janet mentally decided that if Johnny had changed at all in the course of those strange spiritual experiences through which he had passed, it had only been to become more pronouncedly perfect. His expression had always been sweet, with a kind of eager natural gaiety, but there was a new tenderness in his face now, as if the very charity of his heart had been passed through the fires of that mysterious crucible, and refined and perfected in the process. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him. A sudden peace possessed her heart. Like Hamlet's friends, John pulled out the stops of those he was with, but they were always the stops that made their music seem more sweet and vital. He was, she felt, especially made to deal with souls, to win them, to lead them, to . . . save them.

They sat down side by side near the window. On that golden autumn morning the lake looked almost blue. In the distance the dark shapes of the Eastern Pikes were like jagged, gigantic teeth against the clear colorless sky.

A little yacht went by; her white sails looked like a butterfly's wings poised upon the water.

"Well, what do you think of Lorimer?" asked John suddenly.

"Oh, I've hardly seen him, hardly spoken to him," said Janet.

"He's a bit down on his luck," said John carefully, "that's why I brought him. Otherwise, you know, I'd rather have been alone with you and the mater. But I met him on the Euston platform, and I persuaded him to come with me instead of looking up an old cousin of his somewhere in Cumberland. We were delayed this morning, getting a few things he wanted in Kenstone—that's why we were late."

This simple explanation secretly astonished Janet. She had not associated this graceful distinguished-looking man with any kind of financial stress. Like most women who have lived always at home and only dealt with a small dress-allowance, she knew practically nothing either of the worth of money or the cost of living. She had money of her own, for although the Dean had left her less than her sisters, with a reversionary interest, however, in part of her mother's jointure, Janet's modest inheritance brought her in six hundred a year. She could have claimed control over it had she so wished, but such an act of rebellion would have been impossible to Janet. When her mother said that with the exception of one tenth, which was to constitute her dress-allowance, her income was to be pooled with her own jointure for the upkeep of the Grange, Janet acquiesced without demur. No dream of independence had ever prompted her to claim her money.

"It'll do him good here," continued John, "you and the mater and this quiet house. And Mass every day. I must see about turning that attic into a little chapel. I've got a traveling altar and vestments with me, and all sorts of permissions and faculties."

"Then Mr. Lorimer's a Catholic, too?" asked Janet.

"Yes. That's really why he's got a special claim on me. And then we knew each other pretty well in Rome, and I saw a lot of him when he hurt his arm. Did you notice his left arm? He can hardly use it at all."

"Oh, was he wounded?" asked Janet.

"Not in the War," said John quickly; "he served three years, though, and then was invalided with shell-shock. I felt I ought to help him."

"Yes, yes, I see." She was thinking of Lorimer's strange face, unlike any other she had ever seen.

"He's an awfully good sort in many ways, but he's never had a chance. I'm thankful I ran up against him."

Janet listened in silence. John's description of his friend seemed to her slightly irreconcilable with his appearance and manner. For Lorimer did not look like a man who was down on his luck or who needed help, material or spiritual. Still less did he look like a man in acute financial stress. Rather, he had the air of one who quite naturally considers himself superior to his surroundings. There was almost a touch of arrogance in his demeanor, as if he were conferring a favor upon a dull solitary house like the Grange by condescending to visit it. And then . . . he had needed to buy things—she supposed at Johnny's expense—in Kenstone. . . .

"So you must be very nice to him, Jane, and make him feel thoroughly at home," continued John, with his charming smile. It was rather as if he were entreating her to overlook any idiosyncracies that his friend might chance to reveal.

"Won't he find it very dull here?" asked Janet.

"Oh, no; the quiet and the rest are just what

he needs. He's had a pretty strenuous time these last months." (John had learned a good deal of Denis's recent history on their way to Wanswater.) "And I know I can tell you all this without any fear of your repeating it."

"Oh, yes," said Janet. "And I'm glad you brought him. But I wish we could have had you to ourselves for a few days first."

"I should have liked that best, too," said John. "It's never quite the same with some one else here. And he isn't exactly your sort either—yours and the mater's. But I know you'll be kind to him—that's what he wants. Make him feel at home."

Janet said slowly: "But, Johnny dear, if it comes to that, we're not his sort either, are we? I could tell that, by the way he looked round the library. All in a moment, you know. Of course, Sara says our rooms want doing up dreadfully, and that we ought to burn the 'rubbish of years,' as she calls it."

"Never mind Sara. Because it's just the homeliness, the old-fashioned charm of the place—that he'll appreciate."

Janet did not answer. She tried to believe that John had accurately gauged his friend's character and needs, but she herself felt less assured as to their ability to offer him anything that he would really appreciate.

"Now tell me about yourself," she said. "There's so much I want to hear."

"Oh, there isn't much to tell. A priest's life isn't very eventful, and it means pretty hard work. But, then, it's more wonderful than one can tell on the spiritual side. Sometimes I can hardly realize it all, but, oddly enough, Lorimer helps me to do so. You see, if I weren't a priest, he wouldn't take things from me as he does. Things such as I have to say to him sometimes."

"You mean—he's your penitent?" she said, thrill-

ing a little as she thought of the two men as priest and penitent.

"No, not yet, and indeed I hope never. But I want to get him to the point of becoming some other priest's penitent. . . ." He bent a little towards her. "Dear old Jane, you must help, too, won't you? You'll make him feel at home, as if he were wanted? He's absolutely alone in the world, and he's never had a sister of his own."

No one ever called her Jane except this beloved brother. The two youngest of a long family, they had formed a little group to themselves and were intimates from childhood. Indeed, as little children they had been inseparable. Janet was two years his senior, but she had been backward and delicate and John had ever taken the lead. Perhaps no one else had ever treated her so completely as if she were a normal human being. If only for that reason, he would certainly have earned her undying gratitude.

"Yes, yes, Johnny," she promised him now, eagerly.

## CHAPTER XI

WHEN the gong sounded for luncheon, Janet went downstairs. She felt timid and nervous, and yet was determined to do her best to make Lorimer feel both welcome and at home. He was in the library with her mother and John when she entered it. At luncheon she sat opposite to him. Fortunately, there was no need for her to talk—unless she were actually addressed—for Mrs. Ponsford was very conversational and liked to "hold the floor." She talked easily and copiously and continuously. References were made to the Dean, his

unforgotten work, his fame, his popularity. Even Hodge's long and faithful service was touched upon during the brief absence of Watson—the aged manservant—from the room. Lorimer listened, and his brief comments showed that he was listening with the respectful attention which Mrs. Ponsford seemed to demand of her interlocutors. A Catholic born and bred, this kind of Church of England talk was new to him.

The meal was an excellent one, well cooked and admirably served. He found no fault with it for being slightly on the solid old-fashioned side. There were fried soles, roast mutton, apple tart and abundant cream. Only Janet, stimulated to a new discernment by John's words, noticed that Lorimer ate with a certain eagerness. Not exactly ravenously, but as if he were unusually hungry. Perhaps there hadn't been much time for breakfast in Kenstone. . . .

She was rather relieved when the meal came to an end. She had an idea that Lorimer wasn't quite so deeply interested in the late Dean's sayings and doings as he pretended to be. And how could he care to hear about Hodge? Mrs. Ponsford, however, obviously held a different opinion.

In the afternoon John took Lorimer out for a long walk, and Janet, as usual, drove with her mother. They had tea alone together, for John had not returned. Janet did not see them again before she went up to her room to perform that nightly operation known as "dressing for dinner." Her choice of garments was not a large one, for clothes played a negligible part in her life. She was always very neat and tidy, but her dresses were never very fashionable, even when quite new. They all looked alike, she used to think sometimes, half discontentedly. She was not extravagant, and seldom spent all her allowance, although Sara had once

laughed at its inadequacy, and said: "Why, my dear, I couldn't manage Pamela's hats and shoes on that!"

The black velveteen dress that Janet wore night after night throughout the autumn and winter, was already two years old. It was getting shabby—curiously enough, she had never noticed that till to-night—and the cut was, she knew, old-fashioned. It was modeled to the figure, instead of falling in loose straight lines. She wished she had listened to Sara last summer when she had come down for a few days and suggested that Janet should allow her maid to run up a tea-frock for her. "Just the kind of thing to slip on over your head for dinner when you're alone," Sara had said. "You'll find it most awfully useful." But Janet, actuated by some obscure motive of pride, had refused the offer. Her dresses were not nearly worn out yet, she explained. And even now she could hear Sara's merry laugh as she cried: "My dear, what an appalling idea! I should think not, indeed!"

Janet put on the black velveteen dress, which Hodge had laid in readiness upon the bed. She regarded herself discontentedly in the long mirror. Yes, it fitted too closely and the sleeves were tight. It showed her spare angular figure to disadvantage. The skirt was too full, and fell in folds about her feet. She thought of Sara's slim short skirts, her silk stockings and charming little shoes. She had a strong conviction that Mr. Lorimer would have preferred to meet a woman of Sara's type, smart, cheerful, gay, and very intelligent and good-humored. Sometimes, indeed, her acute intelligence almost frightened Janet. It hit so unerringly the right nail on the head, and sometimes it was the very nail whose existence one had tried to hide. . . .

She went down to the library. When she entered it she saw that Lorimer was sitting there alone. He

was not in evening dress, but wore the same dark blue suit in which he had traveled to Wanswater. She thought he looked distinguished and slightly arrogant. Surely John must have made a mistake about his poverty . . .

He looked younger, too, than Janet had thought him when he first arrived. He was perhaps several years younger than John. He hardly looked thirty, with the light from a rose-shaded oil lamp falling upon his face.

She was tongue-tied, and wished that her mother had been there with her glib easy chatter. Mrs. Ponsford could hold her own in that respect even against assembled grandchildren, all eager to pronounce their opinions.

Lorimer raised his eyes and looked at her. Rather a pathetic figure, this elderly sister of John's. Pretty eyes, though, and the hair was still a charming color, though he suspected it of having faded a good deal. Fancy being condemned to spend one's life in this forlorn spot with that garrulous masterful old woman! John had sometimes spoken to him of Janet with sincere enthusiastic admiration, and he had pictured her younger, brighter, more a woman of the world. Still, he was sure that she had qualities, the qualities of her type. Fidelity, devotion, kindness, unselfishness . . . He smiled as he drew a chair nearer the fire for her. But she did not take it. It was the chair consecrated for many years to the sole use of Mrs. Ponsford.

"Thanks—I'm not cold. I think I'll sit away from the fire."

"I'm afraid you must hate my being here," said Denis, with an engaging smile. "And to tell you the truth, I feel a most awful intruder. Naturally, you must have wanted to have John all to yourselves. Honestly, I'm most awfully sorry, but he didn't really leave me any choice. I had to come!"

It was so exactly what she felt must have happened, that she looked slightly guilty, as if he had read her thoughts. Her words were an eager stammered denial.

"Oh, you mustn't talk about being an intruder! We're very *very* glad to have you. Only it's so quiet here, especially at this time of year, and we have so few visitors . . . you may find it frightfully dull."

She spoke earnestly, mindful of John's injunctions that she was to try to make Denis feel welcome and at home.

"Oh, I shan't find it dull," he assured her. "I want rest and quiet and peace more than anything else in the world." (He might truthfully have added "and regular food," but he refrained.) "Just the very things I'm sure Wanswater can give me. And it's awfully good of you not to mind my being here."

As he spoke, she felt his eyes upon her—those brilliant, dark, searching eyes, like lamps for brightness—and involuntarily she turned her face a little away from him. She did not feel at ease with him and his presence seemed to produce a kind of troubling effect upon her that she could not analyze. This man had a history, so much she had gathered from John's brief and guarded utterances; and did not he himself admit that he had need of rest and peace? She had a growing curiosity to know what had brought him to this pass.

He was a Catholic, and perhaps John's first and principal motive in befriending him lay in his hope to benefit him spiritually with help and counsel. To bring him to the point, as he had admitted, of becoming the penitent of some other priest. It seemed strange in this Protestant household, with its sturdy Protestant traditions. But, then, John had freed himself from those traditions; he was

heart and soul a Catholic, ardent, zealous, passionately attached to his Church.

"Our meeting last night at Euston was a most fortunate thing for me," said Denis.

"I . . . I'm so glad," said Janet.

"I might call it providential," he added with a short dry laugh. He had never been particularly sanguine about his old cousin's reception of him. And John had told him that he expected to stay at the Grange for at least a month. If he played his cards well—and how superhumanly careful he intended to be!—he too might enjoy its warm and opulent comfort, and regular and abundant meals, for the space of four weeks . . .

His own room was perfect, large, with two big windows looking out upon that divine Wanswater, with its reedy shores and green pastures and splendid woods, and beyond, the Eastern Pikes lifting their great fantastic fangs to the sky. Thanks to Janet—though he did not know it—a generous fire burned in the ample grate. There was a big writing-table, carefully stocked with all the necessary materials; even a book of stamps had not been omitted. A large bed, a spacious armchair, solid mahogany furniture with dark gleaming surfaces—he had noted all these details with considerable satisfaction. The water was plentiful and hot, and Johnny had told him there was a bathroom "just opposite." Yes, there was a great deal to be said for unpretentious, old-fashioned comfort. For it was typically and, as he believed, almost exclusively English; one never found just that quality of comfort abroad, where, when it existed at all, it was wont to resemble the rather barren impersonal luxury of a first-class hotel.

He felt certain that to-morrow morning he should find the bath water hot, and a cup of tea by his bedside. . . . Yes, he would be a Sybarite, with all

his wants adequately supplied during four whole weeks, and this for the first time since he had left the nursing-home in Florence. There should be no mistakes this time, nothing to recall the disastrous termination of his visit to Villa Ascarelli. And then quite suddenly Camilla's face rose up before him. She seemed to be saying: *Pio is never forgiving when people deceive him.* So little forgiving, indeed, that he, Denis, would bear the mark of his hostility to his dying day. He glanced at his left arm hanging straight and stiff, almost like an artificial one, in the shabby blue sleeve. He had never been able to afford the massage, the expensive electrical treatment, which the surgeons had recommended.

Janet intercepted the glance, and she said very gently:

"Does it hurt you very much?" There was something pitiful in her blue eyes as she raised them to his.

"Yes—a good deal. It's quite useless, you know."

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Thank you," said Denis. "It wasn't done in the War."

"So John told me. You wouldn't have minded so much if it had been, I expect?"

"I suppose not. John didn't tell you how I got hurt?"

She shook her head. "No, he didn't tell me."

Denis felt relieved. He wanted to close down that chapter of his life. Camilla was Princess Forlì now, obedient to Pio as ever. But the torment of losing her had not left him. He had never ceased hoping till the day when he heard of her marriage. Hoping for some word, some sign, he had written again and again, but he had never received a single word in reply. She had banished him from her life

and memory at Pio's bidding, just as surely as she had banished Ilda. Something of that past shame and humiliation was with him then, darkening his thoughts. The wound that had pierced his arm was only symbolic of that deeper wound that had torn his heart. He wondered if he should ever find courage to speak of it to this quiet, gentle, compassionate woman at his side. He felt that perhaps some day he might tell her. . . .

Yet there was something cynical, too, in his determination to play his cards carefully and well, during his stay at the Grange. He would be patient with John's efforts to reform him; he might show signs, from time to time, of a slow and difficult yielding. He would display a proper interest in the sayings and doings of the late Dean, and in the fidelity of the old servant. And this sister of John's, this kind, mild, ineffective creature, he could surely manage her all right. He had an idea that the person most difficult to propitiate would prove to be "the old woman," as he irreverently dubbed Mrs. Ponsford in his thoughts. Something of dear old Johnny's obstinacy and astuteness there. But he would "gang warily"; it was worth while taking a little trouble in order to keep this "cushy" place.

Janet's voice struck in upon his thoughts:

"If you find it too quiet and lonely here—if you ever feel bored—you can always make some excuse to John, and go. . . ." She made the suggestion more as if she feared, than as if she hoped, this might happen. And in her voice too, there was a touch of repressed envy that did not escape him.

"I assure you, my dear Miss Ponsford, I shan't in the least want to go away. The only fear is that I may trespass too much on your hospitality. I'm never bored, you know, and I'm overwhelmingly grateful to you for receiving me so kindly."

His dark eyes met hers squarely. She lowered her own before them—she could not bear their bright searching scrutiny. In all her remembrance of Wanswater, its walls had never received a guest of this type. She thought of her brothers, sedate elderly men, with the solitary exception of John; she thought of their well-bred conventional wives (she did not include Sara, who was anything but conventional, in this category), then of her own sisters with their bald and excellent husbands, prosperous and poised. This man had stepped out of another world, and it was surely a picturesque and romantic world. Yet he asked only to be permitted to remain here . . . at Wanswater. . . .

Mrs. Ponsford bustled into the room. She wore a dress of silvery gray satin, chosen for her by Violet Bradney, who assured her the color would "tone with her hair." About her plump shoulders a shawl of old lace was skilfully draped; she wore a few fine diamonds. With her white hair, the clear rose-leaf tint of her skin, she looked charming. She had been very pretty in her youth and had never forgotten the fact. She smiled at Lorimer, who had sprung up with swift agility at her approach.

His movements, Janet thought, were wild and graceful, like a deer's.

All through dinner that night, Lorimer talked rapidly and easily. It seemed, too, that he brought John a little out of his shell and induced him to talk more than usual. He asked questions about mutual friends and acquaintances in Rome, and when Lorimer sometimes uttered an Italian name, lingering over the syllables as Italians themselves do, Janet felt entranced at those musical vowel sounds.

"You've never been in Rome, Miss Ponsford?" said Denis.

Janet shook her head. "I've never been abroad."

She thought with sudden envy of Pamela, to whom "going abroad" had been a yearly experience, at least until the outbreak of war.

Mrs. Ponsford said calmly:

"My daughter is too delicate to travel."

Janet flushed. She wished they would forget her health for just one day, and especially before strangers.

"Oh, but that's a great mistake," said Lorimer, smiling; "the most confirmed invalids can travel quite easily in these days of motor-ambulances and trains-de-luxe. There's no difficulty at all. And I'm sure Miss Ponsford isn't a confirmed invalid." There was a glint of mockery in his dark eyes as he looked at her now.

To dispute the fact was fatal, as Janet knew. But Mrs. Ponsford was naturally good-humored, and she contented herself with saying:

"Well, invalid or not, I know it would be far too exciting an experience for my daughter."

And Janet thought of that other woman, who had lain upon a sofa for five years and had been carried away to Italy, to grow strong and well and to be the happy mother of a little son, and her heart felt hot and indignant within her.

Lorimer's eyes glanced quickly, almost furtively, from mother to daughter. Not much similarity there. The old story, perhaps, of selfishness and sacrifice. The daughter bound by chains to the mother's side. No will of her own—no escape from her prison. Too delicate? Nonsense!

John said quietly: "I'd like Janet to see Rome."

They began to talk anew about Rome. Janet was thankful when the conversation was turned from the subject of her health. She was so well, between those mysterious attacks that every one dreaded so for her. She never retained any clear memory of them, but they left behind them a physical weakness

that prostrated her and almost seemed to rob her of life itself. If it hadn't been for those results, she would not have known that anything untoward had taken place. But to wake up and find herself in bed with the stern-visaged Hodge sitting beside her, made her aware that she had been the victim of an attack. And presently, as she well knew, Hodge would begin to recapitulate all the imprudent things she had done in the last few days, so as to bring the blame of it home to her.

She had never asked to have her malady labeled. She showed little curiosity about it. Mrs. Ponsford belonged to the generation that did not discuss disease, but treated it like a dark secret to be hidden if possible, or, if not, to be disguised by some non-malignant name. In the family Janet's malady was always spoken of as, "Poor Janet's heart attacks; Poor Janet's fainting fits." Always Poor Janet. Mrs. Giles Ponsford never called her anything else.

Janet was the only one of her eight children that did no justice to her mother's ebullient physique, and to that hardy up-bringing which had been the Dean's ideal for the production of a sound mind in a sound body. All the other sons and daughters were, without exception, sound and normal men and women. The six elder ones had grown up strong and healthy, had married and given hostages to fortune. There was always a touch of contempt in Mrs. Ponsford's attitude towards this sickly youngest daughter of hers.

She looked at Janet to-night and wondered why her eyes were so bright and why she had more color than usual in her cheeks. Her hair was so closely combed back from her forehead that its reddish tinge was scarcely visible. She never made the best of herself. Poor Janet—she had never looked young, and to-night, despite the shining eyes and

flushed cheeks, she looked quite an "old maid." The attacks had aged her. She was just the same age as Sara Ponsford, and she looked quite ten years older. But, then, of course Sara "made up." Mrs. Ponsford would never have permitted Janet to employ such fictitious aids to beauty as that!

Mrs. Ponsford would certainly have been surprised and annoyed had she been remotely aware of Lorimer's interest—so swiftly awakened in Janet. She was indeed the one person present who profoundly interested him and intrigued his curiosity. John, he flattered himself, he knew by heart, the kind of man who bends his neck to the stern perfect yoke of the Catholic Church with the joyful surrender of the early martyrs. Mrs. Ponsford was of a type less familiar to him, but she exhibited all those traits which he could readily categorize as "early-Victorian." Wielding in youth a complete authority over her large family—one never saw such families now—she had traveled easily to a contented self-sufficient old age, still ruling this pathetically prematurely-aged daughter of hers. That was why perhaps Janet reminded one of an elderly child, with less liberty and *aplomb* than the average modern child of ten. She was a survivor of an uncomfortable era of parental authority. Poor Janet . . . His thoughts, from a widely different angle, had reached the same culminating point as Mrs. Ponsford's, now. Only his mental "Poor Janet" held nothing of scorn, but a deep compassion that he would have felt for any other creature at once so crushed and so helpless.

Dinner was ended. John stood up, crossed himself, and rapidly uttered the words of a Latin grace. Lorimer crossed himself, too, with a graceful gesture and said *Amen*. Janet, unconsciously imitative, had for a second lifted her hand to her forehead. But she dropped it suddenly. She had caught her

mother's eye, mutely but sternly forbidding anything of the kind. It was all very well for John and this Papist friend of his, but she would have no nonsense with Janet, the eyes seemed to say.

She rose and moved majestically to the door, which Lorimer, intercepting John, had flung open for her. As he stood there, he let his gaze fall full upon Janet's face. She smiled faintly as she passed him. Her mother had gone on ahead; she could permit herself this indulgence of friendliness. And then Johnny had begged her to make Lorimer feel at home. It was difficult, she was so nervous and tongue-tied too, in the presence of her mother. She didn't feel at home herself—she was only a frightened cheated child, with the nebulous menace of an "attack" if she exerted or excited herself in any way.

She could hear her mother's voice say sternly as it had done after her last attack:

"If you'd only obeyed me and not gone out into the garden in the rain last Tuesday, this wouldn't have happened!"

The attacks surely were bad enough, without having to endure also the blame for having, by some petty act of independence, induced them.

## CHAPTER XII

LORIMER delicately lifted a cigarette from the sumptuous silver box which John had pushed towards him, and lit it. John put the decanter of port wine in front of him, as if to remind him to drink first and smoke afterwards. But Lorimer took no notice except to shake his head slightly. He had drunk nothing but water during dinner, and

very little of that. A curious and not quite consistent characteristic lay in his almost austere abstemiousness in the matter of alcohol.

He leaned back in his chair, as if waiting for John to speak. But John continued to crack and peel walnuts meticulously, sipping sometimes at his glass of port. Lorimer said at last:

"What's the matter with your sister, John?"

"Heart," said John laconically.

"Heart? She doesn't look like a person suffering from heart."

"She has fainting fits, you know. That's why she has to live very quietly. Any excitement . . . This place suits her exactly. . . . There's never anything to excite her. . . ."

"Oh, I see," said Denis.

He went on smoking. So she *was* in prison, this woman. She wasn't young or beautiful or at all clever, or he might have risked the danger and shown her at least how unfair, how even cruel it was. And then the Ponsfords were almost wealthy people; the Dean had left each one of his eight children about six hundred a year, in most cases a little more. He remembered that John had told him that, one day when he was trying to persuade Denis to accept some further help from him. But Janet—getting on for forty—a mature spinsterish forty—so he considered her—and he a man of twenty-nine! It would be wrong and a little dangerous to display his interest in her at all openly. It was thus he examined the situation, for his recent experiences had taught him caution. He wasn't going to run the risk of forfeiting John Ponsford's friendship. It was something too precious from every point of view. He was the one person to whom he could turn in those hours of stress and need which were becoming so appallingly frequent in his life.

And already, though he would scarcely admit it

himself, he was a little afraid of Mrs. Ponsford's disconcertingly clear gaze. It was so much more penetrating than dear simple old Johnny's . . .

The warmth of the room, the excellent meal he had just eaten, filled Lorimer with a sense of well-being that was delicious. Of late he had so often been both hungry and cold, and had sought shelter in those cheap places of refuge which are abominable to a man of proud and fastidious spirit. He would have preferred the open fields, and the star-strewn sky above his head. But he was afraid of the cold, the damp of an English night. Thinking of this, he envied John with a deep and passionate envy because he had this home, this comfortable refuge, always waiting for him. A place where he had only to push open the front door and enter, sure of his welcome. And even to find a sister like Janet there to greet him, was all part of the alluring old-fashioned picture.

"Do you intend to convert your sister?" he inquired suddenly.

Johnny paused over his walnuts and looked up with a smile. "I'm afraid there's no chance of that—in my mother's lifetime."

"But your mother was always very charming to you, wasn't she?"

"Oh, I'm different," said John. "You see, Janet's the youngest daughter and she's never been away from home. I sometimes think my mother forgets she isn't a child."

"But she isn't a child. She must be nearly forty."

"Thirty-five," said John. He always found it difficult to believe that she was older than he was.

Thirty-five . . . and no sign of youth left. It was pitiful. And behind those wistful blue eyes Lorimer had discerned a soul that suffered.

"She'd be much happier if she were a Catholic," he said.

"She's very happy. She's devoted to my mother. And she's used to having to take care of her health. These attacks came on when she was quite a little girl—about nine or ten years old."

"She would be even more resigned if she had a strong supernatural motive," observed Lorimer. "And it might even deepen her devotion to your mother. I'm all for women being Catholics."

As he spoke, he thought of the part played by Father Antonio in inducing Camilla to submit to the banishment of Ilda.

It was surely the moment to speak, thought John. Yet his courage failed him a little. He said only:

"Will you serve my Mass to-morrow, Denis?"

"What time?"

"Seven o'clock. We breakfast at eight."

Lorimer made a faint grimace. He had hoped to lie in bed "till all hours" on the morrow.

"All right," he answered.

"My mother likes us to be punctual," explained John.

"And Miss Ponsford—will she come to Mass, too?"

"Oh, no—I'm certain she's never been to Mass in her life. There was no Catholic church at Hawford, where we lived in my father's lifetime. And the nearest one to this is seven miles away. Janet never goes anywhere alone . . . it wouldn't be safe."

"I suppose not," said Lorimer.

"I shouldn't like to make any sort of breach between her and my mother," continued John, almost as if he feared that Lorimer might step in where he himself feared to tread. "I'm not even sure that I'm going to talk to her about it. You see, Janet's very fond of me—it would be quite easy to influence her."

His face wore a grave perplexed look.

"Is she quite dependent on your mother?" asked

Denis. It was possible, he thought, that in view of her weak health the money might not be in her own hands.

"Oh, no; she has her own portion, like the rest of us," said John. "But she's dependent in this way, because she's so delicate—so unfitted to look after things for herself or to live alone even if she wanted to. But she isn't modern—I doubt if such an idea as that has ever entered her head."

Denis felt less assured on that point.

"And if it would make her happier to be a Catholic, you still wouldn't risk the breach?" he ventured to say.

John shook his head. "Not . . . not yet," he said hesitatingly. "It's an awfully difficult question." He wondered a little at Lorimer's persistency. It struck him at once as slightly inconsistent in a man who no longer practised his religion faithfully, yet there was something urgent about his tone which puzzled him. But, then, Lorimer nearly always puzzled him—puzzled him in every aspect of his many-faceted nature.

There was his religious side, now unfortunately in abeyance. It had received a further shock from the treatment meted out to him at the Villa Ascarelli, and from that compulsory separation from the woman of his love and dreams. But, though quiescent and repressed, his ardent religious sense was not one that could perish utterly. It was mystical, and he had received great graces. Such a man is not able to forget. Denis might turn away for a time, angry and rebellious in his refusal to serve and to submit, but at least he had not lost his faith. His attitude was much more that of a child indignant with a tenderly indulgent father, who for his soul's sake has refused him a perilous gift.

And then there was his worldly side—the side that inevitably attracted and even influenced the men

and women among whom he was thrown. People readily liked Lorimer. For a time they even liked him very much, even to the point of showing him unusual kindness as Pio Ascarelli had done. But he had little of the true and deep sympathy for others, the profound unselfishness, the art of glad giving, that are so necessary for the preservation of friendship. And perhaps that was why people often tired of him. His egotism wounded. Under criticism or censure his temper proved itself prickly, brittle, even passionate. It is not possible for a man to live always in an atmosphere of sympathy, praise and applause, yet this was precisely what he seemed tacitly to demand of his intimates. Thereafter followed disillusionment. John was aware of this less agreeable side of Lorimer's nature, and it made him very careful in his personal dealings with him. But he was obsessed by the thought of winning back this straying sheep. He saw him as a soul that needed help, just as his body last night had needed rest and food. He yearned over him as a father might yearn over an obstinately prodigal son.

"I'm sure your sister must be deeply attached to you," said Denis thoughtfully.

"Dear old Jane! I'm sure she is," said John with a smile. "She's the best sister in the world."

"Is she like your other sisters?"

"Oh, no, not in the least. Violet, the second one, was very pretty—she married when she was eighteen. Louisa and Margaret both married some years before my father's death. I think it was a relief to him to know they were all happily settled. He was very fond of them—very proud of them. Especially of Violet. Janet," he paused and then added slowly, "Janet was afraid of him. He didn't understand her."

He could never understand why there flashed into his mind then a scene from long years ago. The

trend of his conversation with Lorimer had stirred perhaps some long dormant memory. But he seemed to be standing again with Janet in the orchard at Hawford, and their father had come out to her in anger. He asked her a question—John did not remember or perhaps had never heard what it was. She stood there white, trembling. He heard her say, "*No, Papa.*" . . . After that the details had always been clearer whenever he reviewed the scene in which he had, he felt, shared something of Janet's fear and suspense as to what was going to happen to her. Punishments rarely fell singly in that overflowing nursery; there was generally an accomplice to be discovered and dealt with. "That is a lie," said the Dean firmly, "*for Hodge saw you.*" He took Janet by the hand and dragged rather than led her towards the house. John followed. He could remember that his emotions were complex; he was passionately sorry for Janet; he believed that she was incapable of lying, and he was angry with his father, which seemed to him the most terrible thing of all. Would he beat Janet? She had always been rather a frail little thing, prone to illness, and for this reason she had hitherto escaped chastisement in a house where the "rod," as the Dean called it, was seldom spared.

John saw all that followed. He ran a little faster, for he had a kind of immature desire to save Janet from their father's wrath. He saw his mother come out on to the gravel path in front of the house, and he heard his father say:

"Janet has told a lie. I am going to give her a lesson she will never forget."

Janet gave a little shriek and flung herself towards her mother.

"No . . . no . . ." she cried.

John's heart was hot within him. He watched, and no one seemed to notice his presence. If they

had seen him, they would have sent him up to the nursery; he was only seven years old at the time. He was always sent upstairs when one of the elder boys had to be punished.

He watched his mother. "She'll never allow it," he said to himself confidently.

But Mrs. Ponsford had pushed Janet back towards her father.

"I'm very sorry, Janet. But you must go with Papa."

So there was no help there. The Dean put out his hand again to seize the child. She gave a wild shriek and fell at his feet. John could always remember her lying there, huddled up in her blue cotton dress on the gravel path. He could see her hair lying along it like a mat of reddish gold. After that, he had no very clear remembrance as to what had happened; all had been bustle and confusion and terror. Yes, sheer terror, on his own part, on his father's, and on his mother's. Janet's scream rang in his head, haunted his dreams for days and weeks afterwards. It was the beginning of his tenderness towards her, of the feeling that she had to be taken care of, and that he must take care of her. . . . His mother had called him to her when the doctor had come and gone and Janet was lying in her bed in the night-nursery, where even Margaret, who slept with her, was not allowed to go. Mrs. Ponsford had told him that he had seen something which he had better not have seen, and she must rely upon him not to mention it to the other children. He mustn't talk about it at all, even to Janet herself. He had promised, and had faithfully kept his promise. Perhaps they had thought him too young to remember it always. But he had not forgotten anything of it except one or two trivial details that did not affect the impression which the sinister little scene had made upon him. And ever since that day, Janet had

always seemed to be connected in his mind with something essentially mysterious. She had been ill for quite a long time, and the doctor had come constantly to the house. John wondered what had been the matter with her, until one day some casual visitor had said to Mrs. Ponsford in his hearing:

"I'm so sorry to hear your little girl's been so ill. What was wrong with her?"

His mother had replied, making use of those words—which had now become so familiar—for the first time in his hearing.

"She's had a bad heart attack. Only weakness—Sir Oswald Metcalfe says she'll grow out of it."

When Janet had reappeared, she was very thin and pale, and her eyes had a strange expression. Once when he was much older, John had described them to himself as "haunted eyes." She had never quite lost that look. John had always hoped that she would talk to him about the episode, since he was in honor bound not to mention the matter to her. But she did not speak of it, and he soon came to believe that she had mercifully retained no remembrance of it. It had been blotted out from her mind with all its confusion and terror.

The attacks had been of fairly frequent occurrence ever since. Janet had not grown out of the tendency to fall down in a sudden faint, but she never seemed to remember what had happened, when she returned to consciousness. They represented to her perhaps periods of oblivion wherein she unconsciously suffered, as people suffer and moan when enduring an operation under an anesthetic. Suffering imperfectly apprehended, but setting its seal upon her and placing her, as it were, a little apart from other more fortunate women, cutting her off, too from the normal sources of happiness. . . .

Lorimer's voice struck across his thoughts as he sat there, the walnuts uneaten on his plate, recon-

structing the little scene from the obscurity of twenty-five years.

"Afraid?" Denis repeated. "Why was she afraid of him?"

"We were all rather afraid of him," said John.

"But this sister more than the rest of you?"

"I think she was. She was naturally timid and nervous, you know. She was never very strong, even before she began to have these attacks—quite little things upset her."

He felt a little uncomfortable under this close searching questioning of Lorimer's. It was as if he dimly suspected something of the truth. But that was, of course, impossible.

It was so easy to answer, "Heart," as his mother had been doing for twenty-five years, and leave it at that. But Lorimer was obviously dissatisfied with the answer, and something of his dissatisfaction seemed to communicate itself subtly to John.

He felt that for some obscure reason his guest wished to hear more of Janet. And there was nothing to tell. Nothing but that old episode, tragic enough at the time, but now apparently happily forgotten by both his mother and Janet, since neither of them ever alluded to it. No life was more placid, serene and calm than Janet's was now. The only episodes that marked its eventless monotony were those mysteriously recurring attacks, following perhaps upon some secret and repressed emotion of joy, fear or sorrow. Of course, they always tried to discover the immediate cause of them. But invariably they fell back baffled; there was so seldom any recognizable cause, though Hodge would always endeavor to lay her finger upon some trifling imprudence.

In the library—a room which was always used in preference to the drawing-room in winter, on account of its superior warmth—they found Mrs. Pons-

ford alone and knitting with imperturbable assiduity. She looked up at the two men as they came in, and her glance seemed to measure them. This stranger, Denis Lorimer, towered above John, who was well above middle height. She thought that if he had lifted his hand he could quite easily have touched the low-beamed ceiling. A graceful figure, long, slender, loosely made. A curious face, though—so ran her thoughts—with that dark hair, those brilliant dark eyes, those aquiline features. . . . She wondered why he had come, why John had brought him to the Grange. But, of course, he would go away in a few days. There was literally nothing for a young man to do at Wanswater in the winter.

“Where’s Janet?” said John, looking around.

“She was tired—I advised her to go to bed. She asked me to say good-night to you both for her.”

The words slipped smoothly from her lips. They were indeed so commonplace that John was astonished at the slight sense of actual misgiving they produced in him. Was it because he felt certain that Lorimer had not been at all convinced by them?

John felt disappointed, too. He had wanted to talk to his sister, and at dinner she hadn’t looked tired.

Lorimer drew a chair close to the fire and nearer to Mrs. Ponsford.

“I hope my being here hadn’t anything to do with Miss Ponsford’s fatigue?” he said.

“Oh, dear no! Why should it?” Mrs. Ponsford smiled complacently at the slightly egoistic suggestion. She must really find a future opportunity of showing this highly-unnecessary young man that his presence could not possibly affect Janet in any conceivable manner. But she only added: “Janet isn’t strong—we have to take great care of her.”

She had been saying those precise words, or others

that closely resembled them, for so many years that she uttered them now with perfect conviction. But they carried no conviction to Lorimer, and indeed only served to deepen his disquietude. He thought of a bird—a wild trapped bird—imprisoned in a cage.

“Well, I hope she’ll be rested by to-morrow,” he said easily.

John felt a renewal of anxiety. Lorimer had obviously been disappointed at not finding Janet there; it was as if a momentary shadow had clouded his face and then passed, leaving it hard and set.

Mrs. Ponsford did not answer. She went on with her knitting, her lips moving as if she were counting. She had had a little quiet struggle with Janet to induce her to go up to bed. Janet had wanted to remain in the library because “it was Johnny’s first night at home.” With her white face, and eyes full of tears, she had pleaded like a child. . . . One had to treat her as one would a child; it was the only way.

Mrs. Ponsford had been very kind and had displayed nothing of the impatience she had very naturally felt. She had only said: “My dear, don’t be so childish and sentimental—it’s ridiculous at your age! You’ve had quite enough excitement for one day, and I don’t want to have you ill to-morrow. Besides, John has got his friend.”

It was unlike Janet to be so unreasonable, and she had gone away quietly enough at these words. Yes, John had his friend; they wouldn’t miss her. Perhaps Mr Lorimer would hardly notice her absence. She repressed a sob as she went upstairs. Yes, she was foolish and childish. But it was their fault—her mother’s and Hodge’s—for treating her always as if she were indeed a child.

Perhaps John suspected that there had been a little scene of the sort. He knew that Janet would not

have left him very willingly on this, his first evening at home. He had been present sometimes when he had wished his mother could have shown her a less strict attention. If the thought had not been disloyal to her, he would even have perhaps told himself that the care of Janet's health might quite imaginably degenerate into a subtle form of tyranny. He had sometimes even felt passionately sorry for her, as he had done on that day so long ago in the orchard at Hawford. There was cruelty in too much kindness, as there was cruelty in too much severity. One mustn't deprive living things of all light and air and liberty. . . .

Then a fierce desire came into his heart—that Janet should have that outlet which the Catholic Church bestows in her great wisdom upon her children. The Sacrament of Penance stands between them and repressed suffering. A child may take its griefs as well as its little sins thither and receive consolation and advice. He longed for her to have that wider freedom. Had it ever occurred to her to wish for it, too? . . .

Mrs. Ponsford knitted until ten o'clock and then she laid aside the results of the day's labor. She kissed John and gave her hand to Denis. Then she proceeded to the dining-room to read evening prayers to the assembled servants. It was a pity John did not see his way to attend that simple ceremony, and of course Mr. Lorimer believed he had a like reason for absenting himself.

The two men went into the study, and smoked and talked for another hour before they went upstairs for the night.

"Don't forget, seven o'clock," was John's parting injunction to his guest.

"Right-o," said Lorimer.

"Got all you want?" inquired John.

"Yes, thanks."

The fire was still burning brightly as he entered his room.

### CHAPTER XIII

AUTUMN lingered late at Wanswater, as if loath to give place to the long wet weather. Mild southerly airs came over the sea and hills, and stole across the valleys with their brown slumbering woods, their green pastures.

Janet was desperately fond of flowers, of growing things. Her one supreme interest was the garden. She loved coaxing unwilling growths to bud and blossom, tenderly as if they had been children. Only yesterday she had discovered some creamy rosebuds adorning an almost leafless bush; she had brought them indoors and placed them in John's austere and chilly room. She was permitted to garden because a doctor had once said it would benefit her health by taking her out in the open air and giving her also a wholesome interest in life. It was her one pleasure when John was absent.

Mrs. Ponsford used to say in reply to inquiries: "Janet? Oh, she's grubbing in the garden."

Lorimer found her in the garden when he strolled out soon after breakfast on the following morning. He watched her a little before he made his presence known to her. She was so diligent, so absorbed, so deeply concentrated, that he hesitated to interrupt her. This silent enigmatic woman with the wistful eyes of a baffled child! . . . He longed to draw her out, principally because her personality intrigued him. She was so unlike dear old John! In one sense you could read John like a book.

Beyond the figure of Janet bending over her rock-garden, the lake spread like a great sheet of color-

less light. The sunshine was soft rather than brilliant, it seemed to touch the water to silver rather than to gold. The whole world seemed bathed in that fragile illumination. The light wind touched the brown dried reeds that grew in the shallows of Wanswater, eliciting from them a kind of creaking protest as they bent stiffly before it. From the garden of the Grange, there were few houses visible. Just a glimpse of Wanside village with the sharp spire of the modern church showing above the trees. Mountains and woods—the jagged peaks of the Eastern Pikes—that vast sheet of water embosomed in the hills. . . . The lifelessness of it all! . . .

He came down the little path and approached Janet.

“Good-morning, Miss Ponsford. I hope you’re rested?”

“Oh, yes; quite, thank you,” she said, and she straightened herself, lifting her face to his. In her hand she held a trowel and some brown-looking stalks. “I’m going to plant these. Pamela—my nièce—sent them down yesterday. They’ll grow, she wrote, in a sheltered rock-garden in a mild climate. Next summer they’re to be wonderful blue stars!” Her eyes shone a little. Her faith in the future blossoming of those unpromising brown stalks was obviously complete.

“John made me get up at half past six to serve his Mass at seven,” he said, looking away from her across the lake. “Never was such a tyrant. I hate getting up on dark winter mornings.” He smiled as he spoke; his teeth were white and even.

“It was very good of you to do it,” she said, “but people can’t help doing things for John. . . . He’s so glad to be able to do things for his friends—I think that’s the reason.”

She trimmed the earth round a newly-raked oasis formed by a shallow cup in the rock. To do this

she had to turn her head a little away from Lorimer.

"And for his enemies," subjoined Denis.

"Enemies?" She lifted her head sharply and the color raced into her cheeks. "He hasn't got any!"

"I can believe you there. Still, even the saints have had enemies, you know. Goodness and unselfishness can arouse bitter envy."

"Can they?"

"Ask John."

Janet stooped and cut off some dried and withered leaves with a pair of scissors. She did it almost tenderly, as if half afraid of inflicting pain.

"You didn't come to Mass?" said Lorimer.

He had what has been called *le don fatal de familiarité*. He never stood on the threshold if he could help it, but loved to penetrate intimately into the lives of those among whom he was thrown. It was for this reason that men and women so soon ceased to regard him as a stranger—that is to say, those who were immediately attracted by him. He seemed to touch the hearts of things and people.

"No," said Janet. She laid the scissors in her basket. He was afraid that, now her task was finished, she would make some excuse to return to the house. And he liked talking to her.

"Didn't you care to? It must be rather wonderful having a brother who is a priest."

"Yes—it's wonderful," she agreed. "But I've never been to Mass. Mamma wouldn't like it." She made the last admission quite simply.

"And you allow that to prevent you?" said Lorimer. He looked at her curiously, but there was more compassion than contempt in his gaze.

"I can't go against Mamma," said Janet with decision. "And I don't believe John would wish me to." She paused. "We mustn't discuss it."

But I've longed to hear John say Mass ever since he became a priest." She stopped abruptly, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Dear Miss Ponsford, forgive me. I've been very tactless. But, believe me, I didn't understand the position."

Janet took up her basket. "Didn't John tell you?"

"Oh, you know, he never talks much about his own people. I knew he had a mother and sister at Wanswater, and that's about all."

Janet moved towards the house. She was sorry she had made the little revelation to this complete stranger. Lorimer walked by her side, his hands in the pockets of his shabby great-coat. Only once did she break silence as she climbed the path, and then he guessed that it was an effort to her to speak.

"Please don't think I'm wanting in sympathy for John. I do see that he had to do what he has done. If I could show him practical sympathy by going to Mass I would. . . ."

"I'm perfectly certain you would. I never meant to suggest for a moment that you'd be found wanting!"

They entered the house in silence . . .

She had not said much, it is true, but he had learned something nevertheless. And he had created that intimate atmosphere which made people—especially women—eager to confide in him. His clumsy approach was followed by a delicate apologetic withdrawal. And Janet had responded to both; she had been very sensitive under his hand.

Dull, middle-aged woman that she was, there was something about her that attracted him. The dominant passion in her life was her love for John, yet other loyalties prevented her from showing him the complete sympathy she would have wished to show. How she had flushed up at that word

“enemies”! There had been something indignant about her swift refutation. He liked her all the better for that. She had something of John’s steadfast qualities, without his iron will, his single-hearted determination. Lorimer, encountering that will in opposition to his own, had sometimes felt wounded by the impact. But this woman was all yielding softness. Very soon he would win her friendship, her confidence. He wanted to know all that there was to know about her. There had been something very touching about her when she spoke of the blue stars that were to come forth from those brown stalks next summer! . . . He wanted to pierce that slight atmosphere of mystery that surrounded her almost impalpably. Was she really ill, or only nervous? She was in prison here. He wondered that John should accept the situation so calmly. Or perhaps he had never really envisaged it—had become accustomed to things that were crystallized by long years of unconscious habit.

The first days at Wanswater Grange passed quietly, uneventfully, and Lorimer saw little more of Janet. Wet weather kept her from “grubbing in the garden.” They met only at meals or in the library afterwards, with Mrs. Ponsford or John always present. In the afternoon, even on wet days, she generally drove with her mother in a closed carriage. The equipage, carriage, coachman, and horse, were all of such antiquated pattern that he began to feel that he must be living in the last century. It is true that motor-charabancs dashed along the road at regular intervals towards the village of Wanside, and onward to the more important towns that lay along and beyond the lake, but they did not approach the Grange, and to see or hear them pass on their ruthless way only elicited an astonished, “What next, I wonder?” from Mrs.

Ponsford. She regretted them, just as she regretted the hordes of tourists, English and American, that filled the hotels and boarding-houses in the neighborhood to such repletion during the summer months. Some people suffering under the heavy taxation brought about by the War had sold their properties along the lake-side, and the old country houses had been transformed into smart hotels, "vulgarizing the place," as the old lady sometimes observed complacently from her chimney corner. She was always shocked when one of her sons or daughters-in-law preferred to travel from Kenstone in the charabanc instead of journeying the whole distance in the brougham.

Still believing that Mr. Lorimer's stay would only last a few days, she forbore to criticize him to her son. She was not of those who took an immediate fancy to Denis. She secretly disliked something that she considered un-English in his aspect and dress. The way he wore his hair, for instance—brushed back from his brow with just a hint of a wave in it. And his voice—it was too soft. She endured him because he was there, because he was John's friend, and because he would probably quite soon find himself very much bored with all they were able to offer him. Besides, she really couldn't have him hanging about Janet in the garden! . . .

Those very things about him which were rather repellant to Mrs. Ponsford were just the very qualities that often drew people swiftly, as on a wave of sympathy, to Denis. Something that had drawn such opposite types of men as old Lord Farewether and Pio Ascarelli. Often it was felt that to cease to be friends with Lorimer, argued some intellectual or spiritual deficiency in the character of those who drew away from further intimacy. Denis was accustomed to such defalcations but, fortunately for him, they had never been accomplished under such

disastrous circumstances as at Villa Ascarelli. And he could generally achieve some fresh new entrancing friendship to console him for the sudden coldness or hostility of those who had learned to know him better, and who had turned abruptly away as from something dangerous, even sinister.

John Ponsford had never thus turned away. It is true that they had never been in any sense on terms of close mutual friendship. Normally, a priest in his busy work for souls has little leisure for absorbing intimacies. But Lorimer always felt that John's regard for him had never changed, even though he was pretty well aware of all the events that had preceded his abrupt departure from Villa Ascarelli, excepting, of course, he had never been told of the revelations made by Angus Ferringham.

Lorimer acquired two strong impressions in the days that followed his arrival at the Grange. One was that Mrs. Ponsford did not like him, which was certainly correct; and the other was that she was keeping Janet close to her, under her eye, so to speak, for a reason not unconnected with himself. This knowledge at once flattered and ruffled him. It put him on his mettle. And it increased, incidentally, the interest that Janet had awakened in his mind. He determined to try and circumvent Mrs. Ponsford.

Intrigues and situations often sprang up in Lorimer's path. He was wont to discern mysteries in the most commonplace households, was always ready to suspect cruelty, coercion, tragedy, even where these did not remotely exist. It was enough for him to see an old lady living with her elderly daughter in a remote house in a lonely spot of the Lake District, and to be told that the daughter suffered from heart attacks—his suspicions were immediately aroused. Such a simple explanation would never have sufficed to satisfy him. He must needs try

to drag away the veils, and interrogate the supposititious victim. And, as if she had become aware of this intention, Mrs. Ponsford quietly denied him all opportunity of talking to Janet alone.

At night Wanswater seemed to Lorimer to be the veritable home of tragedy and mystery. He felt as if it must be haunted by some fierce and revengeful Spirit of Place. The black waters of the lake on those moonless starless nights only revealed themselves by the light of some rare passing vessel, some lamp shining from a house that stood close enough to the water's edge to fling a faint rosy reflection upon it. And at twilight on these strange wild autumn evenings while the blue dusk lingered in these northern fastnesses—how dark and somber the forest looked, garmenting the banks of Wanswater and flowing over the hills! . . . Leaning out of his window, he could hear the melancholy cry of the water-fowl, whose homes were in the lake, or the flap of a startled heron sailing majestically across the sky, uttering its eerie cry as it did so. . . .

Nor did the house, with its mid-Victorian note of comfort and security, escape that general disquieting hint of tragedy, especially, Lorimer thought, on those nights when the mist came up from Wanswater, enveloping the whole landscape with its chilly embrace, coiling, clinging about it. He hated a suffocating white mist; it took him back to that scene of horror in the Ascarelli woods—a scene that was even yet never long absent from his mind. Then there were the storms that beat down with tragic violence from the fells, hiding the peaks with baffling cloud. The nights when the wind howled about the house like a restless spirit. Small wonder, he reflected, that the geniuses of Lakeland, Coleridge and his son and de Quincey, had drowned those sights and sounds in copious draughts of opium or alcohol! . . .

Nevertheless, Lorimer stayed on and dreaded the day when John should propose departure. He had no place to go to, no money to take him anywhere. He had sunk down upon the comfort of the Grange, and though it seemed to him in moments of depression to be more and more the home of tragedy, he clung to it as a refuge from the desolate freedom of the world that lay outside its gates.

## CHAPTER XIV

LORIMER rose punctually every morning and served John's Mass. The attic had now been transformed into a chapel. Some of the furniture had come from Kenstone, and some from London, and everything was very simple and yet beautiful of its kind. John had brought with him some exquisite old vestments from Rome—delicate fragile things, too worn for any but the gentlest usage—and these were carefully stored away in an old chest. He was his own sacristan, and kept everything spotlessly clean. But it was Janet who filled the brass vases with flowers and put them each day in his bedroom in readiness.

She did not go up to the attic; she was forbidden to climb so many stairs.

John had been at the Grange for rather more than a week when one morning, soon after seven, when he had just begun Mass, the door of the room opened and Janet Ponsford entered very quietly. There were two prie-dieu chairs set apart in one corner, and she knelt down upon one of these.

John was saying the *Confiteor*, and if he noticed his sister's entrance he gave no sign of having done so. But Lorimer looked round from where he was kneeling beside John's upright figure, and smiled at

her with a bright look of encouragement. Janet did not return the smile. She was very pale, paler than ever under the black scarf she had twisted negligently about her head. It must have been a great effort to her to come, Lorimer thought. He could hear her panting a little as she knelt down.

Her eyes were raised and fixed upon her brother. She watched him as one hypnotized, listening to the incomprehensible Latin words which he uttered with such ease and rapidity, noting too his movements and gestures. She watched the graceful movements of Lorimer, who seemed to imbue his part with a dramatic touch.

She did not know that he was never so much the born and bred Catholic as when he was serving Mass. Every response, every action, all the Latin words, had been familiar to him from childhood. Here he was on sure ground, accustomed, recollected.

Sometimes Janet turned her head a little towards the door as if she half feared some one might come in and take her away.

"*Orate, fratres . . .*" said John, turning towards her and seeing her for the first time. He repressed a sense of astonishment, urgent, distracting. Why had she come? How long had she been there?

"*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus . . .*"

Lorimer rang a little bell sharply.

Janet watched. She knew very little about Mass, but some sure instinct told her that a very solemn moment was approaching. She had read something long ago, somewhere . . . The bell rang again as if to command her to kneel down and bow her head. She glanced up and saw John lifting his arms high above his head, and in his hands he held something, round, white, shining. The bell rang three times. . . .

A cry rang through the room. To Lorimer there

was a terrible note in that cry, as if it had been wrung from some spiritual rather than from any physical torture. He dropped the bell just as he was going to ring it again and rising ran towards Janet. Before he could reach her, she had fallen with a low thud upon the floor. He gathered her in his arms; her head fell back limply upon his shoulder; she was so white, so bloodless-looking that his first impression was that she was dead. Her eyes were open, and gazed with a fixed ghastly intensity. Her lips were not quite closed, but her teeth were set edge to edge. He opened the door and carried her down the stairs. Janet was not heavy, but the stairs were steep and narrow, and it was no easy task for a practically one-armed man.

Father John Ponsford went on with his Mass. He tried to exclude all anxious thoughts from his mind.

Lorimer reached the landing, and wondered whither he should now take Janet. She had given no sign of life. He wished he knew where her room was—where even her mother's room was. But before he had found time to form any plan, a door opened and a capless harsh-featured woman wearing black approached him.

"Miss Janet!" she exclaimed, and he felt that there was anger as well as dismay in her voice; "why, where did you find her, sir? I left her asleep in bed not half an hour ago. She's never called till the half hour."

"Never mind where I found her. Tell me where I'm to take her. I can't hold her much longer—I can't use my left arm." He spoke with a kind of abrupt violence.

The woman led the way down the passage and turning the corner descended three steps.

"Mind the steps, sir," she said, and threw open a door to the right. "This is her room, sir. You'd

better put her flat on the bed and I'll attend to her. I know exactly what to do."

He laid Janet down on the bed as gently as he could. He was arranging the pillows under her head when the woman quietly removed them.

"Her head must be kept low."

She was competent, he believed, but perfectly callous and heartless. For himself, the episode had shaken his nerve. Janet still lay there as one dead, with the face of one who had died in an ecstasy of bliss. The excitement of independent action, the effort of climbing the steep stairs at such an early hour, had no doubt conduced to bring on one of her mysterious attacks. That cry of hers . . .

"I can manage quite well, sir. You can leave her to me." The woman's voice was disagreeably peremptory. He glanced curiously at the determined, thin-lipped face. Here was another person of the drama, an able auxiliary, always at hand to second Mrs. Ponsford's vigilance when advancing years made her prefer to shift the task of "watching Janet" to some one else.

"I could help you to bring her round," said Denis; "I . . . I know something of medicine—I was in a hospital for a good many months."

"I've been here since Miss Janet was five. You can leave her to me. She'll come round in a minute, though I shall have to give her something first. She'd better not see you there when she comes to, sir,—it might frighten her."

Although she was civil, he understood that she desired to dismiss him. But he stood his ground. He wanted desperately to be there when she emerged from that strange unconsciousness in which it almost seemed to him that the soul had departed from her body.

"Frighten her?" he said, with contempt. "What should there be about me to frighten her?"

"A strange face, sir—one she isn't used to." The voice was still respectful. But Lorimer was thinking:

"If she wakes up while I'm here, I shall learn something . . ."

He lingered. Suddenly the woman turned to him.

"I'm very sorry, sir, to have to speak to you like this, but if you won't go, I must fetch Mrs. Ponsford. My orders are very strict."

She closed her mouth with something of the action of a steel trap. Lorimer went reluctantly to the door. He must needs bow to Mrs. Ponsford's authority; indeed it would have been dangerous for him to rebel, imperiling his own position. He went back to the attic. John was kneeling before the Altar, saying the final prayers.

*Cor Jesu Sacratissimum . . . Miserere nobis. . . .*

Lorimer repeated, *Miserere nobis.*

He helped John to unvest. "How is she?" he asked anxiously.

"She was still unconscious when I left her. I carried her to her room and she's with a fierce-looking woman now who told me to go away. I wanted to help—I felt I might be of use."

"A fierce-looking woman? Oh, I suppose you mean Hodge! She is devoted to Janet—she's been here for thirty years."

Lorimer's heart sank. John too was blind, blind, blind. . . . He accepted existing conditions simply and unquestioningly. Did he never think of those two women side by side, one so frail and suffering, the other so harsh and hard and domineering?

"I'll just run down and see her before I make my thanksgiving," said John. He went out of the room, leaving Lorimer alone.

Breakfast was less punctual than usual that morning. The household was affected by Janet's sudden illness, and Mrs. Ponsford came into the dining-

room, to find Denis alone. She greeted him, and he was astonished to find that her face was perfectly calm and unperturbed. She poured out his coffee as usual, and glanced at her letters and the morning paper as if nothing untoward had occurred. Lorimer felt a secret exasperation. Was it possible that not one of them had discerned how close to death this woman had been?

Mrs. Ponsford surprised him by saying suddenly: "John tells me that you kindly looked after my daughter this morning. I am very grateful to you. Of course, she oughtn't to have attempted those stairs!"

Denis only said: "I could have been of more use if it hadn't been for this wretched arm of mine!"

He noticed that there was a slightly emphasized pink flush on Mrs. Ponsford's cheek.

"It was very disobedient and imprudent of her to go," she said; "and I'm very sorry you should have been bothered with her. She knows quite well that if she does certain things it brings on a heart attack." Her lips closed firmly on the words.

Lorimer said: "Oh, it was no trouble at all. I was most awfully sorry for her of course, and a little frightened, too. Your maid wouldn't let me stay and help to bring her round. I might have been of use—I was months in a hospital, you know. One learns a lot."

"Hodge was quite right," said Mrs. Ponsford; "she knows that Janet mustn't see strange faces when she comes round—it might alarm her."

"Oh, I don't feel as strange as all that," he assured her good-humoredly. "And I've seen something of these cases in Paris—I was ages in a French hospital—they were interested in my case."

"I have no doubt they were." She ignored the challenge in his dark eyes. "Valvular weakness is

very common, unfortunately. And when it is combined with anemia and a nervous temperament, one knows exactly what to expect in moments of sudden shock and strain."

John had come into the room during this speech and taken his seat at the table.

Lorimer thought: "Dear old John believes all that about the valvular weakness. But *she* doesn't. She knows it isn't true."

"She's quite conscious," said John, looking towards his mother. "She knew me just now. Of course, I came away at once."

"You'd better leave her quite alone to-day, John. She must keep quietly in bed. Don't make any fuss with her."

"We're going into Kenstone this morning, Denis and I," said John. "I've ordered Jenkins' car at ten o'clock. We shan't be back to lunch."

"You could have had the carriage," said Mrs. Ponsford, who had never been able to dominate her fear of motor-cars. She could not bear to think that John should imperil his precious person in one.

John smiled. "But we shall get there in no time. Can we bring anything back?"

"Fish for dinner, if you like. Janet might have some. Oh, and some fruit, perhaps."

If it had been possible, Lorimer would gladly have foregone the expedition, which had been arranged on the previous day. He wanted to stay and hear how Janet was going on. But John took it for granted that he would accompany him, and Mrs. Ponsford even seemed somewhat relieved at the thought of their absence. For, of course, the household had been a little upset. Servants so easily lost their heads, and an under-housemaid who had caught a glimpse of the unconscious Janet had retired to the kitchen to have a violent fit of hysterics, saying that the sight had given her "quite a turn." She

had only been at the Grange a few weeks, and Mrs. Ponsford determined to give her notice that very day. She never had any sympathy with "nerves."

There was a knock at the door, and Hodge came into the room.

"If you please, ma'am, Miss Janet's asking for Father John."

It was obvious that she was delivering the message with great reluctance.

"All right—I'm coming, Hodge!"

John ran swiftly up the stairs to his sister's room. She was lying in bed, her head raised a little now; she looked white and frail and slightly tearful. But that was her normal condition when she returned to consciousness.

"Johnny darling!" She held out her thin arms and drew his face down to hers. Her tears flowed freely.

"Hush, hush, Jane darling, you'll make yourself worse," he said. He soothed her as one soothes a little child, with caressing, deliberate tenderness. She was always so helpless after an attack, as if all vitality had gone out of her.

"Was it a dream that I went up to the attic and heard you say Mass? Mr. Lorimer was there . . . helping you . . . he rang the bell. Then . . ."

She tried to catch the straying threads of memory. Something very wonderful had happened, but the remembrance eluded her. So perhaps it had been only a dream after all, born of her great desire to hear her brother say Mass. "Was I there, Johnny? Hodge said it was a dream." She lowered her voice.

He felt a moment's sharp exasperation at the thought that Hodge had deliberately deceived her. If that was part of the treatment, he considered that the treatment ought to be changed. Janet needed the truth, to strengthen her, to induce her

to further effort. She was too old to be treated like a little irresponsible child.

"Yes, you were there, Jane. You fell down just at the moment of the Elevation. It's a very solemn moment, you know. But I'll explain that to you another time." He stroked back her hair.

"I'm glad I was really there," she said. "I've wanted so to come ever since you have been back. You seemed so far away from me now and I thought it would bring you nearer. Even Mr. Lorimer seemed closer to you than we do."

"But, dear Jane, you mustn't climb those stairs. The doctor's forbidden all kinds of exertion and strain."

"Yes, but I didn't think it would hurt me."

"And, then, you know mother wouldn't approve." He felt compelled to say it. The possibility of any breach between the mother and daughter always made him dread the thought of Janet's conversion.

A faint shadow stained her brow.

"Yes,—I knew I oughtn't. But I felt I must."

She did not tell John that her action had been stimulated by something Denis Lorimer had said to her one day in the garden.

John was interested because he realized that this time she was perfectly cognizant of all the events that had led up to the attack which had plunged her into such prolonged unconsciousness. This time she had gone with full knowledge right up to the very gate of that world of mysterious darkness.

"Is Mamma angry with me?" she asked.

"I'm sure she isn't. Only distressed that you should be ill."

Janet stretched out her hand. "Tell me what happened," she pleaded, "just what happened after you raised up the Sacred Host in your hands. I

knew that Our Blessed Lord was there . . . I felt He could see me . . .”

“You screamed and fell,” answered John, “and Lorimer rushed to help you and carried you downstairs. It wasn’t easy for him, with only one arm.”

She flushed a little. “I’m so sorry . . . it was bad luck for him. I do give a lot of trouble, Johnny. And I’d like him not to have known.”

“Oh, you mustn’t mind his knowing. He’s been so much in the hospital himself, he knows a lot about illness. He wanted to stay and help, but Hodge ordered him off!”

“He must be very clever. Clever as well as kind.”

“Well, if not very clever, at least very versatile,” said John, smiling. He had not a great deal of faith in his friend’s vaunted medical knowledge. Besides, he was aware of the superficiality that lay beneath that deceptive surface brilliancy.

“You must thank him for all he did. Tell him I’m very grateful. Perhaps later in the day I shall be allowed to see him.”

“I think you must keep very quiet to-day. And I’m going to take him into Kenstone.”

“Shall you be gone all day?” she asked in a disappointed tone. She dreaded the long hours with Hodge’s vigilant figure sitting beside her.

“I daresay we shall be back at tea-time.”

“Then perhaps later in the evening you might bring him up. I’m sure I shall be on the sofa by tea-time.”

“Well, we must see how you are, dear Jane.”

She lay back contentedly, a faint smile parting her lips. “I promise to keep very quiet if you’ll only let me see him to thank him this evening.”

John felt for a fleeting moment a passionate sense of dismay. That curious interest she had aroused in Lorimer—quite unconsciously, as John believed—

seemed to have evoked some sort of response from Janet herself. The discovery filled John with acute alarm. It disclosed a situation fraught with peril for his sister's peace of mind. She might even fall in love with Denis. And when he left the Grange, he would probably never think of her again, even as an interesting case. He had been hard hit over that affair in Rome; he still suffered from that frustrated love-affair and from the faithlessness of Donna Camilla, and it was unlikely that he could have recovered sufficiently from that recent calamity to fall in love with a delicate woman five or six years older than himself, scarcely six months later. John tried to allay his own anxiety. But the fact remained that Lorimer had displayed a very special interest in Janet almost from the first moment of their meeting; he had taken up a curious attitude towards her malady, as if he believed it had never been accurately diagnosed. He was not satisfied with the usual explanations. Mrs. Ponsford had also told her son that "Lorimer had been hanging about Janet in the garden," in a tone that plainly showed her own disapproval of such a proceeding. "*If you'll only let me see him to thank him this evening. . . .*" The words had startled him from the tone of entreaty in which they had been uttered, and then he had never in all his life seen Janet look as she had looked then. Rejuvenated, transformed, subtly awakened, very nearly beautiful . . . He could not but believe that she had been obscurely sensible also of the Holy Presence in the chapel that morning. And it had pierced like a delicate shaft of light across that sudden dark storm that had flung her, a huddled unconscious heap, upon the floor of the little attic-chapel. . . .

And she remembered everything up to the moment of unconsciousness. Not quite certain, perhaps, if it had been a dream or if it had actually hap-

pened . . . She could recall perfectly, seeing John's hands uplifting the Host for all to see and adore. No deception of memory there. The incident had impressed itself sharply upon her memory; she would never forget it now. Her very first initiation into the Mysteries of the Catholic religion! . . . And into that episode the figure of Denis Lorimer would always be interwoven, forming part of the brilliant design upon the tapestry of her mind.

"I'm sure he'll come if mother will let him," said John, with a touch of reluctance. "She may think it too exciting for you to see visitors." He fell back upon the traditional formula, honored by the invariable usage of thirty years.

"I'm not a child, Johnny. If Mamma would only remember that! And if Hodge could only forget I was five when she first came!"

So she chafed beneath that kindly and wise but ceaseless vigilance. Even a soft bandage will in time chafe the skin. . . .

"Mother knows best, dear," he said very gently.

"Yes, yes," said Janet, already repentant of her momentary disloyalty, her lapse into futile rebellion. She was afraid too, of the close intimacy between her mother and John. But the next moment she put out her hand with a gesture of renewed confidence.

"If I were your penitent, Johnny, I could tell you things without any fear of your repeating what I'd said."

"Yes, if you spoke under the seal of the confessional, a priest may never reveal a single word. Not even if it were to save his own life."

"I should *like* to be your penitent," she said.

"Priests never confess their own relations if they can help it. Of course, sometimes it's unavoidable. But even without my being your confessor, Janet, you can tell me things in perfect confidence. I should

treat them exactly as if they were told me in the confessional."

"Then may I tell you something that you'll never repeat?"

John's heart sank a little. Yet he remembered Lorimer's words.

"Yes, dear Jane," he said.

"I want to be a Catholic, Johnny. You'll say that I don't know enough. But I have the faith, and surely that's the main thing. When you were saying Mass I believed . . . I remember now, I tried to kneel down and bow my head at the Elevation. Perhaps it was the excitement of being present for the first time. I felt that Our Lord was there and calling to me—that He wanted me although I wasn't strong and clever like other people. And then I don't remember any more. . . ."

So, after all, it had been the spiritual significance of the Mass that had so profoundly affected her.

"Do you think I ever could be one? Must one be very clever?"

"No—no. The Church is for all, for the most illiterate as well as for the most learned. Our Lord didn't choose the wise ones of the world to be his first disciples. Only a few unlearned fishermen . . . But it's Mother I'm thinking of, Jane dear—she's getting old—it would upset her very much. . . ."

He felt almost as if she must have discovered those secret thoughts of his concerning her which had so perturbed his mind ever since Lorimer had spoken to him on the subject that first night at the Grange. Yes, it was Denis who had awakened in him the knowledge that Janet might need assistance that was more definitely spiritual than the care she was now receiving. Denis with his quick questions, his rapid deductions, had caused the smooth waters of the Grange to flow agitatedly.

"I must think it over," he said; "I'm sure you'd be much happier if you were a Catholic, Janet dear." He bent down and kissed her. "Now I must be going, or I shall keep Lorimer waiting."

He went to Kenstone with Lorimer that day in a silent and perplexed mood. All the time his thoughts hovered ceaselessly about Janet and the episode of the morning. Lorimer only once alluded to it.

"You say your sister never remembers anything that happens just before one of her attacks. Didn't she remember about coming to Mass this morning?"

Had no ray of Divine comfort escaped to console that suffering and repressed heart?

John Ponsford's face was rather rigid.

"As a matter of fact, she did," he answered, but something in his manner seemed to warn Lorimer that he preferred not to discuss the subject.

## CHAPTER XV

MRS. PONSFORD permitted herself to administer a mild rebuke, having realized, from something Janet said, that she had at least a partial recollection of the morning's happenings. For of course it mustn't happen again. No deviation from the excellent, accustomed, time-honored path! . . . Janet must remember what the doctor had said about not attempting to climb many stairs. And so early in the morning, before she had had even a cup of tea! . . . It was a great pity it had happened when Mr. Lorimer was there, and it would teach Janet a lesson. Such an awkward thing, too, for her to have to be carried down to her room by this

young man who was such a stranger to them all. Mrs. Ponsford's remonstrance was carefully fashioned, but every word went home. It was none the less forcible because so quietly delivered. She saw a little flush of shame creep into her daughter's face. She knew then that there would be no repetition of the offence. She bent down and kissed her.

"Now don't think any more about it, my dear. I'm sure you're very sorry that it happened." She had been accustomed to use those words to her children ever since they could remember.

Janet was afraid of her mother. She remembered the day when she had flung herself at her feet, and Mrs. Ponsford had failed her. Ever since that day she had had an eerie sense of fear when she thought of her mother. Some one who would stand by, calmly and approvingly, and watch her being hurt and do nothing to save her. In that dim life of hers, spent always upon the borderland of a very active subconsciousness, fear with Janet ruled supreme. And it was this very fact that Lorimer had so swiftly detected. It had established a kind of intimacy between them—the intimacy that need have no recourse to words. Yes, Lorimer, coming thus as a stranger among them, had not failed to lay unerring hands upon the key of the situation. He had wondered if John knew, and, sounding him, had discovered that he didn't. John's was a limpid nature; he loved his sister, but he had grown accustomed to the "treatment"; had not so far, perhaps, examined the case from the Catholic standpoint to discover how far that treatment combined a spiritual with a physical training. Lorimer wondered if Janet was aware of the repressed sensation that governed her, and came to the conclusion that subconsciously she was aware of it. But the storms that had passed over her had robbed her mind of something of its crystal clearness;

it was a stream that had had clouding things flung upon it from outside, as a mountain torrent is forced to bear on its surface the refuse of a great storm. And lastly Denis had wondered if Mrs. Ponsford had really envisaged the situation and simply declined to interfere with existing conditions that in her own opinion had borne such happy results. And gradually he became perfectly assured that this was the case. She might of course have been self-deceived, though Lorimer was too angry with her to give her the benefit of the doubt. But self-deception played a leading part in the life of many women of her generation. They refused—and perhaps wisely, for their own peace of mind—to look truth in the face. They preferred to keep it in its proper place at the bottom of the well, and to imbue themselves with all sorts of specious and plausible reasons for the necessity of such banishment. You did not call a spade a spade, but you heaped all kinds of pretty sentimental things about it to hide its crude outline, and sometimes you were even able to persuade yourself that it wasn't there. No spade at all! . . .

How much did she really believe about the valvular weakness of Janet's heart? She could always quote a doctor—perhaps the doctor had known the kind of woman he was dealing with. Or perhaps that diagnosis dated from many years back, when psychology was less studied in reference to disease.

Sometimes Lorimer raged at his own helplessness. He could get no nearer the truth, for since that morning in the chapel he had seen very little indeed of Janet. She had apparently recovered; after a couple of days spent entirely in her room, she appeared one day at luncheon. Beyond looking a little white and exhausted, she was not much the worse for the experience. But he noticed that she seldom addressed him except when it was absolutely necessary, and she avoided meeting his gaze. It was

as if she felt ashamed that he should have seen her in that moment of supreme bodily weakness.

Mrs. Ponsford said to her one day at luncheon:

"I think it's too unsettled for you to drive with me this afternoon, so I shall take Hodge. I should like you to lie down on the sofa in your room till tea-time. You must find a book—not a novel. A little serious reading, my dear."

"Very well, Mamma," acquiesced Janet.

"I'd rather you didn't go in the garden. It's very damp after all the rain in the night."

Lorimer was saying to himself: "How on earth does she bear it? And it can't be necessary. Why, she wants freedom!" He did not trust himself then to look at her.

It was a day of smiles and tears at Wanswater. An April moment at the end of November. The brown and purple bloom that lay like a sober-colored mist upon the woods was illuminated at intervals by flat bars of palest gold. The lake lay like a great white and silver shield under that changeful sky, and the rush of wind that ruffled and wrinkled its surface from time to time had a fresh spring-like quality. Janet, leaning her head out of the open window of her room, could almost have believed that Spring was on her way and that winter was over—the long dead winter which was so very long at Wanswater. The grass that spread along the shore of the lake was brightly green; amid the prevailing dun and white and gray it gave a sharp emphatic note of color. And in the water it made a reflection that was like a thin trickle of emerald.

The wheels of Mrs. Ponsford's carriage had died away in the distance. After all, the day had turned out brilliantly fine, with that fresh vigorous quality in the air which always stimulated Janet. She longed to go down to the rock-garden and see how things were getting on there. She had not been in the gar-

den since that attack in the chapel. But it was absurd to keep her indoors to-day . . .

John had motored over to the nearest mission, a distance of some seven miles across the hills. Lorimer was somewhere in the house. Janet wondered what he was doing. It must be very dull for him, all alone like that, with Johnny away for the whole afternoon. Perhaps that was why she had to keep up in her room, so that she shouldn't see Lorimer and talk to him. . . .

She looked down upon the garden and suddenly perceived Lorimer going towards the lake. He walked with a quick springy step as if he were just going to break into a run. His hair was uncovered and looked as black as a raven's wing. His stiff left arm hung down helplessly.

He did not look back at the house, but descended the steps into the lower garden, and presently reappeared in sight on a little narrow path close to the edge of Wanswater, where a small wooden landing stage had been erected.

Janet could see his tall figure silhouetted against the lake. Then he moved slowly out of sight; a group of trees hid him.

Lorimer's feet trod heavily on the moist rich soil that clung in black patches to his boots. A dark heavy soil this of Wanswater, the things that grew in it were a little rank. . . .

He glanced back in the direction of the house, of which only some of the windows were visible above the group of trees. It had a solid comfortable and peaceful aspect. It seemed tacitly to promise plenty of good food, punctually and regularly distributed, hot water in abundance, comfortable beds and chairs. The very outside look of it told you all that. But what it lacked was fresh air—pouring in streams and floods from the mountains and the fells, and the sea that lay beyond them. Fresh air penetrating

to the very corners, cold, stimulating but vigorously free! And he thought of Janet living her tragically-enclosed life there from long year's end to long year's end. Almost as enclosed as a cloistered nun's, but without the loving shaping discipline, the spiritual ideals, the overwhelming sense of "vocation," to make the yoke easy and the burden light.

He strolled along the lake-side in the direction of the village that lay a quarter of a mile away. He must buy some stamps, not many—he had so little money left. He wondered if John would be equal to another substantial check when they left Wanswater. If not, it would be difficult for him to make plans for the future. But he was getting stronger, the rest and good food had improved his condition. He had been pretty run down when he met John at Euston; couldn't have got through a day's work of the lightest kind then. . . .

He was in sight of the village—Wanside, lying like a pale scar in the plain at the foot of Dunnrigg. It looked charming, with its scattered groups of houses, its busy market-place, its church spire piercing the sky above a fine clump of elms. He was just going to take the path that led to the right across the fields, when he noticed some children playing close to the water's edge. He stood still for a moment to watch them. Two of the boys were quarreling—he was not near enough to ascertain the cause of the squabble. There was a brief fight with fists, in which the smaller boy, though standing up heroically to his opponent, was rapidly worsted. A sudden push sent him back stumbling to the very edge of the bank, and then, uttering a shrill scream, he slipped over it into the water, just where it ran deep and black. Lorimer thought he should never forget the way in which the water received the little falling body, closing over it, concealing it, like a

prey or a sacrifice, exactly as if the lake had indeed been the home of some fierce pagan deity that yearly demanded its sum of human toll. But the little body did not return to the surface, as is the custom of drowning men, and Lorimer flung off his coat and leapt into the lake.

The frightened horrified children on the bank saw Lorimer dive and disappear from sight. Then his dark head emerged from the surface before he plunged down once more into the black waters.

Twice he came up without success, and crippled by his useless arm he had hardly the strength to make a third plunge into those ice-cold depths. But this time when he came to the surface he struck out for the bank, and as he stood up it was seen that he was clasping an inert little body to his breast. He clambered up the slippery bank with difficulty and laid the child upon the grass. The effort had required all his strength, and as yet he did not know if he were holding a living or a dead boy in his grasp. Shivering and with teeth chattering, he sank down on his knees beside that lifeless-looking form.

"Please, sir, I didn't push him in. He slipped back," said the culprit whimpering.

Lorimer roused himself.

"Don't stand there lying to me—I saw you do it!" he said harshly. "Go to the village at once and fetch a doctor—bring back some blankets and brandy—if you don't look sharp he may die. And it will all be paid for—tell them at the shops!"

Two thoroughly scared children raced off in the direction of Wanside, relieved perhaps to escape from the scene of the disaster and to have active employment thrust upon them.

Lorimer, left alone, knelt down and worked away at the little arms. He was terribly handicapped by his own useless arm, and he despaired of bringing back consciousness to that little lifeless body that

only a few minutes ago had been fighting and quarreling after the manner of rough and healthy boyhood. He wiped the green clinging weeds from the mouth and face, loosened the clothing, pulled off the boots. It was no easy matter to accomplish all this single-handed, especially when he himself was half frozen by the sudden immersion.

He heard a footstep coming along the path. For a second he turned his head and saw that Janet Ponsford was hurrying towards him.

"Miss Ponsford! Thank God! I want help . . ."

"Let me help—tell me what to do." She was down on her knees by his side.

"Just go on working his arms like that—you can manage better than I can."

She obeyed. "You've been in the lake? Why, you're wet through!"

"I had to fish this youngster out. That's all right—only not so gently. Do it as roughly as you can. Work them well." He rose to his feet and shook the drops of water from him with something of the action of a big dog.

Janet was moving the child's arms up and down, as rapidly and roughly as she could. She found them very heavy. It needed all her strength to lift those slender stark limbs. All the time she was thinking: "It's no use—I know he's dead. . . ."

"That's splendid. I'll take a turn now. We must do what we can for the poor little chap. They're bringing brandy."

"It's Jimmy Nicholls, and he's an only child," she said, looking down at the little frozen face.

Lorimer pushed her aside with a slight yet convincing gesture of authority. He worked away with his only serviceable arm with a rough energy that in her secret soul she considered a trifle brutal.

"Take that other arm!" he commanded suddenly,

"work it for all your worth. He's coming round."

Janet obeyed, thrilling a little to the peremptory voice. She felt a quiver pass through the young frame; the lips parted, the eyelids flickered. It was like a return to life, slow, exquisitely painful, perhaps a torturing ecstasy, just as if the soul were a little unwilling to remain in its earthly tenement, as if it stayed there reluctantly.

Jimmy was wide-awake now; he began to sob in piteous fashion.

"What are you doing to me? What's the matter? Where am I?" He looked round, gazing vacantly at the two faces bending above him; his breath came in thick gasps.

Janet turned very white as she watched him . . .

"Get up off that damp grass, Miss Ponsford! And for goodness' sake don't faint or anything of that sort. I want your help."

Lorimer's voice was rough and brutal; he did not know why he obeyed a sudden impulse to speak in that way to Janet. Perhaps he had been afraid of the emotion, the unusual exertion for her; she had made such a tremendous effort to obey him, had worked so valiantly to restore Jimmy to consciousness. She rose to her feet, flinching as if he had struck her, but the rough domineering tone had scourged her to a new vitality. Her whole nature responded as if to a trumpet call. She stood there in an alert pose, ready to obey his least word or gesture. How splendid he was—how strong and powerful! When she was able to control her voice she said:

"You needn't be afraid. I'm not going to faint."

He had raised Jimmy's head a little, treating him now with a curious tenderness as if the boy had been actually dear to him.

She had never seen that side of him before—the side that cared most passionately for little children,

and for all helpless suffering things. And as she watched him, a warmth spread through her whole body, and she knew in that moment that she loved Lorimer. She longed to serve him. She wanted to obey him as a slave. She would not care if he were rough or cruel or even if he despised her, so only that she might serve him. . . .

A few minutes later two men arrived from the village on bicycles, bringing blankets and brandy. Denis took the bottle and poured some of the fiery liquid into the boy's mouth.

"We're going to take you home now," he said smiling at him.

"You'll be as right as rain in a few minutes. Help me to undress him, Miss Ponsford. We must get him out of these wet things and wrap him up in the blankets."

But Janet was already unfastening buttons. Her fingers worked quickly—and she had always been called clumsy. . . . Soon the boy was wrapped in the blankets and was being borne away to the village in the arms of the two men.

"The doctor's out this afternoon," they explained, "but his mother's getting everything ready—we only told her that he'd fallen into the water and we were going to fetch him home. She sets such store by Jimmy—it would have frightened her to know he'd been nearly drowned."

"Oh, then I won't come," said Denis; "I'll go back to the house and change. We'll send down later to hear how he's getting on. Good-bye, Jimmy." He touched the boy's cheek. "Next time you have a scrap keep away from the lake."

He and Janet walked back to the Grange together. Lorimer moved slowly and with difficulty, handicapped by his dripping clothing, his water-logged boots. They did not speak to each other on the way.

As they came up the path into the terraced garden, John's voice accosted them.

"My dear Denis—what on earth's happened? You look as if you had been in Wanswater!"

Lorimer was blue with cold; his teeth chattered.

"One of those village urchins got shoved into the lake and was a bit stunned in the process. We'd hard work—Miss Ponsford and I—to bring him round."

"Is he all right?" asked John eagerly. "Which boy was it?"

"Jimmy Nicholls," said Janet. "And they've carried him home—he seemed nearly all right."

"Well, you'll want attending to next, Denis! You're simply soaking," said John.

"So would you be if you dived three times into Wanswater!"

"I'll come up with you. Janet, you must go and tell them to bring hot-water-bottles and brandy.

Janet hurried into the house. John and Lorimer went upstairs together.

"I'd better have a hot bath to warm me up—I'm nearly frozen," said Denis. Strong shivers shook his frame; there was a blue look about his mouth. John helped him to remove his wet boots.

"Was Janet there all the time?" he asked.

"No, she didn't appear until after I'd got him out. That was the worst part—I couldn't find him at all at first. He'd gone down like a log, poor little chap. Game little chap, too. Of course I'm not much use with only one hand, but Miss Ponsford arrived on the scene and I showed her what to do."

"I wonder it didn't make her feel bad," said John, a little anxiously.

"Oh, I had her well under control," said Lorimer.

"I spoke to her pretty roughly and told her not to

faint or anything of that sort. She obeyed. . . .”  
His black eyes were full of light.

“I’m glad she didn’t give you any trouble.”

“Trouble? She was cool as a cucumber. She helped me—I couldn’t have got him round without the help of her two hands.”

“I’m so awfully glad she was of use.”

“It was jolly lucky for Jimmy that she did turn up.” Lorimer’s mouth was oddly compressed.

Hodge knocked at the door and came in carrying hot-bottles and some brandy.

“The bath’s ready, sir,” she said grimly.

She had been astonished to receive orders—and such orders—from Miss Janet. Lorimer felt that her manner towards him was obscurely hostile. So she was going to fight him, was she? Never mind—Janet was eternally on his side. He knew he had made her his slave, and that she showed him at least gratitude. He was certainly the first person who had ever treated her as if she were a responsible woman, capable, competent. . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

**I**T WAS John who recommended him to go to bed for a bit, and get thoroughly warm between hot blankets, and Lorimer did not contest the advice. He was by this time thoroughly exhausted, and knew that his nervous system had received a sharp shock. But the hot bath and bottles and blankets failed to bring back the slightest semblance of warmth to his frozen body. His teeth chattered and his shivering became so violent that the mahogany bed shook under him. John left the room for a

few minutes, and, without informing Lorimer, dispatched a messenger for the doctor.

He did not wish to alarm Janet. Probably she too was feeling the reaction after so much unaccustomed excitement. But he felt relieved that at a crucial moment she had not been found wanting. She had helped Lorimer; she had been of use. She had been put, in a sense, to the test.

Janet was in her room. It was not yet tea-time, but the short winter afternoon had darkened into night, and the lamp was lit on the table near her couch. She was reviewing the little sequence of events from the time when she had first perceived Lorimer walking down to the lake. For a little while she had resisted the impulse to go down and follow him. But there were things she wished to say to him. She had never had an opportunity of thanking him for the assistance he had rendered to her the other morning. She had been too timid to do so when her mother was present. Now would be a golden opportunity. Hodge was out driving with Mrs. Ponsford; John had gone over to Mossmere to visit a brother-priest. She could come back easily before the carriage returned, and no one would be any the wiser. And she was tired of staying indoors on such a fine sunny afternoon . . .

She was a little afraid that Hodge might hear of it. Hodge reported everything faithfully to Mrs. Ponsford. But presently there rose within her a feeling more urgent than fear. She must see Denis Lorimer and speak to him. She might never have such another opportunity. If she found that she was in the way—that he didn't want her—she could always make some excuse for returning to the house.

She put on a hat and coat and went downstairs and into the garden. The air was delicious, almost heady with an invigorating quality, like wine. It brought the color to her cheeks. She hurried along

the lake and arrived just in time to see Lorimer kneeling on the grass, bending over the prostrate form of little Jimmy Nicholls. She wondered if he had looked at her thus when she had lain unconscious that morning in the attic—with that curious solicitude and tenderness. As she came nearer she saw that both of them, the man and the child were both wet through. The water was dripping from Lorimer's clothes and hair, and the drops poured down his face in little streams.

Then had come that wonderful half hour in which she had been by his side, close to him, intimately associated with him in the tremendous task of restoring consciousness to the insensible, apparently lifeless form of Jimmy Nicholls. And she became aware during that time not only of Lorimer's nearness to her, but of something of his great power, his personal magnetism. His words had been neither kind nor courteous, yet she knew that no other incentive could have kept her alert, self-forgetful, competent, could have calmed the terrific excitement that was swaying her. She would far rather have died at his feet than failed him then. . . .

Yes, she had loved him at that moment. If he had chanced to look at her, he might have read it in her eyes. He had given her courage, yes, and confidence. He had not sent her away abruptly, lest she should faint. She had not the smallest hope, of course, that he would ever love her in return. Like so many women who have never been loved, Janet believed herself to be unlovable and perhaps even repellent. But she loved him and would have served him to the death.

She rose from the sofa. She did not want to rest; her mind was full of a strange activity that drove her into action. She went along the passage to Lorimer's room and knocked at the door. It was opened by John. He was astonished to see her.

He thought he had never seen her look so young and alive before. A faint misgiving seized him, and he closed the door quietly and came out to her in the passage.

"How is he?"

"Well, I can't get him warm. I've sent for the doctor. I've done simply everything I could think of."

"May I go in and see him for a moment, Johnny?"

"No, dear—I don't think you'd better. I want him to sleep if he can, and I'm sure he ought to keep quiet."

"I've got something I want to say to him."

Her persistence surprised him and deepened his misgivings.

"You shall say it to-morrow, dear Jane." His voice was kind but very firm.

Janet's face was very set. But she was accustomed to obey, and to persist in asking for anything that had been refused, was always dubbed as unreasonable. She did not want John to think her unreasonable; she dreaded to lose his good opinion. But now for the first time something angry and rebellious rose within her heart. She wanted to beat her hands against the hard wall of that eternal vigilance, the vigilance of her mother and Hodge. They watched her goings-out and comings-in, and abruptly checked any sign of initiative or independence on her part. They treated her, in short, as if she were still twelve years old. They loved her and they did it for her good—oh, she had been assured of that a thousand times!—and of course she tried not to show them how much they hurt her. But no pain had ever felt like this pain. They were going to keep her away from Lorimer . . . she would only see him alone by stealing out secretly and following him as she had done to-day. They guessed perhaps . . .

Suddenly she turned to John and said passionately:

"Only for a moment, please, Johnny darling! I want to see him so! Before Mamma sends for me to go down to tea. I'll never ask again . . ."

Her eyes were a little wild, and there was something both urgent and supplicating in her entreaty.

"Jane, dear, don't talk like that," he implored. "Surely you can be calm and reasonable and wait till to-morrow." He laid his hand on hers.

She took her hand away. "You don't know what it's like to be watched and watched always, and hindered and prevented!"

John slipped his arm about her. He was horrified and something of remorse seized him. He, loving her tenderly, had never suspected that she was cherishing a secret mutiny against the "treatment" of twenty-five years. The sight of her rebellion alarmed him. She had thrown off what seemed to be an almost lifelong disguise. And it was Lorimer who had wrought this wonder in her . . . had forced that prisoned soul to escape.

*Lorimer . . .*

He put his hand on the door and opened it.

"Just for a moment then, Jane. For his sake you mustn't make him talk much. He's had a shock and he isn't over fit."

She went swiftly, quietly, into the room and approached Denis's bedside. John stood in the doorway watching her, expecting every moment to hear the doctor's footstep upon the stairs. He felt anxious—he didn't like the look of Lorimer. And now there was Janet . . .

Lorimer's black hair was visible, making an inky patch against the pillows. John could see that he raised his head a little as Janet drew near. He put out his hand and she took it for a moment in hers. Only the low murmur of their voices reached him;

he could not hear anything that they said. The room was a large one, and Lorimer's bed was in the corner of it farthest from the door.

Janet, flushed and breathless with excitement, said:

"I wanted to come and see how you were. Do you want anything? Can I get you anything?"

"How dear of you to come!" said Lorimer, "but I don't want anything—John's seen to all that. He's nursed me before—when I got my arm hurt, you know, and I was laid up in Florence."

"I mustn't stay. John says you oughtn't to talk."

Lorimer raised sleepy black eyes. The lamplight showed him Janet with flushed face and shining eyes. If she would only learn to do her really pretty hair better, and to dress decently! . . . She had fallen in love with him, as perhaps he had intended all along that she should. Only it had happened rather too quickly; if discovered, it might abruptly terminate his stay at Wanswater. Drowsily he remembered that she had six hundred a year of her own. Not much in these days for two people, but better—a great deal better—than nothing at all! . . .

"Come back and see me again," he said. "You did most awfully well to-day. Was I very rude to you? I didn't mean to be. I'm always rude when I'm frightened, and I thought that poor little chap would never come round. I said 'Hail Mary's' all the time—I don't think I ever said so many before. And then you came . . ."

Try as he would, he could not keep something of tenderness from his voice.

Janet was speechless.

"When you come back—perhaps to-morrow morning when I'm sure to feel more intelligent—I hope you'll bring a book and read to me. I like being read to."

"Yes, I'll come," said Janet. She was wondering

if she would have the courage to make a second struggle.

Lorimer put out his hand again.

"Good-night. Bless you!" he said with a smile.

Janet went out of the room.

"I wasn't too long, was I, Johnny? I don't think it's hurt him," she said.

All her thoughts were aglow; she seemed to be treading on air. Her eyes were full of a strange light.

"No—no—I'm sure you've done him good," said John.

On the stairs Janet passed Dr. Stokes, a comparatively young man, who had lately come to practise in Wanside after the death of old Dr. Taylor. He gave Janet a quick scrutinizing glance, for he had heard a good deal about her malady, and perhaps he wondered a little why he had never been called in to prescribe for her. He was clever, possessing a thoroughly modern equipment, and from his experiences in the War he was well versed in nervous cases.

They bowed to each other, and Janet went down to tea. Mrs. Ponsford did not allude to the disaster of the afternoon, so Janet rightly concluded she had so far not heard that she, Janet, had been mixed up in it. She would be angry, of course, when she heard that Janet had disobeyed her and gone out, especially after she had told her exactly how she wished her to spend the afternoon. But this evening Janet felt a strange new courage.

Later in the evening when Dr. Stokes's remedies had produced a semblance of warmth in Lorimer's half-frozen body, John said to Denis:

"I'm going down for a second to see Janet."

Denis put down a cup of half-finished tea.

"She's none the worse, I hope," he said.

"No. But these attacks always come on rather suddenly."

He felt vaguely anxious about her. She had looked so changed this evening, almost what the villagers would call "fey."

"She must suffer a great deal," Denis observed.

"Suffer? No, I don't think so. She remembers nothing, you see, as a general rule. The other morning was quite an exception. It's her utter unconsciousness of what's happened that saves her. Otherwise she'd live in perpetual fear of an attack—she'd be afraid to go out even in the garden alone. She'd learn to watch for the symptoms—to remember what happened last time."

"And it has never occurred to you that she does remember—does dread?" said Lorimer.

John paused.

"I'm very intimate with my sister. I think she would have told me—if there had been anything of the kind."

"Fear has been known to keep people silent about experiences of the sort, especially if she is not encouraged to speak of them. There's such a danger, you know, about long-continued repression—"

"Fear? But my dear Lorimer, whom on earth should she be afraid of?"

Lorimer longed to cry out: "Your mother—Hodge—all of you—who are keeping her in prison! Why, she isn't *free* to speak!"

But as he looked at John's frankly perplexed face his heart sank. John's love and confidence in his mother's wisdom were obviously complete and unshakable.

"It's always been such a comfort to us to feel that she didn't suffer," continued John Ponsford. "To a sensitive nature like hers the knowledge would

mean a degree of mental suffering terrible to contemplate."

But even as he spoke, the remembrance of Janet's passionate words that very evening, when she had pleaded for admittance to Denis's room, came back to him with an almost sinister significance. What if she did repress—as Lorimer seemed to suggest—that fear and suffering of hers?

Lorimer made an impatient movement. He had read all the signs of spiritual suffering in Janet Ponsford's face. Something of those fierce experiences remained with her, even if only subconsciously; of that he was absolutely convinced. A violent nightmare, even if only imperfectly remembered, will remain unpleasantly in the background of the mind for many days afterwards. It may leave little trace beyond a haunting imperfectly-apprehended fear, a fugitive malaise.

John was speaking again.

"So I'm sure I needn't ask you, Denis, to talk to her as little as possible on the subject. If she mentions it to you, turn her thoughts to something else. We have always adhered to this policy, and it's according to the advice of a well-known specialist."

Lorimer cleared his throat. The sense of returning warmth gave him a feeling of exquisite comfort. He turned lazily on his side and said:

"But, my dear John—that's the treatment for brainstorms, not for heart!"

"Specialists have assured us that these attacks are due to heart," said John. A quick flush had mounted to his forehead. He felt that this was no new supposition—Lorimer must have had it in his mind ever since his first meeting with Janet. But to hear it put thus into words, deliberately, brutally, gave him something of a shock. For lately, since his return to the Grange after a long absence, he

had not been without a sense of anxiety concerning Janet. He seemed to be studying her from a new angle, from a Catholic standpoint, and in this examination he could not but perceive that while her body was so carefully looked after, while she was fed and clothed and housed, watched lest she should suffer from fatigue or excitement, no one ever did anything for her starved soul. Did Lorimer see this, too? Lorimer was not a good Catholic, but he was perfectly aware of all that the Catholic religion could do both for body and soul. And his interest in Janet had obviously deepened since he had witnessed the acute physical collapse to which her malady could reduce her. There was curiosity in his attitude towards her, and with it there was something of compassion, as if he believed that she was imperfectly understood and inadequately treated. John knew that during the months spent in the hospital in France, Denis had applied himself to the study of those nervous cases with which he had been associated. Such studies had been of a morbid rather than of a wholesome and sane character. He had watched men, with whom loss of memory seemed to have been complete, gradually brought back to a realization of their own identity and to a remembrance of past happenings. Sometimes it had seemed to him that the process was cruel, almost like a kind of torture. He had always been interested in those nervous diseases of the mind which can so fatally affect the body. Pathological psychology in all its various ramifications had attracted him, as well as the more modern craze for "psycho-analysis." He secretly believed that "possession" was imperfectly apprehended and inadequately studied by the doctors of the present day. Once Lorimer had had some idea of becoming a doctor, possibly a brain-specialist, himself; but he had renounced such ambition because, as he ex-

pressed it, he could never remember the names of all those tiresome bones and arteries.

"She ought to be a Catholic," he murmured sleepily, for he felt that he had said enough—perhaps a little too much, judging by John's gravely anxious face. "It would give her an outlet. And then the joys, John, of sacramental absolution . . ."

John longed to cry: "Physician, heal thyself! . . ." But the time was not ripe. The pride of Denis Lorimer would have to undergo many and many a scourging before he was brought to his knees in the Sacrament of Penance.

## CHAPTER XVII

**A**FTER tea that evening when John came down to report Lorimer's progress to his mother, Janet stole upstairs to her room. She had a great longing to be quite alone for a little while. Her mother would not miss her; she was talking to John; She disapproved of his having sent for "this new man," Dr. Stokes, whom she regarded as quite unworthy to succeed old Dr. Taylor, who certainly for ten years past had had the proverbial one-foot-in-the-grave. Indeed he would have long ago relinquished the task of physicking Wanside folk if it had not been for the War, when patriotically he had felt that by continuing his labors, he was setting free an able-bodied young man for service in France. He had died "in harness," two months after the Armistice.

Janet lit the two tall candles that stood one on each side of the massive mahogany looking-glass, and regarded herself attentively in the mirror. Candle-light is commonly held to be becoming, softening harsh outlines and dimming the ravages of Time.

But to-night Janet saw herself under no flattering aspect. She saw the ill-done hair that long ago had lost its bright loveliness and showed here and there a white thread or two. Especially near the temples . . . And there were lines, sharply cut, at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Little perpendicular lines between the rather undefined eyebrows. She had never been pretty, but surely she must once have possessed what is known as the beauty of youth, its rounded contours, its glossy locks, its smooth un-wrinkled skin. Violet, four or five years older than herself, was still often spoken of as the "beautiful Lady Bradney." Since her widowhood a couple of years ago, she had had several offers of marriage. Pamela Ponsford had told Janet about it. At the Grange it would have been considered "bad form" to mention such a thing as that, and Mrs. Ponsford, hearing of the revelations most innocently made, had lectured her granddaughter on the evil habit of gossiping. "I wish she'd just leave Pam alone," said Sara, when these details reached her ears. "If Violet was foolish enough to refuse old Chandler and his millions all the world ought to know of it."

Janet continued her examination, putting the thought of Violet from her mind. Lady Bradney belonged to a different sphere, where women were free, were beautiful, were beloved. She looked attentively at her dowdy old-fashioned dress of nondescript hue that made her skin look even more dingy, and accentuated the angularity of her figure, robbing it of the little grace it possessed.

"I'm hideous—and old! . . . Of course he couldn't love me!" she said in a whisper to that pathetic woman who confronted her in the mirror. "He's so wonderful he could marry anybody. . . ." That pale unhappy image seemed to repeat and echo the words.

Then all of a sudden she bowed her head in her hands and wept. Those sobs she could no longer control, shook and rent her body. The years had gone by, and she had scarcely noticed their passing. She had not rebelled against the gray drab life that they had imposed upon her. She had accepted those existing conditions because of the weakness of her physical health. And she had not been actively unhappy in that twilight existence of hers until the coming of Lorimer. She could not remember that she had wished for anything else, except in very wicked moments when she had prayed that Hodge might die or leave them forever. But now she wept passionately over those dead days that had passed, taking with them her youth, the prettiness she had once possessed, and leaving her with her pale worn face, her wistful eyes, her graying hair. She saw herself as Lorimer must surely see her, and she wept. Bitter, strangled sobs broke from her. Yes, he had praised her to-day, he had been—except for those few sharp words—extraordinarily kind. Despite his now intimate knowledge of her physical infirmity, he had treated her like a perfectly normal woman, inviting her help and appreciating its adequacy. For just those few minutes she had felt strong, capable, competent. How Hodge would have laughed at the idea of her being useful to any one! Her feeble incompetence was so often shamed by hearing Hodge say: "Here, Miss Janet—let me do that for you. Your fingers are all thumbs." Yes, Hodge had been saying that to her for thirty years, and she had come to believe that she was abnormally useless, clumsy and awkward. . . .

The scalding tears dripped through her fingers. Yes, there was something of anger in them, something of rebellion, against those who had deliberately helped to destroy her youth. They had kept

her here, year after year, without change, without freedom, like a caged bird. The very mountains seemed to aid and abet them in that imprisonment of her. The Eastern Pikes with their jagged teeth, the great shoulder of Wansdale Raise, the lovely shape of Dunnrigg, colored green and gray and violet and tawny brown, that presided over Wansdale, stern, protective, remote . . . all these combined to shut out the world from her. If it had not been for John, she would have lived and died here without ever seeing Denis Lorimer. . . .

The door opened and Hodge came into the room.

"Mrs. Ponsford is asking for you, miss. She says will you go downstairs at once?"

Janet turned a tear-stained slightly swollen face towards the maid. The candles cruelly illuminated it, showing all the ravages wrought by that tempestuous uncontrolled weeping. Hodge bestowed upon her a severe scrutiny.

In Janet's childhood Hodge had physically enforced such a request as this one, had there been any symptom of delay or disobedience on the part of her victim. Even now, Janet could almost feel that firm bony hand clutching her thin shoulder or arm, while the iron voice said; "If there's any nonsense, Miss Janet, I shall go and fetch your Mamma!"

"Tell Mamma I can't come down—I'm not feeling well."

She repressed a sob.

"Shall I tell Mrs. Ponsford you would prefer her to come up?" inquired Hodge, patiently.

"No . . . no!" said Janet.

"She won't like to hear you've been crying, miss. Let me wash your face. Dear me, what a sight! You're too old to be such a cry-baby, Miss Janet."

Too old? Yes, too old for anything . . . The

tears flowed freely again. Even Hodge's presence could not produce its usual sobering effect.

"No—no—please leave me. I want to be alone. I can't come down."

Hodge waited passively. She was certain that the mood would pass. Miss Janet hadn't been quite "the thing" since that last attack—she and Mrs. Ponsford had both noticed it.

"Tell Father John to come—I'll see him," said Janet in desperation.

"Father John's gone back to sit with Mr. Lorimer, miss. I must go downstairs—Mrs. Ponsford doesn't like to be kept waiting. I'll tell her that something's upset you. But she doesn't like to hear of your crying. . . ." She moved towards the door.

Janet yielded. "Tell Mamma I'll come in a few minutes. Don't say that I've been crying."

"Mrs. Ponsford will see that fast enough for herself, miss," said Hodge, in her prim censoring fashion. She retreated slowly, wondering what was the matter with Miss Janet. Why had she been crying? Lately, despite that last attack, she had seemed in better spirits than usual. What had happened to upset her? Was it this accident, so to speak, in which Mr. Lorimer had got a thorough soaking so that he had been obliged to go to bed, see the doctor, and have no end of fuss made about him? It wasn't as if he'd been in any danger. A little cold water wouldn't hurt the likes of him—so ran Hodge's disdainful thoughts, for she had examined and inwardly condemned his scanty and inadequate wardrobe. Not a single silk shirt—not a single pair of silk socks! . . . So different from Mr. Stephen and all the other gentlemen who stayed at the Grange, sons or sons-in-law of Mrs. Ponsford. She would like him to see Sir Cosmo Bradney's wardrobe. Her Ladyship chose everything

herself, and nothing but the best would satisfy her! Hodge could hardly bring herself to think of the worn blue serge suit that Father John had sent down that afternoon to be dried in the hot cupboard, with instructions to Watson that it was to be well pressed when dry. Mended, if you please! . . . And badly mended, too, with cotton of a different color. The lining torn in the armholes . . . The trousers frayed at the edges . . . No tailor's name in gilt lettering inside the coat. Nothing to tell you where it was made. And the boots . . . Hodge shrank from consideration of those worn and patched boots. Yes, patched, and the laces broken and knotted. If she had liked him better, she would have put in new ones, but there was something odd about his face, and the way he spoke to Miss Janet, that she didn't hold with at all. He must be real poor, that man. An adventurer, picked up by Father John out of charity, as likely as not. The workhouse was the place for people like that, people who were poor and wouldn't work. . . .

She returned to the library. Mrs. Ponsford looked up sharply, expecting to see Janet.

"Why, where's Miss Janet, Hodge?" she asked, with a very slight suggestion of irritability in her voice.

"She's coming in a few minutes, ma'am. She isn't quite ready. She seems a little upset this evening—she was crying when I went into her room."

"Crying!" repeated Mrs. Ponsford, in a voice that held something of both contempt and exasperation. "Why, what can possibly have upset her, do you think, Hodge?"

"I'm afraid I'm not able to form an opinion, ma'am," replied Hodge sententiously.

"Now, Hodge, none of that, if you please! Tell me exactly what you think." Mrs. Ponsford's bright encouraging smile seemed rather to accen-

tuates than diminish the note of authority in her clear voice.

Few people could resist her when she smiled. Her smile lit up her whole face, her mouth, her eyes. When she had been young it had conquered both men and women, and she was perfectly aware of its undiminished power. With her, it was not always, nor even very frequently, a sign of mirth or merriment; it seemed rather to be an emanation from that iron unbendable will of hers, to denote a consciousness of power and authority that was extremely pleasing to their owner.

It made Hodge feel slightly uncomfortable, as if her own thoughts concerning Janet's grief had been very foolish. And if Mrs. Ponsford were further to discern her reflections upon the subject of Mr. Lorimer, she would scarcely escape censure.

She was never permitted, as some old servants are, to criticize the guests who came to the house. She was jealous of them if they were popular, and uncharitable if they were not. Mrs. Ponsford had long ago discovered this tendency to criticize and carp in her otherwise invaluable Abigail, and had checked it with some severity. She still had the upper hand of Hodge.

"Most women of my age are slaves to their maids," she used to say frankly, with that disarming brightness of hers. "And I don't intend to be. I've an idea Hodge might prove rather a strenuous taskmaster!"

An excellent quality, however, where Janet was concerned; it was good for Janet to feel the firm guiding hand of authority.

"I think, if you please, ma'am, if you'll allow me to say so, that Miss Janet's upset about this—this accident to Mr. Lorimer."

"And what makes you think such a thing as that?"

inquired Mrs. Ponsford; "you must have something to base your opinion on. Tell it to me."

"You see, ma'am, she was there just after it had happened. Found him kneeling on the grass trying to get Jimmy round."

"She was there?" repeated Mrs. Ponsford angrily. "How do you know she was? I told her to stay in her room this afternoon. How did she come to be there?"

"I don't know, ma'am. When the boy went on his bicycle to fetch Dr. Stokes, he heard a lot of gossip in the village. The children said Miss Ponsford wasn't there when Jimmy fell into the lake nor even when Mr. Lorimer jumped in and pulled him out. But when they came back with some brandy and blankets she was there. All the children know Miss Janet by sight, ma'am. I could hardly believe it myself, but her shoes were wet and very muddy—I've taken them down to be dried."

The pink flush deepened in Mrs. Ponsford's plump cheeks.

"I never heard anything so disgraceful!" she said. "It seems I can't turn my back for an hour without being disobeyed. Do you think Mr. Lorimer had asked her to follow him in this way?" She could hardly believe that Janet had herself evolved a course that required so much cool initiative and even daring. But this young man had evidently encouraged her, laughing at her in his sleeve all the time, no doubt! . . . And now she was discovered crying in her room. Crying, if you please! . . . Mrs. Ponsford's eyes gleamed like angry sapphires.

"That I can't possibly say, ma'am. But judging by many things," (she thought hastily of the sad condition of his clothes) "I should say that more unlikely things have happened. He's a very obsti-

nate pertinacious young man and it wasn't easy to get him to go away the other morning when Miss Janet was just coming round after her attack."

Mrs. Ponsford wondered inconsequently where Hodge obtained her vocabulary. Pertinacious? Well, the sooner he took his pertinacity off to some more promising and fruitful *venue* the better! She wasn't going to keep him here to put all sorts of ideas into Janet's head. Janet would be imagining herself in love next.

"Very well, Hodge. That will do. If Miss Janet doesn't come down I'll ring for you again."

Hodge withdrew. In the hall outside she encountered Miss Ponsford. She was deathly pale, and her eyes were scarlet-rimmed; her hair was slightly disheveled; her head ached and burned.

"She'll catch it from her ma, if I'm not mistook," murmured Hodge, as she repaired to the servants' hall.

The mother and daughter were alone together. Mrs. Ponsford controlled her anger with an effort. She looked at Janet and then said:

"Why didn't you tell me you went out this afternoon?"

Janet was silent.

"What made you go out, after I'd told you not to?"

"It was such a lovely sunny afternoon," said Janet. "I couldn't bear to stay indoors."

"Did Mr. Lorimer invite you to accompany him?" pursued Mrs. Ponsford.

It was really necessary to discover what was going on in Janet's mind. And it could only be done by questioning. Mrs. Ponsford had no thought of cruelty; she would have said that she wished to save Janet from herself.

"Oh, no; he was surprised to see me. He said it was providential, my coming just then."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Ponsford dryly.

John must really get rid of this highly unnecessary young man the moment he had recovered from the effects of his immersion. To-morrow perhaps, or the day after. . . .

"You see, I helped him. With only one hand it was difficult for him to bring Jimmy round."

"Oh, I've no doubt of your competence. But will you tell me why you were there at all?"

"I thought I should like to go in the garden."

"Yes, but this didn't happen in the garden. It happened down near Stubb's Cottages. What made you go there?"

"I . . . I just went," said Janet feebly.

"Yes. But what made you think of it? Did you know that Mr. Lorimer had gone in just that direction?"

Janet hesitated. Then she said "Yes," in a faint voice.

"Now I wonder what made you follow him like that?" said Mrs. Ponsford.

She fixed her blue eyes upon her daughter. Janet lowered her own before that bright and menacing scrutiny. She cried out at last:

"He told me that I'd helped him. You see, he showed me what to do—how to keep moving Jimmy's arms . . . it was quite easy, only they were so heavy. . . ."

"My dear, I'm afraid you're thinking too much about this young man! Dear John asked him here out of charity, and the less you see of him the better. Now I want to know exactly why you've been crying."

"I don't know," said Janet desperately. The thought of that pale dreadful face in the glass, with its timorous almost foolish expression, its wistful eyes, dull skin, and graying hair, came back to her with renewed force. She envied her mother, who

was more than thirty years her senior, because her cheeks were still plump and rosy, her hair thick and of a beautiful whiteness, her eyes blue and keen with almost the bright look of steel in them. She remembered some one had told her long ago that her mother had made a beautiful bride when at the age of nineteen she had married the Rev. Charles Ponsford.

"Now, that's an absurd answer, Janet," she said briskly. "Of course you know, and of course you are going to tell me. If you have any little thing on your mind you had much better confess it. For instance, were you upset—frightened—anxious about Mr. Lorimer's safety?"

"Oh, no; I didn't see him in the water. If I'd seen him jump in to try to pull Jimmy out with only one hand to do it with, I think I should have been frightened. But it was nothing to do with that at all." She made the statements hurriedly and nervously. But they carried no conviction to her mother's ears.

"Dear Janet, I think I must insist upon your telling me. I can't have you running after Mr. Lorimer like this—it's very undignified and it only makes you look foolish. And then you come home and go up to your room to cry like a baby. You know I never allow you to behave in this way. Besides, it's bad for you. Remember what happened the other morning—all the result of imprudence and disobedience. Do you want me to tell Hodge that she mustn't let you out of her sight? For that's what will happen if I have any more of this kind of thing, and so I warn you. Now tell me at once what you were crying about!"

The old tone of command had its effect upon Janet. For more years than she cared to count, she had found it irresistible. And then that dreadful threat to make Hodge keep her always in sight,

Such a prospect was unthinkable. The vigilance was so seldom relaxed as it was.

"I was crying—because I'm getting old," said Janet. She spoke reluctantly, and the tears filled her eyes once more. Would that simple statement satisfy her mother? Or would she probe on with practised merciless scalpel till she came to the heart of the truth—that heart that shrank from the gaze of such pitiless eyes?

"Silly child!" said Mrs. Ponsford, feeling nevertheless relieved. "But what made you think about such a thing to-day?"

"I . . . don't know," said Janet, helplessly.

"Was it anything to do with Mr. Lorimer?" The voice was hard and clear, and the question seemed to ring through the little room.

It was, thought Janet, rather like one of those dreadful games you played as a child, called *What is my Thought like?* One of the number thought of something, and all the rest sat round plying the victim with questions. And in the end some one always discovered that thought . . .

She shrank back in her chair and hid her face in her hands. A low moan escaped her, it might have emanated from some wounded animal.

"No . . . no! Oh, no—it can make no difference to *him!*" She began to sob anew.

"Do you mean you think he might have fallen in love with you if you had been younger?"

"Oh, no . . . no . . . ! . . ."

Of course the Thought had been discovered. The cleverest, most alert player could never ultimately conceal it.

"You have always been too delicate to marry. And I should never have permitted a daughter of mine at any age to marry a man like Mr. Lorimer. You are too old to be so sentimental, Janet—you

should check such thoughts at once and not give way to them."

Mrs. Ponsford spoke with brisk decision. There was a pause, broken only by Janet's sobs, which she strove valiantly to suppress.

"Stop crying," said Mrs. Ponsford; "really for a woman of thirty-five you are extraordinarily childish. If you don't stop at once, I shall ring for Hodge, and you must go up to bed. You'll make yourself quite ill and give every one a lot of trouble."

Janet dried her tears. She obeyed her mother almost mechanically. The ring of authority in Mrs. Ponsford's voice braced her to the effort like the flick of a whip. It inspired, too, a sense of apprehension and fear. To be led upstairs and helped to undress by Hodge was a humiliating process. Even as a child she had felt it to be a little degrading. It was not a punishment, but it always seemed to her to hold something of the shame of punishment. It had to be done because she was ill, but Hodge always seemed to convey her unspoken conviction that illness of that kind, nervous illness, was a subtle kind of naughtiness that required a certain retribution. And to-night Janet felt that it would be an unbearable termination to a day that had been so wonderful, a thing to be eternally remembered. Hadn't she helped Mr. Lorimer—working with all her strength under his sharp short directions? Hadn't he praised her? Yes, he had treated her like a woman, not like a foolish child. He was the first, the very first to do that. And it had made her his devoted, adoring slave . . .

Mrs. Ponsford said slowly:

"I believe Johnny has to go away for a few days on Thursday. I shall tell him to arrange for Mr. Lorimer to go with him. It would be altogether too dull for a young man to stay here with only two elderly women to entertain him."

Two elderly women . . . Janet felt her heart sink, and a strange cold sensation came over her. Yes, he would go away, and he would never, never be invited to return. She would never see him again. She tottered to her feet, stood there with her hand on the back of a chair as if to support herself, and cried:

“Oh, you are cruel—*cruel!*”

But the effort was too much for her. She gave a prolonged and shrill cry, and fell insensible upon the floor. Mrs. Ponsford had just time to rise from her seat and go up to her to break her fall a little. There was always a danger that Janet might really hurt herself.

Then she left her daughter lying there, prone and unconscious upon the carpet, and rang the bell violently. Yes, she might have known it would end like this. And Mr. Lorimer too! . . . “*What next, indeed?*”

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE ringing of the library bell had been too violent and prolonged, not to convey a sense of urgency and perhaps disaster to the assembled servants; and Hodge, followed by Watson, rushed with all haste into the room.

“That’s Miss Janet been took ill, you *may* depend!” said the cook, a stout elderly woman with a marked preference for the “kitchen plots.” “There’ll be beef-tea wanted to-morrow.” She went on cooking the dinner with perfect calmness. Nothing short of a fire would have constrained her to leave the kitchen at such a moment. “Luckily there’s lots of boiling water. Miss Hodge’ll soon

be down to fetch some." She continued stirring the sauce with practised hand.

In the library there was commotion, but no dismay. Hodge knew exactly what to do. Father John was summoned and carried his sister up to her room. Her clothing was loosened; hot bottles were brought; she was laid upon the bed. A spoonful of brandy was forced between the parted pallid lips. Hodge gave her an injection which had long ago been recommended by Sir Oswald Metcalfe as an emergency measure. She had been taught to administer it, and sometimes the sudden sharp prick had brought Janet to her senses with its tingling pain. To-night, however, although Hodge had given it with more force than gentleness, the prostrate form did not quiver.

"More brandy—I can hardly feel her pulse," said John.

They obeyed him. Mrs. Ponsford poured out the brandy. She could see that John was alarmed. But she had witnessed far worse attacks than this. Still, two in a week—it was unusual for them to follow each other with such rapidity. It would teach John not to bring strange, attractive, and impecunious young men to the house. What Janet required was perfect quiet, and freedom from any kind of excitement. This Lorimer must have shown her a certain pitying attention—quite the worst thing for her. He must leave Wanswater as soon as possible. She really couldn't have Janet sacrificed for the sake of his soul! . . . These resolutions passed stormily through Mrs. Ponsford's mind. She felt angry to-night with all her immediate entourage; she was angry with Lorimer, who had precipitated the crisis; with John for bringing him to Wanswater; and with Janet for her foolish tears and those horrible words of hers: "*Oh, you*

*are cruel—cruel! . . .*” Such a thing for a daughter to say to her mother, whose one object in life was to protect her from ill and to watch over her health. . . . Janet, with all her faults, had never before displayed any sign of this crass ingratitude.

Then Janet had been such a fool, crying like that over her lost youth; she had needed just a few severe words to check such ridiculous lamentations. It wasn't as if she had ever been pretty or attractive or even intelligent; she had always been plain and awkward and stupid, the ugly duckling . . . And this man Lorimer—a person quite remote from their own circle, whom John had befriended out of pity! . . .

Suddenly John said: “I wonder if Stokes is back yet? He said he'd look in on his way home to see how Lorimer was getting on. He'd better see Janet. Do ask if he's come, Hodge.”

Hodge went reluctantly out of the room. They had far better have left her quite alone with her patient. She knew so well how to manage her, what to say when she came round.

“I'm sure it was most unnecessary that he should pay two visits in one afternoon,” said Mrs. Ponsford. There was a note of exasperation in her voice. John must really learn not to exaggerate the significance of this young man.

“Well, Stokes didn't think so—it was his own suggestion. Lorimer's got a touch of fever now—he was shivering, didn't know quite what he was saying—asked if the boy was safe and all that sort of thing. It was a jolly plucky thing to do, wasn't it? The lake's so deep just there.”

Mrs. Ponsford was silent. She continued to chafe Janet's hands.

“Stokes says he thinks he'll be as right as rain in about a week, if he doesn't get pneumonia.”

"In a week? But I thought you were going away on Thursday? What are you going to do about him?"

"I shan't go if he's very bad, but if I do, I'll leave him to all your tender mercies!" He grinned. "Especially Hodge's. It'll be a sound mortification for her to look after him."

"Hodge's place is here. With Janet," said Mrs. Ponsford, closing her lips firmly. "I couldn't spare her to nurse this man." She glanced significantly at her daughter's prostrate and unconscious form.

"More brandy," said John. "Is she often as long as this? Poor old Jane!" He administered a few drops of brandy. "Janet will help, too, when she's better—it'll be a capital thing for her—take her out of herself, and Denis likes her. She can read to him—amuse him."

"What you suggest is impossible and I should never allow it," said Mrs. Ponsford in a tone of finality. "She's inclined to be sentimental about him as it is—I found that out this evening. And of course he sees it, too, and plays up—that sort of man would. You must take him away to the hospital at Kenstone—there's a private ward where he'll have every attention."

John felt stupefied at these unexpected revelations. Where he had feared and perhaps dreaded, Mrs. Ponsford had apparently discovered irrefutable evidence. How did she know? Had Janet said anything? Poor Janet . . . He was just going to reply when Hodge entered the room.

"Dr. Stokes has just come, ma'am. He'll be down in a moment. I think it's time for a second injection." She took up the needle, examining it.

Janet was still lying there with closed eyes and parted lips, her face deathlike in its livid pallor.

"Don't pump any more poison into her till Stokes has seen her," said John.

The words made Hodge flinch, but she stood her ground.

"Poison, sir? Sir Oswald Metcalfe said it was the best thing to bring her round from a very obstinate attack." There was reproach in her voice as she mentioned this unimpeachable authority.

"All right, Hodge. Wait till Stokes has seen her."

Mrs. Ponsford intervened.

"Hodge is so accustomed to Janet's attacks. I don't think we ought to interfere. And this young Stokes has probably had no experience of these cases. A young man like that! I wonder you troubled to send for him."

But John shook his head. He was thinking of Lorimer's words. Lorimer at any rate didn't believe that the malady had been accurately diagnosed, certainly in its present phase. And Sir Oswald, a great man in his day, had been dead these twenty years. It was high time to have a fresh more modern opinion. They had all got into a rut of cruelty where Janet was concerned. Oh, it was no use mincing matters! They didn't allow her space in which to breathe. She was caged, imprisoned, aware of suffering. She was so completely in the hands of Hodge. And he remembered with a pang the almost vindictive manner in which Hodge had administered the injection, plunging the needle into that white arm with merciless force.

"What am I to do, ma'am?" said Hodge, in a tone of patient resignation. She was still fingering the polished surface of the syringe.

"You must obey Father John," said Mrs. Ponsford; "he must take all the responsibility. I hope Dr. Stokes will come down soon."

"You can go and tell him to come at once. We can't let this go on—please make haste, Hodge," said John.

Hodge moved sullenly away. "He didn't used to interfere," she muttered. "Getting made a Papist and a priest has been the ruin of him. He was always so civil-spoken before, and now he don't trust any one without they're of his own way of thinking. And such a fuss, too, over that there Lorimer."

In the passage, outside Lorimer's room, she encountered Dr. Stokes.

"Father John wants you to come at once, if you please, sir."

"Yes, I'm sorry to keep him waiting. But I couldn't leave Mr. Lorimer. You'd better stay with him till I come back, in case he wants anything. It never rains but it pours—you'll have two patients to look after now."

Hodge did not reply. The gay pleasant tone won no response from her.

"I'm sure you've had plenty of experience of nursing. Father John says you've been with his mother thirty years. Mr. Lorimer'll want poultices and beef-tea and lots of looking after."

"I've enough to do looking after Miss Janet, sir," she replied.

"Oh, Miss Janet will be better for being left alone a bit."

Hodge moved unwillingly towards Lorimer's room. Was she to take orders—and such orders too—from this young upstart of a doctor who had never set foot in the house before? So different from old Dr. Taylor, with his implicit confidence in her unwearying devotion to Miss Janet! Better for being left alone indeed . . . Left alone so that she could go out by herself and get mixed up with accidents and people like Mr. Lorimer. Hodge had never held with young doctors, and this one seemed to talk of illness as if it were a joke. What did he know about Miss Janet? Left alone indeed!

they would send for her fast enough when there was an injection to be given . . .

John said: "What's that stuff Hodge was giving her with the syringe? I didn't like the way she gave it—it seemed to me that she used unnecessary violence."

Dr. Stokes was feeling Janet's pulse. He made no sign of having heard John's remark.

"Hodge knows exactly what to do. She's been doing this sort of thing for thirty years. Sir Oswald Metcalfe—"

"Metcalfe? Metcalfe?" said Dr. Stokes, looking up. "Don't know the name! London man?"

"Twenty years ago he was the first heart specialist in London," said Mrs. Ponsford.

"Oh, a heart specialist! . . . But haven't you ever let her see a brain specialist?"

The words were uttered now, and John felt as much relieved as if the doctor had revealed a guilty secret that was weighing on his own conscience.

Mrs. Ponsford turned quite pale. But she recovered quickly from the unexpected impact, severe though it had been.

"My daughter's heart has been affected since she was nine years old."

"She mustn't have any more injections to-day," said Dr. Stokes. "What was given her? Let me see the bottle."

Mrs. Ponsford named the drug. "Generally that—and the prick—brings her round at once."

Stokes repressed an ironic smile.

"Well, we'll try something a little less drastic. Had Miss Ponsford had anything to upset her to-day?"

"She had rather a shock—you see she arrived just in time to find Lorimer trying to bring little Jimmie Nicholls round. She helped him—" explained Father John.

"That oughtn't to have hurt her. Did she seem all right when she came in?"

"Oh, yes," said John, before his mother could speak. "She was just a little excited . . . that's all."

He thought of her pale pleading face, her passionate request to be permitted to see Lorimer.

"When she came down after tea, she'd been crying," struck in Mrs. Ponsford; "she looked very much upset. Hodge found her crying."

Crying? Why had she been crying? She had looked so bright and happy, almost like a young girl, when she had emerged from that brief interview with Lorimer. John was glad to think he hadn't refused her that little pleasure, that he had let her have those few minutes of happiness. She had come out with her face all soft and aglow. What could have happened to turn her joy into pain? Something had been said, perhaps . . . He put the thought from him, as unfilial, disloyal . . .

"I'd like to try a different plan with Janet—with your approval," he said turning to Dr. Stokes. "I think she's beginning to feel all this discipline and vigilance that has been thought necessary for her health. Hodge watches her as if she were a little girl. I'd like her to be more free—to come in and go out as she likes—in reason of course. It'll be good for her—for her soul as well as her body."

"John!" expostulated Mrs. Ponsford.

"I think your notion is a sound one, Father," said the doctor, "but I shall have to know much more about her first. When she's better I must have a talk with her alone and see how the land lies. Generally speaking, these cases need to be trained to self-discipline and self-reliance. Has she ever had a fright—a bad fright of any kind?" He had keen gray eyes set under rather bushy black brows, and he looked very searchingly at John as he spoke.

John looked at his mother, as if waiting for her to speak. Mrs. Ponsford did not appear to hear, for she continued chafing Janet's hands. Her face was imperturbable.

What did she remember of that scene enacted nearly twenty-six years ago, when a little child had flung herself upon her protection and had been coldly repulsed? It had never been mentioned between them. He did not even know if Janet herself remembered it. But that tragic day had witnessed the very first of this long series of collapses that had shattered her youth and prematurely aged her.

He said very slowly:

"I believe she did have a fright just before her first attack when she was nine years old."

The words dropped reluctantly from his lips.

"Oh, I see," said Dr. Stokes. "Does she remember the occurrence?"

"If she does, she's never mentioned it."

"Does that maid of yours—" he turned to Mrs. Ponsford—"does that maid of yours terrorize her?"

"Certainly not. She has been with me for thirty years, and for more than twenty-five she has looked after my daughter."

But John thought of the needle being plunged so violently into that white arm. He said: "I think myself, she'd be better with some one else!"

"John, you don't know what you're talking about. These attacks may come on at any minute—she might drop down dead." Mrs. Ponsford looked at him in consternation. Had he taken leave of his senses?

"There's weakness of the heart, but it's caused by the general debility, the want of constitution," said Dr. Stokes. "It oughtn't to involve any great danger. But we're dealing with the brain now, Mrs. Ponsford. These long bouts of unconscious-

ness resulting from fear—from repressed fear one may say—are highly mysterious, but there is no doubt they originate in the brain rather than in the heart.”

“But Sir Oswald Metcalfe assured me—” she began.

“Did he ever see her as she is now?” interrupted Dr. Stokes.

“No,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Well, then, I have the advantage over him. I know I’m only a country practitioner, but I’ve seen odd cases of the kind in France.”

Mrs. Ponsford felt that the solid earth was giving way beneath her feet. The treatment which had been followed with such meticulous care for so many years had been crystallized, not to say petrified, by habitual usage, and she was not going to allow the first ignorant bumptious cocksure young man who came along to change it. She could not alter the mechanism of the whole household, and permit Janet to go forth without the aid of Hodge. Her life had made her in a sense childish, unaccustomed to act and think for herself, and perhaps that lack of independence had been increased by the discipline and surveillance adjudged essential for her physical infirmity. She had never had the free active life that young women normally enjoy; it would have killed her. And so she had grown up to be obedient, dependent, submissive. Hodge could always control her better than any one, and perhaps Janet had realized this, and it may have made her, well, say, a little timid of Hodge. There was no harm in that. A moderate fear accelerated obedience; she had learnt that from her dealings with her own eight children. And so if Janet ever showed any obstinacy about a prescribed course, Mrs. Ponsford always sent for Hodge. “Hodge has such a good influence over Janet,” she used to say, “and then she understands her better than any one—she’s

been with her since she was a little child. I don't know what I should do without Hodge."

"These attacks are very weakening. If they are allowed to go on they will become so frequent that she won't be able to resist them," said Dr. Stokes, suddenly.

"You don't understand. She is perfectly sensible and all that, but in many ways she's like an undeveloped child. It would be wrong to give her any kind of freedom."

"She needs patience and tenderness. Her mind is more sick than her body."

"You don't know what you're saying," said Mrs. Ponsford, with some indignation. "And it's impossible to alter the treatment after all these years. Twenty-six—"

"Medical science has made a little progress since then—we must try more modern methods." Dr. Stokes had a very square jaw, and looked like a man who was accustomed to impose his own will on others.

He was leaning over his patient.

"She's coming to. Will you both go away, please?"

Mrs. Ponsford stood firm. "It'll terrify her to see a strange face when she comes to—it's enough to give her another attack. You'd much better let Hodge prepare her for your being here."

"No, thanks—I'm going to do this myself. And I must be alone with Miss Ponsford. You need not be afraid of her having another attack—I'll take the risk."

John slipped his arm in his mother's and drew her towards the door. She was a drag upon him, reluctant, unwilling; he felt that in every muscle.

"Johnny, you don't know what you're doing. It'll be the death of her. We *do* know best," she whispered.

"Come, Mother," he insisted. "Let's give Stokes a chance this time. And I think he's right—something ought to be changed. I've not been very happy about Janet myself lately."

He led her out on to the landing and closed the door of Janet's room. From within they could hear the low murmur of voices.

"What do you think she's saying to him?" demanded Mrs. Ponsford fiercely.

"Saying to him?" But the question and her accompanying look made his heart sink a little. "Saying to him? Why, what should she say to him?"

"I had to speak very severely to Janet about Mr. Lorimer this evening," she said.

"Oh, I'm very sorry you did that, Mother," said John gently.

"I did it for her good. She thought—indeed she said—that I was cruel. He must leave here as soon as possible!"

"We must think of him as well as of Janet. He may be in for a serious go of pneumonia, Stokes says. Mother, I'm awfully sorry you should have all this worry."

He linked his arm in hers and they went down to the library together. She said:

"You're breaking my heart! . . . I suppose this is the result of your new religion. You've never been like this to me before—going against me, too, about Janet. It's that mountebank upstairs. You ought never to have brought him to the house. You were always as weak as water. We were perfectly happy—Janet and I. . . ."

"Janet wasn't happy. She's fretted about her lack of freedom. We must change all that." John's face was rigid and the words sounded hard.

"Don't be cruel, Johnny. You know what sacrifices I've made for Janet. She's been my one care since all the others left home."

"Yes, yes, I know." John touched the plump be-ringed hand with a kind of awkward tenderness. "But you can kill with kindness, too, and sometimes I think you do forget that Janet isn't a little girl any more, and that perhaps a more intelligent companion than Hodge might help to develop her."

"She's a child in mind."

"Yes, but how could you expect anything else with such a woman as Hodge for her constant companion—ignorant, illiterate, tyrannical?"

"She is an excellent devoted servant. It's that mountebank upstairs that's set you against her."

"Not at all. But the treatment has been bad for Janet. You might just as well put a delicate plant in a cellar and deprive it of light and air to keep it safe, and then expect it to grow."

"Why have you never said all this before, John?" she asked sharply. "Hodge has looked after Janet for twenty-five years, and all your brothers and sisters have been perfectly satisfied, have praised her untiring vigilance. . . . *They* don't think I've been harsh and cruel to my own daughter!"

"And you know that I haven't said it or thought it either. But I see that a change is necessary. Perhaps it is because my work is concerned with souls now, more closely and intimately than it ever was before. And I'm thinking of Janet's soul—starved, imprisoned, timid . . ."

"You mean, you want to make her a Roman Catholic?" she asked. "You'd rather make a feeble-minded proselyte than none? They all count, I suppose?" Her tone was bitter.

"I don't want her to be one against her own will. But I know it would help her, give her poise, a sense of responsibility. It would develop her spiritually."

"And then you'll let her marry that mountebank, who is after her money!" she struck in bitterly.

John's face flushed. "I wouldn't have her marry him for all the world. Besides, he's ever so much younger—he'd never think of Janet—"

"I know better," she said; "he's been showing her surreptitious attention ever since he came here. He's trying to make her fall in love with him, and I'm not sure that he hasn't already succeeded. Before you contradict me, will you tell me if Lorimer knows about Janet's money?"

John paused. "Yes, I think he does—but what's that got to do with it? I think I told him once in course of conversation that she had a little less than we all have."

Mrs. Ponsford looked at him with cold triumph.

"I was sure of it! I was certain he knew . . . I shall tell Hodge."

"Hodge!" he repeated. "Why, what has Hodge got to do with it?"

"Hodge noticed it before I did. I told her to keep Janet in her sight as much as possible after that day he hung about her in the garden. I saw at once what he was after. Why, the man's a pauper. Six hundred a year would be affluence to him. Hodge tells me that his boots—he's only got one pair—are simply falling to pieces!"

"You should not encourage Hodge to gossip about our guests."

"And you should not bring that kind of person to the house. I saw he was an intriguing sort of man from the first moment. Like an actor out of work."

"He's my friend and I wanted to help him." John moved towards the door. The conversation sickened him. "I'm going up to him now. Stokes thinks he's pretty bad."

## CHAPTER XIX

AS he went upstairs to Lorimer's room, John had to pass Janet's door. It was still closed, and he did not like to go in and see how she was. Dr. Stokes must have had a particular reason for wishing to be alone with her when she recovered consciousness. Perhaps he had believed he would thus learn something more about her mysterious malady.

He opened the door of Lorimer's room, and saw that Hodge was sitting near the fire, with a hard, patient, immovable look on her face. For the first time, perhaps, it occurred to him to distrust her. She must have made Janet so miserable. Yet she was only obeying instructions, and the unhappy feature of the case was that no member of the family had ever hitherto tried to intervene or insist upon any modification of the treatment. Why had he never seen all this before? Janet had uttered no word of complaint, and it was only to-day that she had ever hinted to him that she found her position galling. It is true that she had on the first day of his return suggested that she would like to be his penitent and tell him things which he could never by any possibility repeat, and he wished he had encouraged her to speak more freely then. Perhaps it had been cowardice on his part, but now he would do all he could for her. And then he remembered that it was Lorimer with his keen fresh vision, who had spoken to him about Janet's malady, and first suggested that all was not being done that could be done for her. Yes, if it had not been for Lorimer, he too might have remained blind. . . .

Only, his mother was surely wrong in ever supposing that Lorimer would dream of marrying Janet. She was several years older than he was,

and she looked much older than her age. Lorimer had only interested himself in her as in a case. He had studied enough to acquire a certain superficial knowledge of the more subtle forms of mental abnormality; and his experiences in France had brought him into touch with many cases of loss of memory, and other mournful consequences of shock induced by the War. Janet had, no doubt, awakened his curiosity and then his pity. Denis always had a lurking tenderness for suffering things, as well as a deep compassion for anything weak and helpless. There was a kind, sympathetic side to his disposition, and these were among its agreeable traits. He hated to see any one wronged or bullied.

"Mr. Lorimer's still asleep, sir," said Hodge. She had never accustomed herself to call him "Father." "If you're going to be here, perhaps I'd better go back to Miss Janet."

"No—the doctor's still with her. As he's asleep, I may as well go and see how they're getting on."

"She's come to, sir?" inquired Hodge.

"Oh, yes, but I haven't seen her since. Dr. Stokes wished to be alone with her."

"I wonder Mrs. Ponsford allowed it, sir. Miss Janet often talks very wildly when she first comes round. It doesn't do to encourage her—I always try to stop her. One of us ought to have been there to check her."

"I'm sure Dr. Stokes will do whatever's right," said John.

As he came down the passage, Dr. Stokes opened the door of Janet's room.

"Oh, there you are, Father. Your sister's come round quite nicely. I'd like you to see her—she's been asking for you."

John followed him into the room and shut the door. Janet was lying slightly raised on the pillows;

she looked very quiet but exhausted, as if she had passed through a sharp experience of suffering.

"Johnny! . . ." She put out her hand, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Dear Jane!" he said tenderly. He took her hand, caressing it.

"I don't want Hodge to come—" she whispered.

"No—no—I don't think she will look after you any more."

She looked at him in incredulous astonishment.

"Not any more? But who's going to prevent her?"

"I am. And Dr. Stokes."

Janet smiled, but there was sadness in her smile.

"You'll never be able to. Mamma won't have it."

"Well, we're going to have a try," said John.

"Mamma has so much confidence in Hodge."

Oh, he was building strangely beautiful castles in the air, but they could never materialize, those houses of joy and dreams! . . . For John would soon in the natural course of things leave Wanswater, and perhaps he would take Lorimer with him. She would go back to the old gray life with her mother and Hodge.

"Better not talk any more," said Dr Stokes. "I'll stay a bit longer and then I'll go up and have another look at Mr. Lorimer."

"He was still asleep just now," said John.

John went quietly away and mounted the stairs to his attic-chapel. There would be no Lorimer to serve his Mass on the morrow. Hitherto he had never failed him. But to-night John Ponsford was thinking less of Lorimer than of Janet. For her future presented fresh difficulties at every turn, and he came to the conclusion that cruelty was as often the result of apathy and indolence as of actual malevolence. People let things slide, accustomed

themselves to existing situations without examining them to see if they were causing hurt or suffering to another person. Hodge represented the line of least resistance. To change anything meant effort, and Mrs. Ponsford, rightly or wrongly, considered that she had made sufficient efforts in her life, and might now rest upon her laurels and hand a rather disagreeable task over to Hodge, with the complete confidence that it would be adequately and punctually discharged.

Suddenly he saw that the scheme would involve self-sacrifice on his own part. He had an ardent wish to enter the Benedictine Order, for which he had already been accepted. It had been his intention to return to Rome for a few months to finish his studies, and then enter a monastery. But now he would have to defer this until something definite had been decided for Janet. He might even have to become a simple parish priest in England, where he could have his sister near him for at least part of the year. He couldn't leave her at Wanswater in the transition stage from complete dependence to partial freedom. She must have a fair chance. Ambition was not dead in John, although all his ambitions were now of a spiritual character. He foresaw difficult days both for himself and Janet. She would be as a child learning its first steps . . . That new and untried draught of freedom might well prove an intoxicating thing. A cloud came over his face. Yes, but she would be a Catholic; there would be nothing to prevent her fulfilling that wish, and indeed from his point of view it was highly desirable that she should have all the aid she could, spiritual as well as physical. It was a pity it hadn't been ten years ago, when she was still young. . . .

Then there would be the difficulty of taking her away from Wanswater. Mrs. Ponsford would

probably oppose such a course very strongly. It would be for him to accept the whole weight of the responsibility, to make plans and carry them out.

But of one thing he was quite resolved. Janet must never suffer in the future as she had done in the past. He must make the sacrifice quietly, and she must never learn what it had cost him. Perhaps he would talk things over with Lorimer when he was better.

He knelt down before the Altar, at which every day he offered the Holy Sacrifice. It seemed to him that the Divine Presence lingered there, descending upon his soul with a strange grace of healing.

John had had, ever since he was a child, a passionate love for his Divine Master. With him it was a fierce emotion, inexplicable to those who have never experienced it. It had grown year by year, until it had caused him to fling aside those excellent material prospects which the Church of England promised him, for a future that was untried and nebulous. But the Catholic Church promised him spiritual riches, a far more close and intimate communion with Him upon Whom his heart's love was so surely set, the graces of a mystical life, and he had made the sacrifice joyfully.

It was not only that the dire confusion of the English Church had dismayed and distressed him, but that he seemed himself to be torn therein by conflicting duties. He had learned to teach a modified Catholic doctrine, without ever daring to pronounce the irrefragable dogmas of the Catholic Church which would have been unacceptable to his bishop. Yet, at the same time, it was required of him to give his assent to the Thirty-nine Articles, which in most cases were the very negation of those doctrines, and the thought tormented him. He was not able to accept those articles in a "Catholic" sense as other men informed him they were able to do. John's

soul was far too simple and straightforward to linger in a course that was to him ambiguous and even perilous. He longed to teach the fulness of Catholic doctrine in the Catholic Church without let or hindrance, nay more as a precious duty to be accomplished unremittingly. And the first step led with him quite simply to another. He wished to follow the more perfect way that lies in the religious life. Nothing less than the complete abnegation would satisfy him. But as he knelt there that evening, he felt that the sacrifice he had offered had been refused, and that another and far harder one had been demanded of him. . . .

And then submission came. His sister's destiny was, humanly speaking, in his hands. It was his task to release her, to train that soul, so repressed and starved, to its new spiritual life. He felt that he could make her happy. Normally the convert always has to set forth upon a new life arranged upon new lines. It was necessary to turn a fresh page. And he could lead Janet gently into that new life, teaching her step by step. He would make amends to her for all that she had suffered, consciously and unconsciously. The work was ready to his hand; he could not refuse it. He believed that those in authority over him would recommend that at least for a time he should work as a parish priest somewhere in England, where he could look after his sister.

When he rose from his knees his face was very calm. He must explain it all to his mother. There must be no sort of quarrel between them. But she must see that things could not go on as they were. Janet had been sufficiently sacrificed.

It was not quite dinner time, so on his way downstairs to join his mother, he entered Lorimer's room. He found him awake, very flushed and feverish-looking.

"Well, Denis?" he said.

Lorimer flung himself restlessly from side to side.

"My dear John—I'm simply burning hot all over. I'm not even sure that I didn't like being frozen better!"

John poured out something from a glass jug that stood near. He held the glass to the sick man's lips, and Lorimer drank thirstily. It seemed to revive and quiet him, for soon afterwards he fell into a light uneasy slumber.

Seen thus in the shaded light of the lamp, screened carefully so as not to fall upon his face, Lorimer looked arrestingly handsome. His dark disheveled hair, tossed back from his brow (such a broad noble brow!), made a black patch against the pillows. His face, sharpened by privation and by all the sufferings, mental and physical, he had endured during the last few months, had an almost ascetic appearance. A bright flush colored the high cheek-bones.

John was always so deeply concerned with the souls of others and so little with their bodies, that he realized Lorimer's beauty for the first time, and realized it, too, almost with consternation, and certainly with dismay. He was seeing him perhaps as Janet saw him, as something a little wonderful. Janet had known but few men in her life outside the circle of her brothers and brothers-in-law, and she had known none intimately. It was quite possible that Lorimer's beauty had attracted her to him in the first instance, and that softness of manner, that ready sympathy which he displayed to all women, had quickly completed the conquest of her.

He had never thought of Denis as a man whom it would be dangerous to invite to the Grange. He had wished to help him, and all that Lorimer had revealed to him of the smirch and stain of his past life, had only rendered more passionate his desire to assist him spiritually. But now he saw clearly

that in bringing him here he had not reckoned with Janet. Even now he was inclined to put the possibility of her falling in love with Lorimer from his thoughts with indignant denial. He would not have liked any of his sisters to marry a man of whom he knew so little, and that little, something which did not in the least redound to his credit. But there was no danger of his wishing to marry Janet—that thought seemed to John entirely absurd. He had not in the least recovered from that Roman affair, although he now never spoke of Donna Camilla. And it was quite unlikely that he could care for an elderly faded woman so much his senior.

Yet he was bound to acknowledge that the man had purposely perhaps played a picturesque part ever since he had arrived at the Grange. Situations of a kind seemed to spring up in his path, and he made abundant use of them. There was that swift rush to Janet's side that morning in the chapel, that lifting her up and carrying her downstairs. John felt sure that he had enjoyed the dramatic moment, had considered himself deeply injured because Hodge had refused to allow him to remain with her. Then that impetuous plunge into the icy deeps of Wanswater to rescue little Jimmy Nicholls. . . . It was a plucky action for a one-armed man. The mischief was that he accomplished all these things without simplicity, but as if he knew that the limelight was playing upon him and revealing him as the central and most important figure of the drama.

Life often offers to men the opportunities their dispositions demand, as well as those temptations whose lure is to them almost irresistible. And Lorimer made use of his dramatic opportunities with an easy grace—the grace of an actor whose second home is on the boards. He seemed to know just the moment when applause would greet his ears.

He could sway men and women to tears and laughter. And he was aware too, just as the actor is aware, of those occasions when he failed to convince. The stony eye of disapproving detection could make his heart sink. John believed that he had discerned it in Mrs. Ponsford as well as in Hodge during his stay at the Grange. Mountebank? . . . The word came back to him now, and he was annoyed with himself for even faintly and secretly admitting that it was far from inappropriate.

But, alas, with Janet, Lorimer had succeeded. Janet too had had her subordinate part to play in that scene by the lakeside. John knew that she had been proud to feel that she had helped him, and helped him adequately in that moment of stress. Although he had not himself witnessed that episode, he felt convinced from subsequent happenings that it had profoundly affected his sister, and that it had made her clearly aware of her own attitude towards Lorimer, changing it with extraordinary rapidity from passive gratitude to an active and passionate love. It had aroused and awakened her, and she was able to see her starved unhappy life in the mirror of that new light. It had taught her lessons of which, without it, she might always have remained in ignorance. The danger to Janet lay in the fact that Lorimer would certainly never reciprocate that love he had perhaps deliberately evoked.

John felt that his next task would be to remove Lorimer from the Grange as soon as possible, before that new-born passionate impulse of love could be crystallized into a permanent emotion. It was so terrible—that love that comes for the first time late in life. . . .

It would be impossible, however, to remove Lorimer to Kenstone in his present state, as Mrs. Ponsford had so harshly suggested. John could not agree to do that, even though he saw eye to eye

with his mother as to the paramount necessity of removing him as soon as possible from Janet's field of vision. Fortunately in one sense her faculties were weak, and she would probably soon forget all about him; her memory had suffered a little by the very frequency of those attacks that had so undermined her health. And then in her new life of freedom she would have many other things to think of. She would have pleasant duties and studies. Her instruction should last if possible for several months. But into that new life of hers Lorimer must not trespass. There was no place for that derelict figure with its strange appealing beauty, its utter want of poise or of serious purpose. Perhaps the thought of him would recur to Janet's mind sometimes like some tormenting memory, beautiful and a little perilous. But she would certainly soon substantially forget him. He had been there such a short time: the impression could not be very deep, very permanent.

And then as John gazed again at that slumbering fevered face, something in Denis gave the lie to all these comforting reflections. He even felt a sense of disloyalty for having entertained thoughts that were prejudicial to him. For, after all, Lorimer was wont to turn to him in hours of need. There were those days in Florence. . . . It is true that even then Lorimer had never shown the slightest contrition; spiritually he had been hard and obdurate, blaming Pio bitterly, vowing vengeance upon him, but never regretting his own action which had caused the quarrel.

Lorimer opened his eyes suddenly and said:

"But, dear Janet—of course you helped me!" He looked up into John's face with a glance that was at once tender and unrecognizing.

John's heart sank. So it was true, then. . . . That soft light tone of his stabbed the man who lis-

tened. Lorimer must have deliberately set himself to win Janet's love. Mrs. Ponsford's suggestion that he was "after her money," came back to his mind with fresh and sinister significance. John had denied it passionately; now the fancy laid chilly and compelling hands upon him. This man had no doubt spoken to Janet in just such tender and caressing tones as he had now used, sure perhaps of her response.

Janet had passed through a series of fierce and complicated emotions that day; it was small wonder that one of those mysterious crises should have overtaken her, diminishing her vitality, her slender store of resistance. The excitement of helping him to restore Jimmy Nicholls to consciousness had been rapidly followed by her eager urgent request to be permitted to see Lorimer. Had he made a mistake in allowing her to have that brief interview? John remembered again her face as she came towards him, aglow with a soft radiance. Then there had been a scene of some sort—he was sure of that—between his mother and Janet. Perhaps Mrs. Ponsford had spoken disparagingly of Lorimer, perhaps she had imposed her own will more insistently than usual upon her daughter with regard to future meetings, future conversations with Denis. Or she might even have made Janet aware that she had discovered her secret, and was prepared to combat that growing preference for Lorimer. And even now John was not able to assure himself that such cruelty was utterly unnecessary. Wasn't he himself planning to separate them? Didn't he, too, see something to shudder at in the vision of Janet married for her money to this slightly dilapidated and even dishonorable man? For if Lorimer wished to marry Janet, it could only be on account of her money. He could not possibly have fallen in love with this faded, pathetically-aged woman, childish

in will and in development, and prone to constant attacks of a mysterious malady. Dearly as John loved his sister, he could see that hers was a figure to inspire the deepest pity and compassion, but never love.

The fresh complications, however, seemed to render his own task still more delicate and difficult. He saw Lorimer in a sinister light, and he felt that he might have to take him into account as well. That the man was unscrupulous, was plainly shown in his recent dealings with Camilla Ascarelli. He had no money, perhaps indeed he had importunate creditors, and it might be highly necessary for him to obtain large sums by some means, fair or otherwise. Janet's income would perhaps represent something at once desirable, adequate, and easily obtainable. She had not now the full control of her money, but in the event of her marriage—it hadn't seemed worth while, the Dean had thought, to take such an improbable event as that into practical account—she would have full control.

Lorimer tossed to and fro, muttering uneasily. The delirium of fever was upon him. He would have to be watched to-night. John hoped that Dr. Stokes would not forget to telephone to Kenstone for a nurse. Lorimer did not again utter Janet's name. Sometimes he spoke in fluent Italian, so rapidly that John could not catch the words. Sometimes it was Latin—the words of some psalm learned in his school days. Once he cried, "*Camilla, Camilla!*" in heart-rending tones of grief. Then the quotation. "*Non ho che te nell' anima. Camilla!—Camilla! . . .*" He called to her as if she must surely hear and come to him. . . . Then he burst into a passion of weeping, as if the very sound of her name had penetrated across his dazed senses and shown him beyond doubt his bitter and ultimate loss of her.

John was so deeply plunged in contemplation of Lorimer that he did not hear the door open and a footstep come softly across the room. Dr. Stokes came and stood beside him, and made him suddenly aware of his presence by saying:

"That must have been a pretty bad wound on the left forearm. He stooped over Lorimer and pushed the sleeve a little higher up the arm. The cicatrice was still red, and showed prominently against the pallor of the flesh. "Bayonet?" he inquired, turning to John.

"No. A sword."

"A very vindictive blow, and given at close range, too. Hand to hand fighting in the trenches, I suppose. This is the work of a very powerful man—I wonder he didn't kill him while he was about it, for Mr Lorimer must have been completely disabled by a wound like that."

He bent down again, examining the arm more closely. Then he gave a short laugh. "Must have nine lives, this friend of yours," he said. "We mustn't let him slip through our fingers now."

## CHAPTER XX

**J**ANET passed a quiet night and by the following morning seemed to have perfectly recovered from the effects of the attack. She did not refer to the events that had immediately preceded it, and whether she remembered them or not, it was difficult to tell. John was beginning to doubt whether that habitual reticence of hers proceeded from an inability to reconstruct the emotion that was primarily responsible for the attack. He believed that

she remembered far more than they ever imagined, and that prudence induced silence.

He noticed, though, that morning, that she shrank a little from her mother, as if nebulously aware that there had been some kind of scene between them before unconsciousness supervened. But she suffered Hodge's ministrations without protest. The habit of submission to Hodge was of too long standing; she had not the strength of will to resist it.

"All that must be changed as soon as possible," thought John.

He visited her frequently. It was thought wiser, and indeed Dr. Stokes recommended, that she should remain in her room all day, not necessarily in bed but lying on the sofa.

"If you read at all, it must be a very light novel," he said.

John wondered if such a thing could be found in the house. But Janet did not seem anxious to read. She liked lying there and looking out upon the lake, that was dimly veiled by a golden autumn mist. The mountains were clear that morning, and the row of jagged fangs forming the Eastern Pikes were nobly silhouetted against a pale blue sky.

She always smiled at John when he came into the room. His presence gave her a sense of immense security.

Janet indeed gave no cause for anxiety. Her pulse was a little feeble and she showed symptoms of exhaustion, but on the other hand she was much less tearful than was usual with her, especially after such a prolonged period of unconsciousness. But it was for Lorimer that grave anxiety was felt. He was very ill indeed; pneumonia had declared itself, and his temperature had risen during the night. John had been sitting up with him all night, and had only relinquished his watch about eight o'clock when the two nurses arrived from Kenstone.

John had not slept all night. Lorimer awoke from time to time, generally asking for something to drink. He slept fitfully, but seemed aware, on awakening, of his friend's presence.

And as he watched him through those silent hours, John's thoughts were many and conflicting. They centered around Janet and Lorimer. The situation thus created had become fraught with difficulty and even peril. But he had no hard thoughts of Denis; he even experienced something of tenderness towards this man who was now so completely dependent upon him. It was the tenderness that a nurse must feel for a patient, as for something helpless placed in her hands, whom she must aid in the grave conflict between life and death. John wondered if anyone placed in such a position could feel quite indifferent as to the issue; he felt as if the very participation in that conflict must inevitably create a subtle link of sympathy and even of affection between the watcher and the watched. It would be impossible to be quite detached, as if one had no concern in the result. And while Lorimer was thus dependent upon him, he could not even feel a great measure of distrust in him. He felt more as if he had been watching an erring child for whose conduct he was in some way responsible. And he was conscious of but one desire—that this soul should not traverse the valley of the shadow of death unshriven and unabsolved. . . . It was in a state of sin, of rebellion. He had tried in Florence to bring Lorimer back to the practice of his religion, and he had failed. Denis, despite his acute sufferings, was in too hard and bitter a mood then to listen to him. He was angry with all the world. He had lost the woman he loved, and lost her irrevocably; he had been cruelly wounded so that he would be maimed for life. But that mood had passed. Day after day since his arrival at the

Grange, he had been present at the Holy Sacrifice. . . . He had spoken of the Catholic religion with love and understanding. Perhaps he had some great sin on his mind—a sin he shrank from confessing. Men would sometimes hold back for many years for a reason of that kind. They were sometimes, indeed, only induced to go to confession by the fear of approaching death. . . .

During the night John rose several times and then knelt by the bedside, his lips moving in prayer. He prayed for Denis, with almost passionate supplication. He prayed that he might not die with a grave sin still unconfessed upon his conscience.

The prospect of Lorimer's death could not in itself give him pain; it was only the manner of it that could conceivably wound him. There was literally no one to mourn him, unless Janet cared sufficiently to undertake that unwise part. No one would really be the poorer for his exit from the stage. In many ways death—a holy death—would solve a complicated problem. For Lorimer had come to the end of what little money he had, and his future prospects were the reverse of bright. He possessed at present neither the health nor the stability of character to earn his living. Such chances as he had had in life he had deliberately spoilt by his own foolishness—or wickedness. Once upon a time hard work would have been his salvation. Now John feared he had not the strength for it. His constitution had suffered in the War, and later events had contributed still further to impair it. He had looked such a wreck that evening at Euston—like a man who had come to the end of his tether and was beginning to be indifferent about the future. John was glad he had come across him then. Of course it hadn't turned out as he had expected and hoped. Denis had

proved almost as disturbing a figure at the Grange as he had done at Villa Ascarelli. He was not only the herald of storm, he was storm itself. But if he made others suffer, he also suffered keenly himself. And then the man was capable of heroism; he had given proof of it in his plucky rescue of the drowning boy. He had shown courage, too, in accepting the challenge of a skilled and practised swordsman like Pio Ascarelli. John glanced down at the maimed left arm. After all, it was not such an inglorious wound as it seemed at first sight. Dr. Stokes had been right when he judged it to be the work of a formidable and powerful enemy.

John was relieved when the doctor appeared upon the scene, to be followed soon afterwards by the two nurses, calm competent young women, who took immediate charge of the patient and gave and executed orders with mechanical precision.

Lorimer was still asleep. From time to time he moaned and coughed a little. But he had ceased to wander in his mind; the dreadful delirious voice had ceased its frenzied utterances.

John went up to the attic-chapel to say Mass.

There was considerable confusion at the Grange all through the day, although no echo of it was permitted to reach Janet's room. To begin with, Lorimer's condition grew perceptibly worse. Dr. Stokes came in several times during the day and once spoke of a consultation.

"If he's got any relations, I should think they'd better come," he told John.

"I don't think he has any. No near ones at least. I've never heard him talk about them."

"So much the better," said the doctor, looking relieved. "It's touch and go with him, as I suppose you can see for yourself. I don't know if Mrs. Ponsford realizes it."

"I shall tell her," said John, "but I think it would

be advisable not to say anything to my sister at present."

"I wanted to speak to you about your sister, Father," he said in a more guarded tone. "That woman who looks after her—Hodge, don't they call her?—isn't the right kind of person to be with her. I should imagine she terrorizes her, and that's the worst possible thing for her. You ought to get her a younger and more cheerful companion."

"I'm going to see about it as soon as possible. To tell you the truth, I'd hoped to take her away for a bit, but of course now I can't leave Lorimer."

"No, of course not. Unfortunate business," sympathized the doctor. "However, from the look of him I don't think it will be very long . . . He's weak and run down. Too thin for a man of his height and size. When did he get that cut on the arm?"

"Last . . . last April."

Dr Stokes raised his eyebrows. "So recently as that? Well, he must have lost a great deal of blood. And the shock to the system . . . Wanswater will be able to claim another victim."

He hurried away, promising to return later. John went to his sister's room. He didn't want her to suspect the real state of affairs. She was lying on the sofa as he came in, looking out of the window. An open book was on her knee.

It struck him that he had never seen her look so calm, so normal.

"How is he this afternoon, Johnny?"

"There's not much difference since the morning, Jane dear," he answered.

Janet was obviously dissatisfied with his answer.

"Has Dr. Stokes seen him again?"

"Yes—he's just gone. By the way, Stokes wants you to have some one with you instead of Hodge

—a younger and more cheerful companion. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Jane?"

She smiled at first, and then a shadow came over her face. "It's no good, Johnny; Mamma would never allow it. I've heard her say so often that Hodge is the only person who can keep me in order."

"But, my dear—that's just it. You're not to be kept in order. All this fuss and fidgiting is bad for you. We want you to be more free."

She shook her head. "It's no use trying, Johnny. Tell me more about Mr. Lorimer. Do you think I shall be allowed to go in and see him?"

"Not to-day, certainly. He isn't to have any visitors. The nurses don't seem to like my going in, but then it's different for me. A priest is accustomed to visiting the sick—it's part of his duty."

"I wish I could have helped to nurse him," said Janet.

"Oh, you wouldn't be strong enough. Besides, these nurses are highly trained—he needs skilled nursing."

"I should like just to go in and see him. Do you think Dr. Stokes would let me—if I promised not to say a word to him?"

John shook his head. "Not to-day. Certainly not to-day."

"I believe you're hiding something from me," said Janet, in a suddenly agitated tone. "Is he so much worse? Does Dr. Stokes think he's going to die?" She fixed her eyes entreatingly upon her brother's face.

"He thinks he's very ill—he did not say there was immediate danger," said John. After all, was it not better to be frank and truthful with her? There was always the fear that emotion might bring on another attack of her malady, and yet he felt that it would be wrong to keep her altogether in the dark.

"Do you mean that he may die?" she asked, large-eyed and trembling.

"Indeed I hope—I pray—that he isn't going to die."

"You must pray for him, Johnny. You must offer Mass for his recovery." Her tone was urgent. She stretched out her hand and touched his. "Promise!"

"Yes—yes—Jane dear—" he assured her.

She lay back apparently satisfied. There was a little pink flush in her cheeks to bear witness to the violence of her emotion.

"He must get better—for my sake, Johnny."

"For your sake?" He could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

"Yes. Haven't you seen—haven't you guessed—how dear he is to me? He *must* get better, because I love him—I love him . . . so very much. . . ."

It struck him that the confession had been a relief to her. She looked much calmer now.

"When I saw him kneeling beside Jimmy, I realized how much I loved him. . . ."

Two tears trickled slowly down her cheeks.

"It would be terrible to lose him so soon—so very soon . . . just at the beginning."

"But, Jane darling, you must remember that Denis is ever so much younger than you are. He has probably never thought about you in that kind of way. He's a young man with his career to make in the world."

She was unconvinced. "He *has* thought about me, Johnny. No one has ever spoken to me so kindly before."

"But, my dear—" he said aghast, "you must try and conquer this love. Denis isn't in a position to marry, even if he did care for you. It's his way to be kind and gentle to people—it doesn't mean any-

thing." He wondered if it would be wise to tell her something of Lorimer's love for Camilla Ascarelli, but judged that it would be a breach of confidence.

"I believe he cares. . . . I've felt that he wanted to talk to me, but Mamma prevented our meeting. Mamma doesn't like him."

"You mustn't think of him, Jane, except as a man who once spent a few weeks here."

"I shall think of him as splendid and brave and unselfish . . . all my life!"

There was a little thrill in her voice, and her eyes shone.

It was dreadful to John to learn beyond a shadow of doubt that she cared for Lorimer, and even deluded herself with the belief that her love was in some measure reciprocated. It was impossible to ignore it any more, and the separation would be doubly hard to accomplish if Denis should pull through. When, if ever, he got better, it would not be possible to prevent Janet from seeing him frequently during his convalescence. John doubted if she would consent to leave the Grange, even to enjoy something of that promised freedom. She would wish to remain near him.

"You mustn't be angry with me, Johnny," she continued. "I couldn't help caring for him, you know—it all came so suddenly. Mamma found out about it very soon—it's so difficult to hide anything from her and Hodge—I don't remember what she said, but it was rather cruel. Something about sending him away as soon as possible—she doesn't like him, you know." Her brow puckered; she seemed to be searching her memory for those forgotten phrases that had left a wound upon her, although she could not accurately remember them. "It wouldn't matter his being poor either, for I've got plenty."

So she had considered the matter even in its financial aspect.

"Does he know that? I should like him to know. . . ."

"But it isn't a question of money."

"Oh, you're thinking I'm too old and plain—that he couldn't care about me? That thought made me unhappy at first—made me wish I was more like Violet. People wanted to marry Violet when she was older than I am now—Pamela told me so. But I've been thinking about it a great deal, and I know that if you care for a person it doesn't matter if they're old or . . . not good-looking. I shouldn't mind how ugly and old he was—he would still be my dear, *dear* Denis. . . ."

As she uttered his name, her whole face softened, and one could trace in it the long-vanished comeliness of youth. Her love endowed her with a certain wistful beauty.

*My dear, dear Denis* . . . The words rang in his head.

"So you won't help Mamma to keep us apart—to prevent us from seeing each other directly he's well enough? . . ." There was agony in her tone. For the first time perhaps, she realized how complete was her mother's power over her. Her mother . . . aided by Hodge . . . .

John was saying to himself: "He can't live—he won't live. If he does, I shall never be able to keep them apart, unless he'll consent to go away and leave her alone." Then there was always the possibility that Lorimer would ask her to marry him. Not that he loved her, for his mind and heart were still obviously filled with the beautiful image of Donna Camilla. But he had come to the end of his resources; he needed money, and money was just what Janet was able to lavish upon him. It

would be easy enough for him to persuade Janet that he loved her; indeed she half believed it already.

"My dear, I don't know what to say to you except to beg you not to think of him any more."

Janet shook her head.

"I think of nothing else . . . all the time I'm lying here. That's why I didn't want to read. My thoughts are full—so full—of Denis. . . ."

She smiled to herself in a furtive secretive way. "When he's better I must see him—I don't care if Mamma and Hodge do try to prevent me. Denis makes me feel stronger. . . ."

"But, Jane dear, when he's better he will have to leave the Grange. I shall have to go away myself and he must come with me."

"But he hasn't any money—he'll starve. He ought to stay here till he's strong again."

"I shall see that he doesn't starve. And when he's well again I hope he'll try to find some work. Perhaps in the colonies."

"He won't be fit to work for ever so long. And what could he do in the colonies, with only one arm he can use?"

"You mustn't worry about him. I shall see that he has all he wants."

"But you'll be going back to Rome?"

"I'm not so sure that I'm going back there now. My plans have rather changed. But I'll tell you about them another time. At any rate, I can promise you that I shan't forget Denis." His tone was purposely bracing and cheerful, but it carried no conviction to her ears.

"I could give you some of my money for him, Johnny. Only you mustn't tell him where it comes from." She made the suggestion timidly, watching its effect upon him.

"No, no, dear, you mustn't think of such a thing."

"Oh, Johnny, it seems so hard that I'm not allowed to do anything for him!"

"Does it? But that's often the way; we can't help those we love the most." He bent over her and kissed her forehead. "I must go down to Mother now—she's been alone too much to-day."

"But you musn't tell her, Johnny! You mustn't repeat anything I've said to you." There was a kind of terror in her eyes.

"Of course I won't. You might trust me."

He went out of the room. Her confession of love for Lorimer had touched him; there was something so selfless about it. But that she should love that poor wastrel! . . . And then he reminded himself of Lorimer's charm, that had attracted far more sophisticated women than herself; his physical beauty, his kindly gentleness of manner—all those personal attributes to which Janet had so swiftly almost unconsciously succumbed. Many women had loved him, as John knew from Denis's own admissions; some had tired of him, of his instability of purpose so imperfectly concealed beneath the surface glitter; of others he had wearied. But that affair with Donna Camilla had, as John knew, gone deep. Even during his visit to the Grange he had seen him plunged in a gloomy passionate dejection. He had suffered heart and soul, and his maimed arm was in a sense the symbol of those interior sufferings. His pride, too, had suffered hurt; he had been humbled to the dust by Pio Ascarelli. And all this had only served to increase his obstinate rebellion—to set him further from the contrition that his Church demanded of him. John had detected signs at times of struggling; he had believed himself to be within an ace of victory. But it had never seemed to him that the right moment for speech had come. It was a delicate dangerous thing to interfere with souls, lest they should suffer

complete estrangement. So he had done what he could for the man's body, had seen that it was housed and clothed and fed. But now he had to face the fact that perhaps the sands of Denis's life were running low, and that delay would be the most dangerous thing of all.

To repent . . . and die . . . comforted and sustained by the Rites of Holy Church. That to John would have been the perfect solution. But to live and marry Janet! He sickened at the thought. Janet was so fragile, so utterly innocent in her outlook, that she would prove a helpless victim in his hands. Lorimer would spend her money and then weary of her. He would break her heart—her most trusting and loving heart. At all costs such a marriage must be prevented.

## CHAPTER XXI

A WEEK had passed, and Lorimer's condition had become steadily though slowly worse. He made little struggle; a settled weakness had come upon him. He lay there quiescent and obedient, asking for nothing, expressing no wishes. He had not even asked to see Janet again. When John approached him, a faint smile of pleasure came over his face. But it quickly passed. His eyes were often closed; he seemed to be sleeping. There were nights when his cough racked him, and then a more pronounced weakness and lassitude were apparent. The change was not always very perceptible, but the decline in strength was sure and indisputable.

Dr. Stokes did not say much, but it was easy to gather that he had little hope.

The evening had set in, wild and stormy. Narrow white lines of foam were visible on the darken-

ing wind-tormented waters of the lake. Ragged clouds drifted like tattered garments about the fantastic summits of the Eastern Pikes. From the windows of the Grange could be heard the angry hiss of the water as the little waves beat against the landing-stage. Great gusts of wind and rain attacked the old house and the trees that stood protectively around it. It seemed to John as if the very fells were lifting up their heads to greet and combat the storm.

He was seldom away from Lorimer's room for long. The nurses resented his continual presence at first, but his quiet purposeful manner dominated their opposition. He was waiting, and still Lorimer gave no sign. But to-night as he stood there, watching the storm and listening to its wild music, a voice from the bed called to him.

"John . . ." said the voice, feeble and yet urgent.

The priest drew near.

"John, send those women away. I want to say something to you."

The sentences came in short gasps, as if he scarcely had breath to speak.

John whispered a few words to the nurse, who seemed reluctant to leave her charge. But after a moment's struggle she withdrew and the two men were left alone. Outside, the wind shrieked and moaned; to-night it seemed to possess many voices.

"John—is there a priest anywhere near that you could send for? If there is . . ."

"I'm afraid not within many miles, and on such a night!—you can hear the storm, can't you, Denis?—he couldn't be here for many hours. If you want to make your confession I've got faculties, you know. . . . I can hear it, if you'll put up with me."

"No, no . . . not you," said Lorimer.

"Dear Denis, you must think of me as a priest, not as a friend or even as another man. And I'm

sure it would be advisable for you to make your confession."

A faint flush came into the haggard pallid cheeks.

"You'd never speak to me again," he murmured.

John came a little nearer.

"Denis—Denis, don't let the fact of our friendship prevent you from making your peace with Almighty God. You know that all you say will be under the seal of the confessional—I may never speak of it even to you again—I may not even deliberately think of it. And in any case you know that nothing you can tell me will make the slightest difference to our friendship. Don't delay—" There was pleading in his voice.

"Then I'm going to die?" said Lorimer. His great hollow eyes, too large now for his wasted face, were fixed upon John.

"You're in God's hands, Denis. But I think I ought to tell you that there *is* danger . . . you've been losing ground all day. If I were to send for some one else, he might not get here in time."

The old fighting spirit in Denis, something unconquerable and indomitable in him, seemed to brace his nerves to receive the information calmly. A change came over his face, a delicate stiffening of the features. Life's last and greatest conflict was perhaps close at hand. Whatever his faults, he had been at least a brave soldier; he had shown coolness and indifference in the hour of danger; the scene in the Umbrian woods at dawn, the plucky rescue of Jimmy Nicholls from the black depths of Wanswater, had proved the man's mettle. And it was not likely that he would show the white feather now. . . .

"Well, then, John, I'm afraid there's no choice. It's hard luck . . . you're the only friend I've got in the world."

"Put that out of your mind. Think of me only

as a priest, Denis, who can give you what only a priest can give."

He left the room for a moment with a strange glow of thankfulness in his heart. The supreme moment had come, and he felt that his whole action in bringing Denis to Wanswater, in caring for him and watching over him, was amply justified. He could give him those spiritual gifts which his office as a priest empowered him to bestow. When he came back into the sick-room, he was wearing a white cotta with a stole thrown over his shoulders. He sat down by the bedside, murmuring the words of the preliminary blessing.

*"Since my last confession about six years ago, I accuse myself . . ."*

So he had passed through the long years of War in imminent almost daily peril of death unshriven and unabsolved. A great sin will often plunge a soul into deep rebellion that shuts out fear. And with Denis there had been other forces at work; his pride shrank from the deliberate revelation, even in the confessional, of his own deep dishonor. So for six years—such years too—he had lived apart from all the consolations of the Church. Then active rebellion gave place to carelessness and indifference; he had allowed conditions to crystallize; a prodigal son, he had wandered very far from his Father's House.

"You see, I didn't care to go to confession after what happened at Sledwick," continued the feeble voice. "Farewether forgave me—he let me off because the War had broken out, and he wanted to give me a chance to make good. He treated me as a son, though I think the whole thing had broken his heart. When I came back on leave for the first time, I heard that he was dead. . . . I had embezzled a large sum of his money—he trusted me completely. . . . I'd debts . . . and those large sums

. . . passing through my hands . . . I took a little at first . . . it wasn't discovered, and that encouraged me to go on. Then one day he found it out by chance . . . I shall never forget it—the way he spoke to me. . . . He said he'd hush it up, but I must go away—he'd like me to enlist—I should be more use fighting for my country than shut up in prison. He wanted me to have another chance. Angus Ferringham must have found out something—perhaps the papers weren't all destroyed—I was pretty careless when I discovered how easy it was. Angus must have told Pio that the man he'd treated as a friend, the man who wanted to marry his sister, was nothing better than a common thief."

So the recital went on without any effort to extenuate his own action, a clear, plain unvarnished story of criminal dishonor. John, listening, felt his heart sink. Those words rang in his head: "*The man who wanted to marry his sister was nothing better than a common thief.*" And side by side, in ghastly juxtaposition, Janet's passionate words seemed to range themselves: "*Haven't you seen—haven't you guessed—how dear he is to me? . . . He must get better because I love him. . . .*"

Lorimer went on, speaking rapidly, as if aware of the danger of delay. John caught glimpses of the reckless and dissipated life that had followed his recovery from Pio's wound. Separated from the woman he loved, just at the moment when he had reasonably believed his love to be returned; maimed, suffering, and hopeless and almost friendless, he had plunged into yet deeper and darker waters, squandering too the last remnants of his tiny fortune. He was a pitiable wreck, derelict and abandoned, but flung upon a friendly shore just, as it seemed, before the end. And at last contrition had come. . . .

John's eyes were full of tears as he pronounced

the beautiful words of absolution that fell upon Lorimer's ears and heart with their lovely grace of healing. The sin purged, even though red as scarlet; the soul washed white from its many stains. . . . It was true that God's greatest act of mercy to man was the bestowal of the Sacrament of Penance.

"I meant to keep straight, John, to justify Farewether's action in letting me off. . . . But it was this Italian business—this inhuman vendetta—this driving me out, a marked, maimed man—that seemed to hurl me back into the abyss. Yet it was hell—black hell to me. . . ."

He sank back exhausted. The priest administered Extreme Unction, and then knelt down by his side and prayed. When he looked at Lorimer again, he saw that tears were glistening on the black lashes. But the face was very calm and peaceful, despite its haggard wasted look.

He rose to his feet again as Dr. Stokes and the nurse entered the room.

In his heart was a great thankfulness, shadowed by a great fear. For at last he realized beyond all doubt what sort of man this was upon whom Janet had bestowed the starved and pent-up affection of a whole lifetime. He was no fit husband for her. And John's hands were tied; his voice was arbitrarily silenced; he could never put out a finger to save Janet from her fate, to separate them—if Lorimer lived . . .

*If Lorimer lived . . .*

He went out of the room and climbed the stairs to his own. But he paused as he passed the window, and looked out into the deepening twilight. It was nearly dark now, and the boughs of some trees that were grouped near the house were slightly illuminated from the light within, and lifted themselves against a black starless sky in moving, bending sil-

houette. He could hear the swish of the little waves as Wanswater, beaten to fury by the wind, broke against the banks and wooden landing-stage in futile revolt. The wind whistled sharply among the dried hard stalks of the reeds, sometimes snapping them roughly in two, for the early frosts had made them brittle. It was a wild night, with the wind careering madly like a fierce, restless, unconquerable spirit across fell and dale and mere. The air was full of its strange fantastic music, sustained, symphonic. . . .

The storm reminded John of the fierce onslaught of battle. Earth and Heaven seemed locked in a titanic conflict. It was a night when pigmy man could only watch and wonder at the wild adventure enacted before him.

As he paused there for a moment, John heard a light footstep near him. Looking round he saw Janet; she came up close to him and slipped her hand in his.

"What a night! We haven't had a storm like this for years."

They stood there, side by side, listening to the voices of that crying wind.

They were both thinking of Lorimer. Suddenly Janet said:

"Will it be to-night, do you think, Johnny?"

Her throat and lips were so dry she could hardly utter the words. She looked up into his face with terror-stricken eyes. It seemed to her that the wild storm that raged without was the herald of some dire misfortune, some unprecedented calamity . . .

John knew that she referred to Lorimer's death.

"No, dear, I don't think so. There's no improvement, but there's no sign of collapse."

"Then there's hope?" she asked eagerly.

"There's always hope, dear Jane."

"You must pray. You are praying, aren't you? . . . Praying with all your strength and might that he may get better!"

"Janet—we oughtn't to pray like that. We must pray that God's Holy Will may be done . . . and that we may have strength to accept and bear all that He may send."

"That's all very well for a priest . . . But I couldn't pray like that. I *want* him to live. . . ." Her white face had a tortured look.

"Dear Janet," he murmured pitifully.

"Oh, you must pray for him," she repeated, passionately. "Surely a priest's prayers are the most likely to be heard. You've made such sacrifice of everything—you've given up all you had to God . . . He must hear your prayers . . . more than mine. . . ."

"Janet, life and death are in His hands. We must submit—obey—without question. You must learn that, if you wish to become a Catholic."

"I can't bear it if he dies. It'll be as if the world were in darkness—the world he made so full of lovely light. . . ."

"Janet, you've got to be brave over this. And you've known him such a little while. It's barely three weeks since I brought him here. And you've seen very little of him—it isn't as if you knew him well—as if he were an old friend."

"But I loved him so quickly—almost from the first moment," she whispered, "and no one had ever been so kind, so understanding, to me before. He was sorry, I could see, but he didn't despise me for being weak and delicate and not like other women."

"Janet! Janet!" Mrs. Ponsford's voice could be heard, calling from below.

"Mamma's calling—I must go. Oh, Johnny, that dreadful knitting . . . it'll send me mad!"

He touched her hand.

"Be brave, dear Janet."

"I want to be alone . . . to pray. Then I could bear it more bravely. . . ."

"Go down to her, dear."

He watched her as she obeyed, going quietly down the stairs, her head raised, and her face set in almost stern lines. Something of its weakness, its wistfulness, had left it, giving place to an expression that was almost determined. She was more of a woman now, less of a child. She was less timid, less helpless. Love had accomplished this miracle in her. Love for Lorimer. . . .

## CHAPTER XXII

THERE was a decided rally that night, and a few days later Dr. Stokes pronounced his opinion that if the progress continued, Lorimer would soon be out of danger. John communicated the good news to Janet as soon as possible. She received it quietly; she had been almost abnormally calm during those days of anxiety and suspense. John hardly knew what to think. He was glad for Janet's sake, but he foresaw nothing but difficulty in the future. Even if it were true that Lorimer had any idea of marrying her—which he considered improbable—it was certain that Mrs. Ponsford would display the most violent opposition to such a project. John did not want to be cruel, but he felt in his heart that he must surely support any effort on the part of his mother to prevent such a calamity.

A new era had already begun for Janet. She was allowed—even ordered—to spend much more time out of doors, and much less in sitting with her

mother in the library. The weather was often wet, but Dr. Stokes was of opinion that she might be out of doors a good deal notwithstanding the rain. Especially with this illness in the house. He knew nothing of Janet's feelings towards Lorimer, but he felt that the state of suspense and anxiety that prevailed at the Grange was bad for her, and wished her to get away from it as much as possible. Mrs. Ponsford acquiesced. She looked forward to the time when John would take his friend—happily cured—away from Wanswater, and the household should resume its normal routine. There would be no further talk of more "freedom" for Janet then. Hodge would continue to look after her, and she herself would support Hodge's authority, yet restrain her from an undue tyranny;—a little discipline was of course necessary. It would be needless to say that Mrs. Ponsford was still perfectly ignorant of the plans that were maturing in John's head concerning Janet's future. Had she known of them, her peace of mind would have been seriously affected.

To think that any one should know better than she did as to the proper treatment for her delicate daughter! . . . Why—Sir Oswald Metcalfe . . . But Dr. Stokes was too young to remember that great man; the name had obviously conveyed nothing to him. Young people were always for changes, and in her opinion nearly all changes were for the worse. She had firm belief in the comforting assurance that John would soon take his friend away, and then she need not be troubled any more with that ignorant young doctor's presence in the house.

The crisis which John had dreaded ever since Lorimer had been pronounced on the mend, was precipitated, not by Janet, but by the sick man himself.

"Do you ever see Miss Ponsford?" he inquired of the nurse one afternoon.

"Oh, yes—I often meet her on the stairs and landing. She is always very anxious to hear news of you—if you've slept well."

"I should like to see her. Tell her to come up if she's feeling well enough."

Nurse Roberts went downstairs and on her way to the library she met John.

"How's your patient this afternoon, Nurse?"

"Oh, he's weak but quite cheerful. He's asked to see Miss Ponsford, and I was just going to fetch her."

"You're sure he asked for her?"

"Quite sure, Father." She had a very assured manner that even impressed Mrs. Ponsford during their rare conversations.

"My sister isn't very strong—" John began. He was half afraid of that sudden excitement for Janet. And then she had not seen Lorimer since that first day of his illness; she had no conception how greatly altered he was.

The nurse smiled. "Oh, this isn't going to hurt her."

"Well, don't let her stay too long with him. And I'd rather she didn't go too often—the fact is, any excitement's bad for her."

"Very well, Father. But just now we must think exclusively of Mr. Lorimer—it would be bad for him to be thwarted."

"You'll find my sister in her own room. She's not in the library now," said John.

He watched the nurse as she went quickly upstairs. He must try and get Janet safely away from Wanswater before that long convalescence began, when, if she were still at home, she would doubtless see Lorimer day by day, and perhaps learn to love him with a deeper and more permanent love.

"Miss Ponsford, could you come upstairs for a few minutes? Mr. Lorimer is asking for you."

Janet sprang up from her sofa. She had been reading a novel. Dr. Stokes had recommended light reading, and John had thoughtfully sent for a box of books from Mudie's. She had been deep in such a wonderful story, which had seemed quite real to her, when Nurse Roberts's voice had broken in upon her.

And then suddenly it seemed to her that her own poor little romance was more wonderful than anything she had ever read in novel or poem.

"Really? Are you quite sure he wants to see me?" As she stood up she felt that her limbs were trembling a little; the summons so ardently desired had come at last very suddenly and without warning.

"Yes, but you must only stay a very few minutes for the first time. He hasn't seen any visitors yet."

Janet gave a hasty glance at herself in the mirror and smoothed her straying hair back with her hands. Then she followed Nurse Roberts down the long passage until they reached Lorimer's room.

"You must be very careful, Miss Ponsford, not to say anything that's at all likely to upset or disturb him."

"I'll be very careful," said Janet. Now that the time had come she almost dreaded seeing him again. It would be so difficult to hide her overflowing thankfulness at his recovery.

"May I see him alone? He may have something to say to me."

"Yes. I shall come in when I think you've been there long enough. I'm afraid you'll find him a good deal changed."

Janet's hand shook as she opened the door. She was aware almost at once of Lorimer's great eyes

glittering in his white and wasted face. Strange eyes that looked very bright, and larger than they used to be. As she drew near the bed, she saw that he was extraordinarily emaciated, as if he had been ill for a very long time. She found him incredibly changed, with scarcely any resemblance to the handsome romantic-looking figure with whom she had so swiftly fallen in love. It even occurred to her to ask herself whether this love of hers for this worn wasted heroic being had not been an imaginary emotion. Then his voice fell upon her ears and she doubted no more. She had an impulse to take his hand in hers and raise it to her lips, and tell him that she loved him. . . . The impulse passed, and Janet stood there silent and secretly embarrassed at the very boldness of her thoughts.

"Dear Janet," the voice was very soft—womanish in its softness as it had seemed to her at their first meeting, "you must get a chair and sit down. You look most horribly tired and exhausted. Has Hodge been bullying you?"

Janet fetched a chair obediently, and sat down by his side.

"Dr. Stokes doesn't want me to be so much with Hodge," she said; "he thinks I'm better left more alone. You can't think what a relief it is!"

"I'm sure it must be. Why, she treated you like a child."

"Yes, you must have thought it odd." She saw now how humiliating had been that long tyranny. It hurt her to think that Lorimer should even know of it.

"But you bore it like an angel," said Lorimer smiling. "Any other woman would have rebelled long ago." There was a little indignation in his tone.

"Don't talk about me," said Janet; "I want to

hear all about you. I've wanted so to come—but they wouldn't let you see any one."

"Well, I'm better," he said, "but it's been a narrow shave, as perhaps John told you. I'm sure he thought he'd seen me safely off—shriven and all the rest of it. . . . I believe he's a little disappointed to find I'm still on his hands. But as a priest he's had the time of his life!"

"Oh, you mustn't think he's disappointed," she said, taking the statement very seriously indeed. "He was praying for you—I know he was—and so was I!"

Lorimer stretched out his right hand and took hers.

"You were praying for me?" he said softly.

"Yes, yes—I seemed to be praying nearly all day."

He bent his lips till they touched her hand. There was silence between them. They looked into each other's eyes.

"So you did care?" he said at last.

"Yes," she answered. She felt then that he had a right to know what was in her heart.

She looked quite beautiful then, he thought, with a tenderness in her voice and expression that was almost maternal. Lorimer was touched and vaguely alarmed. It is true that before his fatal plunge into the deep icy waters of the lake he had considered the question of asking her to be his wife, but he had rejected it almost immediately, feeling certain that such a project would be most rigorously opposed. He was quite aware that he found no favor with Mrs. Ponsford, and was aware too of the indisputable and unrelaxed authority she wielded over this delicate suffering daughter of hers. She would be certain to lay an unerring finger upon his motive which was, as he knew, a sordid one. He needed Janet's money; therein lay the temptation. For Janet herself he had felt a profound pity com-

bined with a deep interest in her mysterious malady, which he considered had never received proper treatment. Now another element had entered into his feeling for her. It was the discovery of that profound sentiment of affection which she entertained towards himself. His words, "So you did care?" had elicited from her a simple affirmative. She did care, and in that moment of self-revelation she had not tried to hide the truth from him. There was something inherently childlike in her nature, a simplicity of outlook, a limpidity of vision that touched him deeply.

Had he received that answer when he had been in full possession of health and strength, he would probably have taken Janet in his arms and spoken words of love to her, unmindful of the consequences. But the situation had only disclosed itself when he was too ill a man to do more than ever so slightly increase the pressure of his hand upon hers. In some dim way he was grateful to her. There was no one else in the world to care if he lived or died, and in envisaging this fact he was untainted by self-pity. To most people the news of his death would have come as a relief. "Poor chap, hard luck, but he was never any good." Yes, he could hear them saying those very words on receipt of the news. Pious people who cared for his soul would have prayed for him . . . John, for instance . . . John had been with him, tender and encouraging, in that dark moment when he had felt himself drawing nearer and nearer to the gates of death. But this woman had honestly cared whether he lived or died, and had dared to tell him so. They were both in a sense outcast from their kind. And they had drifted together like stray flotsam and jetsam flung by the capricious waves of chance upon an alien beach.

For a little while he lay there contentedly, with-

out speaking, his hand clasping hers as if he were clinging to the one mortal thing which remained to cherish him in a world that had cast him out. It was a strange sentiment, not at all like the love that he had felt for Camilla Ascarelli, an emotion that had held much of both passion and romance. But on the other hand it would never give him those pangs which had followed that disastrous love. Janet would always love him, irrespective of the world's opinion, the world's disdain, the opposition of Mrs. Ponsford.

He closed his eyes, and a sense of passive but very real well-being came over him. Janet, looking at him, thought that the pale composed face possessed a statue-like beauty that belonged to death rather than to life.

When he opened his eyes they met hers. She made no attempt to conceal from him the fact that she had been looking at him.

"I'm so glad you cared," he said, with a slight smile.

She did not speak.

"You're the only one in all the world who cared. . . ."

His voice was slightly weaker; there was a perceptible tremor in it, suggestive of an emotion he was trying to control.

"Am I?" she said. She gave him smile for smile.

"Will you—will you—kiss me, Janet?" he said.

She hesitated. But he put out his hand with a feeble gesture, and touched her face as if he would have drawn it towards his had he had the strength. She bent down and kissed him. Her face was pressed to his. She would have died joyfully then in the knowledge of Lorimer's love.

"Janet, when I'm better will you marry me?"

"Yes," she answered.

"You must say, '*Yes, Denis*' . . . I want to hear you speak my name."

"Yes, Denis. . . ."

"You do love me, Janet?"

"Yes, Denis." It never occurred to her that he should tell her also that he loved her. But his voice, his look, the touch of his lips, had assured her of that. Her face wore a serene contented look; it seemed to her that she had nothing now to ask of life since Denis loved her. What did John mean when he said that she could never marry him? For of course she was going to marry him, directly he was better. An ocean of happiness seemed to flow about her, encircling her with light.

The door was softly opened and John entered the room. He came across and stood near the bedside, and glanced from Lorimer to his sister. A faint misgiving took possession of him. Janet had stayed there longer than he had believed would be allowed for a first visit. But Nurse Roberts, knowing she would not be wanted at present, had gone out for a few minutes into the garden to breathe a little fresh air. Thus fortune had favored them.

"Janet dear, you'd better go now. You mustn't tire Denis."

"I'm not tired, Johnny. I've liked having her. . . ." Lorimer put out his hand. "You must come again to-morrow," he said smiling.

"Yes," she answered.

She went out of the room. Would Denis say anything to John? Would he tell him something of what had just passed between them? She hoped, even while she feared, that he might do so. She belonged to Denis now; she was his promised wife, and sooner or later they must all know it, John and her mother . . . and Hodge. And then the others—the families of the great Ponsford clan, Violet

Bradney and her young son. Sir Cosmo, Louisa and Algernon Dacreson, Margaret and Gerard Fortune, Stephen and Sara and Pamela; Curtis and little Curtis (as he was always called) and Mrs Charles Firth, whom she could remember as a baby; Giles and his wife and their endless family in Devonshire . . . they would all have to be told. Sara would certainly be kind about it, but the others? She had always had the feeling that Algernon Dacreson and Colonel Fortune were just a little ashamed of having a sister-in-law like herself. They never invited her to their houses.

When the door had closed behind her, Lorimer said feebly:

"John, old man, I'm very tired, but I want to tell you something."

"Yes, Denis?"

"I have asked your sister to marry me. I don't deserve it, but she loves me . . ." His voice trailed off into a weak whisper.

John's heart sank, but he said nothing.

"You mustn't try to come between us any more," continued the weak voice from the bed. "I know you've done it for her sake . . . you were quite right to think I wasn't worthy of her . . . But we love each other—we shall be married when I'm better. I'll make her happy . . . I *have* made her happy."

John was oddly speechless. Consternation and dismay filled his heart. But he told himself that Lorimer couldn't recover. "He's too ill—the least relapse and he'll slip out of our hands."

It was horrible to stand there thinking these thoughts. But he could find no word of encouragement or sympathy to offer.

"You'll give us your blessing, won't you, John? You know too much about me to feel very pleased,

I'm afraid, but I promise you to take care of her—to make her happy.”

“I'm sure you will do your best, Denis. But Janet's so much older than you, and she's always been delicate. . . . I don't feel that she'll make quite the right wife for you. You're a young man still, with your way to make.”

Lorimer, weary with the unusual emotion, lay back on the pillow with a very contented, peaceful expression upon his face. And as he looked at him John realized that, despite his extreme emaciation and the fact that his physical comeliness had suffered eclipse from this severe illness, there was still something in him that could attract and fascinate. He had cast a spell over Janet . . . Janet, sad and plain, elderly, faded, so many years his senior. . . . She must have listened with something of a child's eagerness to his words of love, and responded to them without fear or hesitation. John saw nothing but calamity for her in the future, whether the marriage took place or not. In the one case Lorimer would squander her money as he had squandered his own; he would weary of her, break her heart, and probably desert her. And if she did not marry him—if any one stepped in to separate them she would mourn that first and last love all her days. To lose him indeed would in all probability kill her.

John blamed himself bitterly for having been instrumental in bringing Lorimer to Wanswater. But for that fortuitous meeting at Euston, this succession of disasters would never have occurred to disturb the ancient peace of the Grange. But he would as readily have envisaged the possibility of his mother's falling in love with Lorimer as of Janet's doing so. The pitiful folly of it all. . . .

The nurse returned, calm, capable, preoccupied with her patient, as if nothing else in the world con-

cerned her. She laid her finger on his pulse, paused, nodded her head approvingly.

"Doing very well indeed, Father," she said to John. "I think the visit's been a success."

John went away, but he avoided Janet's room. He felt then as if he could not meet her trusting happy eyes. She would want to know if Lorimer had revealed to him their mutual profession of love. She would perhaps wish to tell him about it herself; she was ever eager to confide in him. And she would want to show him, too, how mistaken he had been in thinking that Lorimer could not care for her.

John, aghast at the situation so clearly delineated, was uncertain as to his next step. To reveal the state of things to Mrs. Ponsford would be to plunge the whole house into dire confusion; she would try to put an end to the engagement, and reduce poor Janet to the last extremity of woe. And a scene of the kind would hurt Janet physically as well as mentally; it might even bring on another of her attacks. No, he must conceal the truth from his mother for as long as possible. He knew that Mrs. Ponsford would fight the project to the death, and where her youngest daughter was concerned she had never doffed any of her parental authority. She would exercise it to some purpose now, and it would certainly result in the swift banishment of Denis, ill or well. John felt that he must weigh the whole matter and resolve upon some plan of action. It was his own fault, he told himself again and again, for bringing Denis to Wanswater, knowing him to be a deliberate creator of dramatic situations. He could so easily have kept him elsewhere at his own expense. This scheme of surrounding him with kindness and comfort, in the hope that it would soften his defiant and rebellious attitude had been in one sense a complete success. But it was too per-

ilous an experiment—a thing of costly consequences. And it promised to result in permanent suffering for poor Janet.

She had confessed her love for Denis; she had promised to be his wife. They were evidently planning a quiet wedding that should take place as soon as he was sufficiently recovered. There was of course, a hope that Janet might succeed in redeeming him, reforming him. But John put the flattering thought aside. She was too weak and ineffectual a woman to influence a man like Lorimer in any sense permanently. She loved him, and she would probably love him blindly to the end, believing with childish confidence in the reality of his love for her. She had made of Denis an heroic creature of her own imagining, a fantastic figure before whom she could kneel in a kind of ecstatic adoration.

Well, the mischief was done, and his own hands were tied; he could take no steps to influence his sister and entreat her to give up this marriage. He must bury in his heart all those things he had learned from Denis's own lips on that night when he believed himself to be dying. He was bound by all that was most sacred never to divulge the terrible knowledge he had acquired.

He must stand by and see Janet sacrificed. . . .

## CHAPTER XXIII

**I**N the library John found his mother sitting by the fire, placidly knitting and all unconscious of the situation which was so rapidly developing under her roof. Indeed she had so far submitted to Dr. Stokes' decision, that she no longer kept Janet under the perpetual surveillance of herself and Hodge.

Perhaps she reflected that there was no immediate necessity for doing so at the moment, since Lorimer, whose influence she secretly feared, was lying ill upstairs and unable to move.

Mrs Ponsford disliked illness. She had seldom been ill herself, except when her children had come into the world and then only for as short a time as possible. She had small sympathy for petty ailments, and indeed she had brought up her sons and daughters to regard illness as something of a crime, if not to be exactly punished, at least to be corrected by severe and nauseous remedies in the shape of draughts and powders of unpleasant aspect and unpalatable taste. Not for her the modern and sugar-coated and easily assimilated tabloid. These, she held, would never teach a child to avoid those imprudences which resulted in chills and colds and internal pains. She preferred the robust and deterrent remedy, and it was to her everlasting regret that she had never been permitted to physic Janet in the way she considered would have been most beneficial.

She looked up as John came into the room.

"How is your friend?" she inquired sub-acidly.

In her opinion Lorimer had capped all his other delinquencies by falling ill—and dangerously ill too—in her house. Two nurses too—modern young things who required the maximum of attention and unlimited food and hot baths—such a thing was unheard of at the Grange. No one could tell how terribly the house had been upset, and she was certain that had she had less ancient and devoted servants, they would assuredly have given notice under the peculiar strain imposed upon them. Hodge was nearly run off her legs, and Watson had been complaining of rheumatism. . . .

"The nurse says he's doing very well," said John. He sat down and watched with a kind of fascination

the unceasing rapid activity of the shining pins, the gray wool, under the skilful control of her fingers.

"I hope, then, he will soon be able to be moved. Doctors are so clever in these days about moving sick people. Motor-ambulances and all the rest of it. Why, Sara took Gilbert up to London from his school at Brighton, when he was suffering from appendicitis, in a motor-ambulance, so that he might have the operation at home. I thought it was a risk myself, as well as a quite unnecessary expense."

"I don't think Dr Stokes will consider Denis fit to be moved just yet, even in a motor-ambulance. Pneumonia is such a dangerous thing to have. . . ."

"John, I really can't have the house turned into a hospital much longer. The extra meals at all sorts of hours for these two spoilt young nurses are simply driving cook crazy! And he's already been with us for more than a month, and Christmas will soon be here. I must insist upon having the house to ourselves for Christmas, indeed I hoped that Violet and Cosmo would come. I feel I've done quite enough for Mr. Lorimer, and now I must think of my own family."

Her soft mouth was set in unusually firm lines. One saw in her then the practical woman who had brought up a large brood of children with success, and had had only one failure among them all. She was accustomed to authority, indeed since the Dean's death her decisions in her own house had been absolute, admitting of no appeal, and now at the age of seventy she was in no way more inclined to lay down the scepter. Advancing years had indeed rather increased than diminished those autocratic qualities, and accentuated her confidence in her own indisputable superiority.

"In that case I'll try and make arrangements for him to go as soon as ever he's fit to be moved," said John quietly. After all, it was the best solution of

her difficulty, and Dr. Stokes must be the one to decide when the removal could take place without injury to the patient. There was an excellent nursing home at Kenstone where Denis could spend the first weeks of convalescence.

Mrs. Ponsford was appeased; she had expected further remonstrance from John. She said kindly:

"It's quite spoilt your visit. We've seen so little of you. Of course I understand you've felt obliged to give up a great deal of your time to Mr. Lorimer. I only hope he will show a proper gratitude!"

"Oh, he's grateful enough, and I'm sure he's most awfully sorry to have put you to so much inconvenience. When does Violet talk of coming?"

"She hasn't decided anything yet. But it won't be before the twenty-second of December."

Indeed Lady Bradney had shown a certain reluctance about coming at all, and Cosmo was bitterly opposed to the scheme. It was not yet certain whether he would prevail upon his mother to accept another invitation that promised more amusement in the shape of dancing, hunting and golf.

John was a little relieved to find that there were other reasons for accelerating Lorimer's departure—reasons that had no reference to Janet. The whole thing could be accomplished quite smoothly. Even Janet shouldn't consider herself ill-used. She was very fond of Violet Bradney, who had a charming disposition and was always kind to her. She was her favorite sister, and John believed that Violet would give her sound yet kindly advice should she confide in her about Lorimer. Sara would have been even better, of course, but then it would have been quite useless to invite her to the Grange in the dead of winter. When she entered a house it was always as if a slightly boisterous but highly-perfumed wind had passed through it, forcing open

doors and windows, and penetrating into the dustiest and "frowsiest" of cobwebby corners. Sara loved to demolish all the unnecessary barriers which a former generation had built for the protection of their persons and still more for the preservation of their accepted codes and shibboleths.

Mrs. Ponsford shrank from that light destroying touch, just as she would have shrunk from a sudden chill draught of air, although she liked to think that Stephen had married such a wealthy intelligent woman. The house in Green Street was admirably appointed—she had stayed there a few years ago. The two children, Gilbert and Pamela, were strong, healthy and very clever. Sara frankly loved her money and enjoyed spending it; she wore delicious clothes and always looked charming. She made Stephen very happy though she had puzzled him a good deal at first. And indeed she was a slightly astonishing person.

"When I think of poor Janet I want to shake your mother," she had said once to Stephen and John. "I'm not sure that anyhow she doesn't want a good shaking."

Rank heresy! . . . Mrs. Ponsford's position in her family was as stable as that of her royal contemporary, Queen Victoria. Whatever she did and said was right in the eyes of her children. Sara was not sure that she herself would not have enjoyed such omnipotence! Stephen had stiffened a little under the adverse criticism, and John could remember that his brother had said:

"I really don't know what you mean, Sara!"

"Well, just think of it! There's Janet past thirty and she's got nothing out of life. She's watched and bullied and corrected as if she were a little girl. Why Pamela wouldn't stand it for a second!"

"You forget . . . Janet needs attention. Her malady . . ." Stephen was evidently prepared to

defend his mother's actions. But Sara, wholly unconvinced, had given her gay rippling laugh.

"Her malady? I believe she'd have got over it long ago if she'd only been let alone and given a little freedom. It seems to me that they all sit around *waiting* for her to faint!"

When he thought of that conversation John almost wished Sara had been there to help him now with her clear impartial judgment, her sensible straightforward advice. She was modern and worldly, luxurious and pleasure-seeking, but she possessed a certain cool sanity that, combined with a wise sympathy, made her criticisms invaluable. She had certainly humanized Stephen, had made him less of a prig and more of a man, had eradicated much of the *Ponsfordism*—as she called it—from his character. He was not permitted to impose any Ponsford theories of education on their two children.

Cosmo Bradney had been heard to regret that the Dean had not lived to see Pamela and Gilbert in their prime. . . .

In default of Sara, John considered that Violet would have the happiest effect upon Janet. He might even persuade her to take her away for a little, when Cosmo had returned to Oxford. It would make a break in her life, and give him a little space in which to make plans for her future. But all the time, he felt that Janet was an unknown quantity to him. She would not remain a passive acquiescent figure while they sought to separate her from the man she loved. If he did not misread her present attitude, he believed that she would fight for her own happiness—she would not allow it to be arbitrarily taken from her. She loved Lorimer, she believed in his love for her, she intended to marry him. Even Sara herself could hardly have reasoned her out of it. But, then, Sara always

wished to give people what they wanted. She would only have said: "Why on earth shouldn't she?"

The three dined alone that evening. Janet was pale and very quiet and silent, but her eyes were grave and steady. She did not appear at all excited by the events of the day. The knowledge of Lorimer's love had surrounded her like a circumambient flood of peace. It seemed to her that after a long tempestuous voyage she had reached at last a calm haven.

Dessert had just been put on the table when Mrs. Ponsford, turning to her daughter, said:

"I've just been telling John that perhaps Violet is going to bring Cosmo here for Christmas."

There were dishes of oranges and apples and a few large late pears on the table. Cut decanters containing port and sherry stood in front of John, and a dish of his favorite walnuts.

John was peeling an orange. His face bending above it was scarcely visible; the light from the lamp fell upon his thick fairish hair. Janet was not eating, but she was watching her brother, and waiting for part of the orange he was so meticulously preparing.

She looked up sharply as her mother spoke, and the blood seemed to rush back to her heart. She guessed that this first remark was but the prelude to some mighty decision. . . .

She was right. Mrs Ponsford after a slight pause added:

"I shall want all the rooms. I've told John he must get rid of his friend before they come. Certainly not later than the twentieth."

"Oh! . . ." The sound that escaped from Janet's lips was almost faint enough to elude observation. Mrs. Ponsford, whose hearing was excellent for her seventy years, wondered if on this occasion it had betrayed her.

"I shouldn't at all care to have him and Cosmo here at the same time," continued Mrs. Ponsford, "and naturally at Christmas one prefers to entertain one's own family."

Janet felt as if she had been gazing upon a bright and beautiful picture, and that even as she looked a black sponge had been drawn across it, blotting out its fair color and form. A fierce passionate mutiny filled her soul. Why was her mother so anxious that Lorimer should go away, ill and suffering as he still was, and homeless as she knew him to be? Had she herself divulged anything of her own feeling for him in their interview on the night of the accident, of which all details still escaped her memory? But she felt as never before the iron will of her mother, a resistless thing against which it was useless and futile to fight.

John, looking across the table, dimly aware of the struggle that was shaking Janet's soul to its very foundations, met his sister's eyes. She looked at him entreatingly, as if she were mutely imploring him to plead Lorimer's cause. She was aware that John did not approve of their love, but surely he would not enter the lists against her, now that she had promised to marry Denis. . . .

"You won't let him go unless he's well enough to travel?" she said. "He hasn't a home of his own."

"He will be perfectly fit to travel in a week's time. And he can live where he has always lived."

As Mrs. Ponsford uttered these words she looked steadily at Janet, as much as to say, "I know quite well why you want him to stay. And I'm not going to have anything of the kind. Lorimer, indeed! What next, I wonder?"

If John had not been present, Janet was convinced that her mother would have used just those words.

Mrs. Ponsford's eyes were very hard then; they held a kind of steely glitter. Janet had known and

feared that look now for many years. But to-night she felt imbued with an extraordinary courage. Perhaps it was the sense that in the future she would have Lorimer's support to uphold her, his love to strengthen and protect her. She said suddenly:

"If you send him away now, he will come back very soon. I am going to marry Denis Lorimer."

There was a dreadful pause. Mrs. Ponsford continued to regard her daughter with un pitying eyes, in which, too, one could discern both reproach and contempt, as if she believed that Janet had suddenly become demented through some fault, some imprudence, of her own.

John felt the blood rush to his face, and then ebb slowly away. It was horrible to watch them; he was irresistibly reminded of a cat and a mouse. He could almost see the smooth velvet paw raised to strike the petrified prey.

Mrs. Ponsford was the first to recover herself sufficiently to speak.

"Indeed, you're not going to do anything so foolish. I forbid you to see him or speak to him again while he remains in this house. I can't have you exhibiting such folly. And at your age, too!"

The words were harsh and full of a biting scorn that scourged Janet like a whip.

"You can't separate us. I love him," said Janet. It seemed to her that it was no longer her own voice that was speaking. It was a stranger's—a cold resolute stranger's. . . .

"And do you imagine that he can possibly love you?"

John made a little exclamation of dismay. There were things too cruel to be uttered. He shrank from the deliberate infliction of such bludgeon blows. It was true the thought had often teased his own mind, but he had tried to reject it. That it should

be uttered aloud to Janet herself seemed to him the refinement of cruelty.

But Janet was not so easily to lose confidence in Lorimer's love. It would take harder blows than that to destroy her complacent pathetic belief in it.

"He does love me." Her voice was steady. John began to realize then the new strength and confidence that informed her.

"Has he had the impertinence to tell you so?" inquired Mrs. Ponsford. She rarely lost her temper, but delivered her blows coldly, deliberately. No haphazard hitting; she seemed to detect by instinct the vulnerable spot.

"He told me so to-day."

"I don't suppose he knew in the least what he was saying. They tell me he's been wandering in his mind constantly."

"He wasn't wandering in his mind—he was perfectly conscious. And he's taught me that I'm not . . . hateful!" As she said those last words her voice trembled a little for the first time. She was very white now and her lips were bloodless. But she was enduring the ordeal with a strange fortitude, clinging to her point with a resolution that was not to be daunted or intimidated.

"We won't discuss it any more, and I must ask you not to repeat such foolish statements," said Mrs. Ponsford. "You're not quite yourself, Janet—you'd better go up to your own room, and I'll send Hodge to you. We shall have you ill to-morrow if we don't take care."

She looked at her daughter sternly. And she hoped that John would realize now how disastrous had proved the increased freedom which Dr. Stokes had prescribed for Janet. There had been meetings, interchange of sentiments, a disclosure of mutual love. That montebank lying upstairs had

missed nothing of his opportunity. There was no doubt that he wished to marry Janet, was prepared to saddle himself with a semi-invalid wife in consideration of her income. That was surely the only motive that could have prompted an offer of marriage on such slight acquaintance. Six hundred a year. . . . And more when she herself died. To a person without a half-penny this must surely represent positive affluence.

But Mrs. Ponsford was resolved not to permit such a degrading alliance. John must help her to put a stop to the whole affair. She was certain of John's support. A motor-ambulance must be sent for in the morning, and with a couple of nurses to travel with him and perhaps Dr. Stokes, too, if he could spare the time, there could be no kind of risk in removing Mr. Lorimer from the Grange. He could be safely and swiftly transported to Kenstone, and Mrs. Ponsford was resolved that never again should his shadow darken her doors. No one should say that she had been lacking in kindness to this sick stranger, but he had violated all the unwritten laws of hospitality by making surreptitious love to her daughter. There were limits, and he had deliberately overpassed them. Making love to Janet indeed! He had even persuaded her that he loved her, and no doubt she had proved an apt pupil, had drunk the sweet false draught without hesitation. And Janet, who only a few nights ago had bewailed her lost youth, weeping over it, could now make herself believe without difficulty that Lorimer loved her.

Then words fell upon Mrs. Ponsford's ear—amazing preposterous words to emanate from the submissive, obedient Janet.

"I'll go up to my room, but Hodge isn't to come. I won't have her near me ever again!"

She felt to-night as if the touch of Hodge's hands

would be a desecration. John must surely take her part. . . . She wasn't going to be ill; she had never felt so strong, so full of self-confidence as she did to-night. But she couldn't have Hodge near her.

John rose and slipped his arm in his sister's. Even he felt afraid of the results of all this excitement for her; it would not do to leave her quite alone.

"I'll come up with you, Jane dear," he said gently, and led her out of the room.

Mrs. Ponsford went into the hall and watched her two youngest children as they climbed the stairs side by side. She leaned a little more heavily than was her custom upon her black-handled cane to-night. But her face was unperturbed, and despite Janet's wild rebellious words she still felt a supreme confidence in her own power to end this foolish engagement.

Then she went into the library and taking up her knitting worked at it with undiminished assiduity. Only once did she pause for a second to wonder what they were saying to each other upstairs.

## CHAPTER XXIV

**J**OHN sat by the fire in Janet's room, in a big old-fashioned armchair that was covered with a shiny chintz of early-Victorian pattern. Janet sat on the sofa just opposite to him. He waited for her to speak. Her thoughts were wont to move slowly, and to-night he felt they must be unusually confused; she had passed through such a succession of unaccustomed emotions during the day. It had been for her perhaps the most eventful day of her

whole life. It was bound—whatever might come of it—to affect her future very seriously, either for joy or sorrow. He desperately longed to know what was going on in her mind. That brief outburst of passion had been so unlike her. As a rule, when things went wrong or her mother was unusually severe with her, she brooded and struggled in timid silence. To-night she was changed, more assured, more courageous.

She said at last:

“I did right to tell her, didn’t I? She can’t do Denis any harm. . . .”

So that was what made her so fearless, so resolute—this sense that whatever might happen to her, Denis could not suffer. . . .

“She can send him away. But I’ll see that he’s all right.”

“You mean he’ll have to go sooner because of this?”

“I should think he’d go to-morrow morning,” said John. “I don’t see who is to stop it.”

“In this cold? Why, it was snowing this evening.”

“Perhaps you should have waited a little before telling her. But it was the brave thing to do.”

“But it’ll hurt him to go to-morrow—he isn’t fit to be moved. He may blame me. . . .”

“I don’t think he can possibly blame you. He made no secret of it to me. He told me when I went in to see him.”

“Did he think Mamma wouldn’t approve?”

“He didn’t say so.”

“I wonder if he saw that she didn’t like him? It was so plain to me. . . .”

“Denis is accustomed to exciting aversion. It does happen sometimes to a man who is generally very quickly liked.”

"Does it? I can't imagine any one not liking Denis at once. He . . . he's so wonderful. You've always liked him, haven't you, Johnny?"

"Yes, I've liked him, Janet. But I don't always approve of everything he does and says. And I'm sorry, too, that he's taught you to care for him."

"He didn't teach me," she said simply, "I . . . just cared, Johnny. Even that first night when he followed you so unexpectedly into the room, looking so cold and tired and a little hungry, I cared for him. But of course I never dreamed that he could care for me—I'm so old and plain now. I look older than Violet—no one would have thought it impossible for a man to fall in love with her. But you can see Mamma doesn't believe that he can possibly care for me." She sighed.

John was silent. He, too, put scant credence in Lorimer's glib protestations of love. Scarcely six months ago he had been passionately in love with Donna Camilla. He had left Italy broken-hearted, broken too in body and mind. It had been a genuine passion while it lasted, and Lorimer had suffered tortures from his defeat. Yet he had managed to convince Janet now that he loved her, and it remained to be seen whether he or Mrs. Ponsford would win. Janet stood between them, as between the upper and the nether millstone, a fragile helpless figure.

"John," she said suddenly, "you must tell her that I'll make any promise about not seeing him—not speaking to him, while he's here—if she'll only let him stay. I'm sure it would kill him to be moved in this cold weather while he's still so ill. People would wonder at our letting him go. . . . Do tell her, won't you?"

"Yes, Janet dear, I'll tell her. But then if he sends for you as he did to-day?"

One could hardly explain to Lorimer the terms

upon which he was permitted to remain at the Grange.

"I might go away . . . perhaps Sara would have me. And then I could see Denis in London . . . when there would be no one to interfere. . . ."

"But don't you realize that Mother is utterly opposed to your marrying him? She will try to prevent you, and I don't know how to advise you, Janet. You must think it all over very carefully, and try to find out how far it's your duty to obey her."

She shook her head. "I've only one duty now, and that's to Denis. I've promised to be his wife directly he's better. I shall take such care of him till he's well and strong again."

"I think under the circumstances it would be best for you to go to Sara's if she can have you. It would be rather miserable for you here. But I'll tell Mother what you say about not seeing Denis, not speaking to him. . . ."

He took Janet's hand. It was white and thin and somewhat incapable-looking. She had not inherited her mother's useful, firm, competent-looking hands that always seemed so expressive of the energy of her mind and body.

"Do all you can for Denis, John," she pleaded. "I shan't like leaving him. Supposing he were to have a relapse?"

"I'd promise to send for you. But Stokes didn't seem to think it was likely."

She was silent. Her face wore a brooding meditative look.

"You must pray, you know, for guidance," he said. "If you do marry Lorimer I'd like you to be received first. I must look out some books for you, Janet, you could begin to read."

"Yes. I've always wanted to be a Catholic, and more than ever since that day I heard you say

Mass. It was the thought that you were one, that first put it into my head. And now I think Denis would like it too."

John rose and bending his head kissed her.

"Pray a great deal, dear Janet. . . ." he murmured.

She looked up.

"I pray for Denis always. . . . Shall you see him again to-night, Johnny?"

"Yes."

"Give him my dear love. . . ."

John did not immediately go to Lorimer's room. He rightly expected that his mother would be awaiting his return, perhaps with some anxiety after the scene at dinner.

She accepted with relief Janet's promise neither to see nor to speak to Lorimer, and rather approved of the suggestion that she should go and stay with Sara. She hoped Sara would talk her out of all this foolishness; she would write herself, and give Stephen a hint. . . .

Mrs. Ponsford was secretly glad of an excuse for not banishing Lorimer immediately; she did not wish to send him away at the risk of his life, for although she was a hard, self-willed, prepotent woman, she never liked to do anything of which the consequences might conceivably lower her in the esteem of others. If Lorimer became worse and died after his removal to Kenstone she would surely be blamed for sending him away from the Grange. She belonged to a generation that cherished a wholesome awe of public opinion.

"I'm very glad that you've been able to make her see reason, John. And perhaps the best thing for her will be to go away as soon as possible. If she stays here, that mountebank will try to get her to elope with him, and you know how foolish poor Janet is! The sooner she forgets him the bet-

ter. . . . Of course even if he really wished to marry her—which I can't for a moment believe—I should never have permitted it. All my children have made excellent marriages. I remember your dear father was not quite pleased at first when Algernon Dacre-son made an offer for Louisa. His father was only a half-pay officer and there was very little money. But dear Louisa was so much attached to him, and it turned out far better than we expected."

"I don't see how you're going to prevent the marriage," said John gloomily.

Mrs. Ponsford laughed, a little ironically.

"Oh, I know how to look after Janet," she said. "I hope by this time you see the wisdom of our policy, which you and Dr. Stokes have been trying to destroy. If Hodge had been looking after Janet as usual, there would have been no opportunity for Mr. Lorimer to ask her to be his wife."

"You may be right in theory. Janet has been looked after so rigorously, she's bound to be like a child learning its first steps. . . . But it wasn't wise either to relegate her to the custody of such a woman as Hodge. Illiterate—not very kind . . . I shall never forget the way she gave her that injection!"

"Oh, I daresay she used more force than was quite necessary, but as Janet didn't feel it, it doesn't matter. She's an excellent servant, faithful, devoted . . . and she's been with us for thirty years."

"Janet is afraid of her. She must never be put in her power again."

"In her power? What an absurd expression! I have always been here myself to look after things. You speak as if Hodge were in the habit of ill-treating Janet."

"Stokes is certain that she terrorizes her. I shouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't tell you all this. But I've made plans for Janet. I shall accept the work that's been offered to me at Gillingsea.

For a time at least I hope she'll come to live near me."

"I thought you intended to become a Benedictine. And then your studies. . . ."

"Yes—but I see my way quite clearly. I must help Janet."

"You'd better get this Lorimer out of the country first," she remarked grimly.

"I don't think it'll be difficult."

He was quite hopeful about future dealings with Denis. The man wanted money, and money was precisely what John intended to offer him.

"I don't suppose you've ever thought that if you carry out your plans for Janet it will reflect most seriously on me! People will think I . . . I haven't been kind to her."

"They shall never think that. But mistakes have been made, and it's not too late to rectify them, thank God."

"It's all perfectly absurd. Janet has an excellent home here—I've grudged her nothing. Plenty to eat and drink—a good fire in her room all day—some one to be always at her beck and call. . . ."

John repressed a smile at this euphemistic description of the part played by Hodge.

"And now I suppose you mean to make a Catholic of her? What your dear father would have said to your all repudiating his life-work in this way I really don't like to imagine! And Janet too! . . . One would have thought such a feeble-minded quarry was scarcely worth pursuit!"

"She'll only become a Catholic if she wishes to—if she feels that she must. But she must first thoroughly understand all that it entails. That's what is so wonderful about the Faith, Mother, it is for the weak as well as the strong, the simple as well as the learned. For us all, in fact, as Christ intended that it should be." His eyes shone. "It

will give Janet strength and poise—it will help to develop her intellectually as well as spiritually. Her will has been atrophied.”

“Atrophied? Her will! She never had one. You’re talking nonsense, John. You and Dr. Stokes and this Lorimer have all entered into a conspiracy to deprive me of my own daughter. I don’t blame *you*—you’ve simply been hoodwinked with all this talk of tyranny and torture. As if I didn’t know Hodge much better than any of you. And Janet too.” She looked at him with something of contempt. She believed he wished to gain control over Janet for the sole purpose of converting her to Catholicism. He was an enthusiast, almost a fanatic. But she felt assured that disappointment awaited him. Janet showed her best side to him; he had always drawn out what was sweetest in her, but when he had her to himself he would soon find what a miserable, weak, invertebrate, uncontrolled creature the poor thing was. She trembled to think—so she inwardly assured herself—what Janet would be like when permanently removed from the custody of Hodge. And in the end John, discovering the impossibility of the task he had undertaken, would send his sister back to the Grange. . . .

“You were always so cocksure, John. So you think you’re going to succeed, and work wonders. . . .”

“I shall pray tremendously hard to succeed,” he said smiling.

“And when is this experiment to begin?”

“Probably after Janet’s visit to Sara.”

“Sara won’t want her there long!”

“Oh, I mean to talk to Sara about it. And then Violet . . .”

“I don’t suppose you’ll find the family quite so eager to help you as you suppose.”

“It’ll only be for a little time. Janet will be

happy with me directly I'm settled and can give her a home. There's a cottage she can have quite close to the presbytery—I shall get a good maid for her and a young companion, too, if she feels dull. Stokes thought she ought to have some one young with her. But that can be seen to later on."

"Oh, then she won't be with you?"

"No—that would be impossible—I shall only share the presbytery with another priest."

"Well, I hope Janet will enjoy her cottage." There was a note of bitter irony in her voice. The Grange would be far less comfortable without Janet's money; she could not carry it on as it was now. She must get rid of a servant or two, and have one man less in the garden. It was all very upsetting, but no one thought of her or her comfort. It was absurd, too, this plan of taking Janet away. Janet had lived with her all her life, and it was her duty to remain at the Grange and comfort her mother's declining years. In thought Mrs. Ponsford waxed sentimental, but she did not reveal these feelings to John, whose clear-cut face was hard as adamant. In this matter, she considered he was showing the true Ponsford qualities of iron will, and an absolute belief in his own infallibility. And he had always been the most tractable of all her children. None of the others had possessed quite his sweetness of disposition.

"Well, you'll let Lorimer stay on for a bit, won't you?" said John; "it would never do to move him just yet. He won't interfere at all with Violet and Cosmo if they come."

"Janet will keep her promise?"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of that. . . ."

"I shall telegraph to Sara in the morning. The sooner Janet goes away the better. John, you're not to encourage this idea of marriage. You must see that Lorimer isn't of our world. What do you

think Stephen and Algernon Dacreson and Gerard Fortune would think of him? I'm not going to have it. He only wants her money, and you know that if Janet doesn't marry, all her money will go to Giles. He needs it too, poor fellow, with all those children! It's our duty to put a stop to it."

"I don't like it any more than you do. But I can't see how we're going to stop it. She seems to have fallen in love with him almost at first sight. And now that he's proposed to her. . . ."

"Do you mean to stand by and see your sister sacrificed?" she demanded angrily.

John's thoughts were back in Lorimer's room on the night when believing himself to be dying he had made a confession. Locked within the priest's heart as it was, that confession could yet disturb him with its unbearable memories. And above all he recalled those terrible words: "*Angus must have told Pio that the man he'd treated as a friend, the man who wanted to marry his sister, was nothing better than a common thief.*"

*The man who wanted to marry his sister. . . .* Yes, Pio had tried to befriend him, and Lorimer had betrayed his hospitality by making surreptitious love to Donna Camilla behind his back, though aware of his own utter unworthiness. And John had committed the same error as Pio; he had held out a helping hand to Denis, and this was his reward. Denis had sought and won Janet's love, as well as her complete trust and confidence. And he did not love her; he was marrying her coldly and deliberately for the sake of her money; he would end by breaking her heart. . . .

"You have more influence over Janet than any one," continued Mrs. Ponsford; "you must do all you can to stop it. I shall rely upon you—"

"I am sorry," he said coldly; "I can't possibly interfere. Our only hope lies in getting her away

from here, and perhaps Sara's influence . . . I can do nothing. He came here as my friend—I can't tell her, after that, that I don't want her to marry him. Especially when he has persuaded her that he loves her."

"Loves her? Impertinence! What next, I wonder?" She fell back upon the old phrase. "Fifty years ago she'd have been shut up in her room and fed on bread and water till she gave in. Did you ever read 'Clarissa Harlowe,' John?"

"But that was much longer than fifty years ago," he objected. "And you really can't shut a woman of Janet's age up in her room as if she were mentally deranged!"

"Ah, if your dear father had been alive he would very soon have brought her to her senses. And he'd have had this mountebank out of the house long ago. . . ."

She would never own to herself that she had felt some relief in her own release from the Dean's autocratic discipline. She had been almost as much afraid of him as the children were. It was very good for the children of course, since it had served to keep them—especially the girls—in a wholesome state of fear and apprehension. She herself had found it a little trying at times to be the object of that "righteous indignation," that obstinate authority, but she did wish from time to time that he could return for a few days and set his house in order in just the old way. . . .

There would be no more talk of any engagement between Janet and Lorimer then! . . .

## CHAPTER XXV

JOHN felt a great reluctance to visit Lorimer on the following day.

The promise of snow had been fulfilled, and he had awakened to find a lovely white world bathed in the pale December sunshine. Snow crowned the great fang-like summits of the Eastern Pikes, and silvered the long sloping shoulder of Wansdale Raise. Wanswater lay like a bright colorless mirror between snow-covered banks, and the brown woods beyond were also lightly powdered with silver. There was a wonderful beauty about the scene, and he lingered for some time at the library window after breakfast, gazing at it.

The roads would be almost impassable to-day, owing to the deep fall of snow. It would make traffic across the fells difficult and dangerous. Mrs. Ponsford would have found the elements against her, had she decided upon sending Lorimer away that day.

But there was Janet. Janet must make that proposed journey to London as soon as possible. Lorimer would certainly ask to see her, and he was still at a stage when to thwart him in anything might produce a return of fever. It would be difficult, therefore, to refuse his request, and impossible also to reveal the promise Janet had made not to see him. To tell him that, would be to display before him without any mitigation of the truth, the measure of Mrs. Ponsford's undoubted hostility.

And he would probably believe that Janet had been coerced into making that promise. A new example of the tyranny with which she was ruled! . . . It would make him more than ever eager to effect her rescue. There was something of

chivalry in his attitude towards her—of that John was reluctantly aware.

When, later in the morning, he conquered his repugnance to an interview, he went upstairs to Lorimer's room. It was rather a relief to find that Denis was asleep. His strange face was calm and tranquil as a child's. In its emaciation it looked almost ascetic. Something of a new contentment seemed to have permeated the subconsciousness to which belongs the mysterious kingdom of dreams. He was slightly smiling, and in the smile there seemed to be something both of satisfaction and triumph. But seen thus in repose, his face was to a great degree beautiful and innocent. All the dusky, shady, ambiguous passages of his life seemed to be blotted out. He had perhaps deliberately looked his last upon a past that had held the enchanting, romantic figure of Camilla Ascarelli, and was glimpsing a future that promised something more prosaic and commonplace and at the same time more durable. He had won the love of a good woman who was both loving and weak. What would be the end of that rash engagement so recently entered upon? How soon would he weary of Janet with her intellectual limitations—her physical weakness—her adoring love?

Janet had given him her whole heart—the pent-up devotion of her own starved life. She would put herself utterly into his hands, to make and mold or mar as he would. . . .

Meanwhile plans were being arranged apace. Mrs. Ponsford was determined to run no risks. In the afternoon a thaw set in, converting the roads to a brown slush. A telegram was dispatched to Sara, and a letter simultaneously posted to Stephen, giving him some slight details of the situation at Wanswater. "A very undesirable out-at-elbows

friend of John's had been staying for some weeks at the Grange and was now very ill with pneumonia. He had been making love to Janet, and Janet—like a fool—had listened to him, had drunk in every word, and now declared her intention of marrying him. As he was too ill to be sent out of the house, their only course was to banish Janet, hence the telegram to Sara. Of course, the man was only after her money. . . ." Mrs. Ponsford added that she relied upon Sara to instil a little common sense into Janet's head. She hoped they would put her up for a week or two—there was really nothing else to be done except to send her to London. Of course, Hodge would accompany her.

The telegram and letter both produced a shock similar to the explosion of a bombshell in the house in Green Street.

"I shall take Janet in because I must," said Sara, looking across the breakfast-table on the following morning to where Stephen was sitting immersed in the *Times*. "But I won't have Hodge. Of course, I see she must travel with Janet, but I shall pack her off on my own as soon as possible."

Stephen, the eldest of the Ponsfords and a man close on fifty, with thick gray hair and a slightly corpulent figure, looked up from the newspaper with an irritable expression.

"You'd much better refuse. Janet'll be awfully in the way in the Christmas holidays. She'll bore the children."

He was not fond of Janet, of whom his chief recollection was as a nervous little girl who cried when he teased her, thereby getting him into "hot-water," as he would have expressed it. Her malady made him feel slightly ashamed of her, and he never permitted his special or more intimate friends to

see her. She was a deviation from the solid normality of the Ponsford stock, and he felt that she diminished its value.

He did not see in her, as John did, a beautiful struggling soul, half-submerged in a "dark tremendous sea of cloud. . . ."

It had been a great shock to him also, to learn from his mother's letter—which lay open on the table—that Janet had actually been sought in marriage. Who was this Denis Lorimer? An old fool, probably, who was certainly after her money. Six hundred a year—and it ought all to have gone to Giles's children. The Dean should have tied it up, instead of leaving her the full control of it in the event of her marriage. It was absolutely at her own disposal, and there was no doubt she would leave it all to this needy adventurer.

He did not care for Giles, and rather disliked his children than otherwise, but an obscure tribal sense of clanship made him range himself strongly on his brother's side.

Sara only said: "I don't see why she shouldn't marry him if she wants to. She's always had an awfully thin time at home."

"I do hope you won't take that view of it to Janet. You must do as my mother says and try to instil a little common sense into her head."

Sara looked at him with perfect composure.

"I shall do nothing of the sort, Stephen. This is Janet's business, not mine, and you know I've always disapproved of the way she was treated."

She munched a thin crisp piece of hot toast and sipped her coffee.

"Johnny must be feeling pretty sick about it, since this man's a friend of his. Wonder why he ever took him to the Grange," said Stephen.

"I don't suppose he thought there'd be any chance of his wanting to marry Janet," said Sara. "I like

Janet myself. She's very patient and unselfish."

At that moment the door opened and a big, rather fat, very good-looking girl of about fifteen came into the room.

"Late again, Pam," said Stephen, smiling at her.

"Well, I was dancing till one," replied Pamela.

"Hullo! A letter from Gran! What's she writing about? Not to ask us there for Christmas, I hope?"

She took up the letter and perused it. Neither of her parents uttered the slightest remonstrance. There was no use in concealing facts from Pamela; she always found everything out.

She had round dark eyes with pretty dark curled lashes, a white skin and black bobbed hair that hung thickly about her face and brow. She was fat because it was the fashion for girls of that age to be fat. Women of her mother's generation had often "banted" to achieve a slender silhouette. You wouldn't catch the girls of to-day banting; they had lived too long on strictly rationed food. . . .

"Oh, help!" she ejaculated; "fancy any one wanting to marry poor old Aunt Janet! Jolly lucky thing for her, though. I'll help her to get her trousseau while she's here. It'll be an awful rag."

She sat down and began to consume a large plate of porridge liberally covered with cream and sugar.

Sara watched her daughter. "If any one could make me feel old-fashioned and a back number, it would be Pamela," she reflected. "She has so absorbed the new spirit." She advised her, but never tried to control her. Pamela knew exactly what she wanted, and intended to have it. Sara found it simpler, therefore, to give her what she asked for; it saved rows, unpleasantness, and perhaps duplicity.

She had taught Stephen to pursue a like policy. The lesson had not been easy, because it was so diametrically opposed to the true robust Ponsford

code. When she was smaller, he had wanted to smack her, and to his astonishment Sara had immediately become like a lioness defending her cubs.

Stephen had no fixed profession, though he had been called to the Bar in his youth. The great interest of his life was finance. He wrote articles about it in some of the more serious reviews and quarterlies, but this hardly amounted to an occupation, much less to a profession. He was also a director of three old-established companies, and he found this more remunerative as well as less intellectually fatiguing than committing his knowledge on the subject of finance to paper.

"When's Aunt Janet coming?" Pamela referred to the letter. "Oh, to-morrow evening. Well, we've got a day's reprieve. What are you going to do to amuse me this afternoon, old thing?"

Stephen was accustomed to being thus addressed by his affectionate daughter. He beamed at her and said:

"You'd better choose. Nothing too strenuous, though."

"We'll do a play," pronounced Pamela. She read out the list of matinées. "Yes—'The Spin of the Coin . . .' it'll shock you, but then everything shocks you. It's jolly good I know. I'll 'phone for the tickets if you like."

Her plate was now empty, and another, liberally supplied with poached eggs and bacon, had taken its place.

"Dancing up till one o'clock makes one jolly hungry for breakfast," she remarked, as if in apology. "Do you think Aunt Janet will want me to be a bridesmaid? I shan't let her choose what I'm to wear, though. The old lady seems to be making an awful fuss about the whole thing."

"Well, she doesn't like it, naturally," said Sara. "She thinks he's marrying her for her money."

"Tosh!" was Pamela's contemptuous criticism. "Six hundred a year isn't enough. You want that for love in a cottage these days. I should be sorry to set up housekeeping on it, I can tell you, and I'm still at the romantic age."

She applied herself with renewed energy to her breakfast. "If this man's a friend of Uncle John's, I suppose he's a Catholic," she said. "That'll be fun—they can be married at Westminster Cathedral. I should like to be a bridesmaid there—it's such a splendid *mise-en-scène*. What a pity poor old Aunt Janet isn't better suited to the principal part! Still, if we rig her out, I daresay she'll look all right. Denis Lorimer? It's rather a nice name. I mean to be very charming to my new Uncle Denis. . . ."

Sara said:

"I only wish it hadn't happened just now. I've got so much to do, what with Gilbert coming back, and Christmas presents to get." A slight frown puckered the perfect smoothness of her brow.

"Don't worry, old thing. Gilbert and I prefer to choose our own presents, and we can look out something for Dad if you like!"

"Yes, I know your shopping," said Sara, with uncomfortable recollections of an endless bill from a Bond Street shop, which had been the sequel to their last efforts in this direction.

"Oh, well, if you don't like the results! And we took a lot of trouble."

"The results were so much greater than I expected," remarked Sara, dryly.

She had finished her breakfast and rose from the table. "You'll want lunch early if you're going to the play," she said, "that is, if you want any at all, Pam."

"Of course I shall want lunch and lots of it,"

replied Pamela, with her mouth full of buttered scone and marmalade.

Sara raised her eyebrows. The immense proportions of her daughter vaguely disturbed her. The short hair, the broad candid brow with the curls hiding the cheeks and not the forehead; the upright, straight, almost shapeless and quite unrestrained figure—yes, these things were all characteristic of Pamela's age and type. Yet with it all, she managed to present an aspect of good looks, good health, and good temper that seemed to justify the liberty and freedom from all but the most necessary control, which she enjoyed. She adored her mother, was kind and considerate to Stephen, and was "great pals" with Gilbert, who was a year younger. Her education was conducted on the most expensive lines and comprised all the subjects she really wished to learn. It was no use, she had affirmed at the age of twelve, when the last of her resident governesses had departed in a storm of rage and tears, it was no use trying to teach her things for which she had no aptitude. She would learn all she wanted to fast enough. Sara and Stephen sighed over the curriculum she placed before them, but they had no option except to submit. It was all done so gracefully, almost apologetically, as if she were sadly aware of her own limitations; and now after some years they were obliged to admit that the experiment hadn't turned out so badly. Pamela had a real gift for music and played remarkably well for her age. She danced at least as gracefully as any of the slender maidens of a bygone day. She could speak French fluently and Italian tolerably, and wrote excellent letters in a capable, modern, upright handwriting.

Sara had said to her husband: "You see, it's no earthly use your treating her like a Ponsford—"

she doesn't take after your family. She's a product of the age."

Stephen was secretly proud of her. He didn't really mind being called "old thing," and other disrespectful but endearing appellations. She was such a good sort, was Pamela, always so cheery and good-tempered. And already one or two highly eligible youths had shown her considerable attention. . . .

Janet arrived on the following evening. Sara received her alone, for the children were out together—Gilbert having returned from school that same afternoon—and Stephen had gone to his club. Sara knew that she could not look to him for any assistance in the task of entertaining Janet. He would probably spend most of the day at his club, eating large and indigestible meals, and losing his money and temper at bridge. He would go off quite cheerfully, perhaps saying that women were best left alone together. He was civil and kind enough to his sister when he did see her, but he possessed a very strong strain of Ponsford individuality—he did not call it egotism.

"Well, Janet, what's the matter with you now?" he said, when he came into the drawing-room just before dinner that evening, and found her there with Sara. It was his invariable greeting to her, but he did not perceive that it had grown in course of years slightly inappropriate.

Of course, he'd never known Janet well, he used to tell himself when he felt slightly self-reproachful at the want of affection he was conscious of towards her. She had been a baby when he was already at a public school, and when he came home for the holidays and teased her, she was frightened and cried. She wasn't up to standard—the Ponsford standard. This secretly annoyed him, and made him feel a little ashamed of her.

"Nothing's the matter with me, thank you, Stephen," said Janet's grave voice. "Mamma thought I'd better have a change. John agreed with her." She made the statements mechanically. They were all used to seeing her treated in an arbitrary manner, so that her own wishes were subordinate things that didn't count.

The glitter of Sara's house, its concealed yet golden electric light that suffused the room with a kind of subdued glow almost as of mellowed sunshine, the polished surfaces, the clear clean outlines, the brilliant colors, dazzled her a little. It was such a change after the dim lamp-lit interior, the old-fashioned, rather heterogeneous furniture of her own home. Sara had a great fondness for rose-pink, and expressed this preference in her carpets, curtains, hangings and even in the straight short velvet gown she was wearing.

"Well, I daresay London'll rouse you up a bit. You look as if you wanted rousing, doesn't she, Sara? Wanswater's a deadly hole in the winter. You're not going to wait for Pamela and Gilbert, are you? When I was a boy no one waited for me if I was at all late, and I had to wait for something to eat till next day." He laughed a little grimly at the reminiscence.

"I can't say it had the effect of making you exactly punctual," said Sara, smiling. "But we won't wait for them anyhow." She pushed a little pink enamel button at her side, and gave the order for dinner to be served.

All the time she was regarding Janet secretly with her calm American eyes. Janet was certainly changed. There was the least touch of increased assurance. . . . She looked puzzled, and yet extraordinarily alive.

"She's in love with this man," thought Sara.

Stephen interposed with a clumsy though well-meaning question.

"What's the name of this friend of John's who's been so ill down at Wanswater?"

He had no idea that as yet Sara had not ventured to broach the subject to Janet.

"Denis Lorimer," said Janet.

"What sort of aged man," he inquired.

"About . . . twenty-nine. . . ."

"Oh, quite a young chap," said Stephen, looking relieved. There was probably nothing in it, nothing at all. A foolish fancy. . . . It would not come to anything. Sara must give her a good talking to!

Janet said nothing. Twenty-nine, and she was past thirty-five and her youth was gone. She felt that she looked years and years older than Sara, who was much the same age as herself. Six years. . . . Her brother Curtis was six years older than herself, and to her he had seemed grown up ever since she could remember; first as a huge awkward schoolboy, and then as a long-legged athletic young man, and lastly as an officer home from India, with a cold hard face and stern eyes. She thought of him as he was now, a man of forty-one or so, with a son in the Army—he had married as quite a young subaltern—and a daughter, who had married last year. Janet had heard it said that he had been a harsh father to his two children. He had been left a widower before he was twenty-five. Molly had married a man he didn't like, a young officer called Firth, who had done very well in the War. She was a bright, pretty, wilful little creature, very like her mother, it was said. She was happy, Janet believed. . . .

"Penny for your thoughts, Janet," said Stephen. His efforts to be cheery with this silent sister of his were pathetic.

She was thankful that she could truthfully answer:

"I was thinking of Molly. Have you heard from her lately?"

"Sara had an ecstatic letter after her brat was born," said Stephen.

"It's a girl—they've called it Lucy," said Sara. "Molly's going to bring her home next year."

"Is she friends with Curtis now?" asked Janet.

"So-so," said Stephen, "not much love lost, you know. I can't see why he should have objected to her marrying Charles Firth. He's a very good sort, devoted to Molly, and quite enough money. . . ."

"As if any one could be friends with Curtis," put in Sara; "he's the most Ponsfordy of you all!"

"Better be careful—you'll shock Janet!" roared Stephen, breaking into one of his huge jovial laughs.

The telephone bell rang. "Just see what that is, Stephen," said Sara.

Stephen rose obediently and went into the next room. "Hullo! . . . Hullo! . . . That you, Pam? Dining with Violet? All right. Gilbert there, too? Right-o. Don't be too late." He hung up the receiver. "They're both dining with Violet," he said to his wife.

At dinner Sara returned to the subject of Curtis and his children. Janet was thankful that the conversation should have drifted away from herself and Wanswater; she felt that she could not bear much more of Stephen's blunt questioning.

"Molly and little Curtis could tell you a thing or two," Sara informed her; "they simply refused to let him spoil their lives." There was the least touch of indignation in her tone. "Molly's perfectly happy, and she's got a nice young husband who is devoted to her. Little Curtis is very popular in his regiment; he did simply splendidly during the last six months of the War, and he wasn't nineteen

then. Curtis ought to be proud of him, instead of sending him nothing but furious letters for spending too much money!" She had befriended the two more than once, and had given Molly her trousseau as well as a quantity of loving advice.

All through dinner the conversation never flagged. Sara's bright normal presence gave Janet courage. Why, there was freedom in the very air she breathed! . . . Janet thought she would tell Sara a little—a very little—about Denis Lorimer. Only she must promise not to tell Stephen. For, after all, Stephen was a Ponsford, and he would be certain to uphold Mamma. He would probably say too, that "Janet mustn't be allowed to 'make a fool of herself,'"—it was a favorite expression of his, and it included all that he would have found difficult or impossible to do himself. Anything wild, extravagant, eccentric, or that could conceivably raise a smile of ridicule from his onlookers and intimates. . . .

It was wonderful, Janet thought, how cleverly Sara governed him. He was so much more genial and human than he used to be. The eldest son, of whom great things had been expected, he had been something of a prig in his youth.

"How long's Johnny to be at the Grange?" he asked.

"Only a little while longer. Till—Mr. Lorimer is well enough to be moved."

"And what's been the matter with this Lorimer?"

Janet related the story of Jimmy Nicholls' rescue. Sara said at once: "A very plucky thing to do! Those deep places in Wanswater are very treacherous."

"And his left arm's been hurt—he can't use it," added Janet quietly. Her face was flushed a little, and her eyes glowed with a steady light.

"He sounds quite a hero," said Sara, smiling.

"Is Johnny going back to Rome?" asked Stephen.

"I don't think so at present. He's not made any plans yet."

"Did he try to convert you?" inquired Stephen, with another burst of Homeric laughter.

"No . . ."

"That's fortunate. Mother would hardly have endured that!"

Sara said: "But what's it got to do with her? Surely, Janet can do as she likes."

"Dear Sara, you don't know your mother-in-law." Stephen mocked her with lips and eyes.

## CHAPTER XXVI

**A**FTER dinner Stephen retired to his study, to smoke and probably to snooze over the evening paper. Out of consideration to Janet, they had settled to remain at home that evening. Ordinarily he spent such quiet evenings with Sara, but to-night he took refuge in his own den.

Sara slipped her arm in Janet's and led her upstairs to the drawing-room. She threw herself upon a luxuriously soft sofa, her pretty golden head outlined against a huge rose-pink cushion.

Opposite to her was Janet's demure black-clad figure, sitting upright in an armchair.

"Now I've got you to myself, I'm going to insist upon your getting some decent clothes. You can't go about London in those Wanswater creations," said Sara cheerfully.

"Oh, I know I can't. . . . I shall be really grateful if you'd help me to choose some new ones," said Janet.

"Of course I'll help you. I'll get my own dress-maker to run you up a few things. By the way, I don't want to keep Hodge here. Shall you mind if I send her back to the Grange to-morrow?"

"Mind? I shall be so grateful—so glad. . . ."

"There's so little room with the children at home. Pamela has to have her own maid now, and she can give you any help you want. And Hodge is always tiresome in the house—makes fusses with the other servants."

"Oh, Sara—thank you—thank you!"

Sara saw to her astonishment that there were tears in Janet's eyes.

"Why should you thank me? I only hoped it wouldn't put you out."

"Sara, it's the dream of my life to get away from Hodge. I'm afraid of her—so dreadfully afraid. Mamma gives her so much power."

Her face was very pale, and she glanced nervously round the room as if she were actually afraid that Hodge might be lurking there.

Sara noticed this and said:

"Don't be frightened. These walls haven't any ears. Why don't you ask your mother to send her away if you don't like her?"

Janet shook her head. "Mamma likes her to be there, always, to watch me. I shouldn't dare tell her I was afraid—why, she might tell Hodge!"

Sara was disagreeably impressed by these disclosures, but she tried to assure herself that Janet was morbidly sensitive and fanciful. What was there in Hodge to fear? A hard sour-faced woman, but surely she would never be permitted to be cruel and tyrannical.

"You might have told Johnny, anyhow."

"I have told him . . . he's trying to get things changed. The doctor—there's a new one now

called Stokes—said I ought to have some one younger with me. And Mr. Lorimer . . .” She hesitated.

“Yes? What about Mr. Lorimer?” said Sara kindly, feeling as if she were coming to the crux of the whole situation.

“Sara—he seemed to understand at once how unhappy I was . . . how stifled . . . almost as if I were in prison. . . .”

Janet did not look at Sara as she said the words. Her eyes were fixed upon the pretty leaping dancing flames of the wood-fire, and she was thinking of Lorimer, of what he had said to her, of how he had looked . . . that day kneeling on the wet grass beside Jimmy, for whom he had so nearly sacrificed his own life. . . . And again that evening only three days ago, when she had found him lying wasted and emaciated on the bed—when he had asked her to be his wife.

“Tell me about him, won’t you, Janet?” said Sara.

“He wants to marry me. Didn’t Mamma tell you?”

“Yes. Why’s she making so much fuss?”

“She never liked him,” Janet admitted reluctantly.

“Do you know why?” asked Sara.

“Well, he’s not quite like other men—not the kind of man who has ever stayed at Wanswater with us before.”

“Oh, I see,” said Sara. “And then of course he’s a lot younger than you.”

“Yes, more than six years. But I don’t feel any difference. You see, I love him, Sara.” She uttered the words steadily with only a faint hesitation. “Mamma thinks he only wants my money—she can’t believe that any one could care for *me*.”

“And you’re sure that he cares?”

“Oh yes . . . even at the very beginning when he first arrived at the Grange with Johnny, looking

cold and hungry and exhausted, he noticed me, he was kind. . . . I think I began to love him then."

"Cold, hungry, exhausted. . . ." repeated Sara.

"Yes—he's very poor. He lost his job, you see, when he volunteered, and then when he was in Italy he hurt his arm and was very ill for a long time. Johnny met him at Euston when he was leaving for Wanswater and persuaded him to go with him. He thinks he must have been practically penniless."

Sara banished an involuntary inclination to adopt Mrs. Ponsford's view of the case, and share her evidently well-founded belief that this man who professed to love poor faded Janet Ponsford was after her money. The little picture she had drawn of him gave Sara a vivid impression of the man. Some poor wastrel, of course; some lame dog whom Johnny had picked up out of charity. But why in the name of fortune did not Johnny interfere and tell his friend that such a marriage—so unequal from every point of view—could not possibly be permitted? This Lorimer was probably a gentleman by birth, since John had taken him to his own home, but he was obviously very poor indeed, "practically penniless," as Janet had admitted. He was younger than she was, and his health seemed to be almost in as precarious a state as her own. What had brought him to this pass of penury? There must have been something, surely, to account for the *dégringolade*. Drink, in all probability; it was this that submerged nine-tenths of the men who went under.

She looked at Janet, and her heart ached a little. It seemed on the face of it such a hopeless business. But she was resolved to be impartial; she would not judge Lorimer till she had seen him, spoken to him.

Janet rose suddenly and came across to where Sara was sitting. She knelt on the floor near her and took Sara's hands in hers. "Sara—you must help

me. John doesn't say much, but I feel he's against it, too. I've no one except Denis, and I've had to go away without seeing him—he'll think I've listened to Mamma and given him up. . . ."

"Oh, they didn't even let you say good-bye?"

It was astonishing to Sara, that terrible submission of Janet's to Mrs. Ponsford's will. Just as if she had been a child. . . .

"I promised not to see him if they'd only let him stay till he was better. Mamma wanted to send him over to Kenstone in a motor-ambulance the very day after we were engaged. I knew it would kill him, so I *offered* not to see him, not to speak to him again. But it was terrible this morning just before I left. . . . He sent the nurse down to ask me to go up and see him, but Mamma wouldn't release me from my promise. I felt as if my heart were being torn out of my body."

Sara bent down, and taking Janet's face lightly in her two hands, kissed her. "I'll help you, Janet," she said, "if you're quite sure this marriage will be for your happiness. You see, I don't know your Denis, and all the circumstances, you must own, do offer some justification for Mrs. Ponsford's objections. Where did Johnny originally meet him?"

"In Rome, I think," said Janet.

"He's a Catholic, I suppose."

"Yes. . . . Not a very good one . . . but I think he went to confession the night they thought he was dying." She related again with a wealth of detail the story of his plucky rescue of little Jimmy Nicholls. "It was so brave of him—if he hadn't been there Jimmy would have been drowned. Wanswater's very deep just at that point, and he isn't strong, and the ice-cold water . . . it was so long, too, before he could change his wet clothes."

There was a touch of hero-worship, then, in this strange tardy love of hers. Bewildered, Sara said:

"Perhaps the less we talk about it before Stephen the better. Of course, he's dying with curiosity. . . . You Ponsfords are dreadfully clanny when danger threatens any of you!"

"Only—this isn't danger," said Janet, and her eyes shone.

Sara reserved her opinion upon that point. She must first of all see Lorimer and know what type of man this was who had so speedily captured Janet's untried heart. She flattered herself that she was a quick and accurate reader of character—that Lorimer would prove as easy to her as an open book. . . .

"I'd like you to see him, to know him, Sara."

"That's just what I want to do, my dear Janet. He must come here when he leaves Wanswater. When's that likely to be?"

"I don't know. But Mamma didn't want him to be there when Violet and Cosmo go for Christmas."

"They're not going," said Sara. "Cosmo refused, and Violet of course won't go without him. I expect they've telegraphed by this time. When do you think Mr Lorimer will be fit to travel?"

"Not for some weeks. The idea was to send him to a hospital at Kenstone. Sara—he'll be delicate for a long time. And I want to be sure that he has lots of things to eat, and proper nursing. And no one seems to care except Johnny. . . ."

"Well, Janet, I am going to do a very rash thing. When the children's holidays are over I shall have him here. Pamela is going to Paris for a month with the Cullingdons after Christmas, so she'll be out of the way. Will that do?"

"Oh, Sara, of course it will do! How could you think of such a lovely plan?"

"It may be lovely, but I've an idea it's a very imprudent one. However, something must be done."

"He doesn't even know where I am," said Janet, "unless, of course, Johnny's told him. But Johnny's very odd about it; he says very little, yet I know he can't bear the thought of it."

"I'll write to Mr. Lorimer myself," said Sara, "and ask him to come when he's better. Let me see—he might come about the fifth for a week at any rate. Pamela will have gone to Paris, and Gilbert is to stay with a friend in Hampshire. I think he ought to be well enough to come by then."

"But they'll know your writing at Wanswater—they'll suspect something. . . ."

"You goose—the envelope shall be typewritten."

Janet breathed a sigh of relief. "You *are* clever, Sara. Do you think I might put in one little line?"

"Yes, if that's allowed by the terms of your agreement!"

"Yes—I never promised not to write."

"Be careful what you say," said Sara. She felt that she had perhaps been more sentimental than wise in consenting. But Janet must learn self-confidence, otherwise this man would certainly use her as a doormat. She repressed that steadily-growing inclination to doubt Lorimer's sincerity. A needy adventurer probably, one who had aroused Johnny's well-known ardor to capture the straying sheep and bring it back to the fold. So foolish of dear Johnny to bring his straying black sheep to Wanswater! But the mischief was done now, and if Denis Lorimer really intended to marry Janet, married they would certainly be, to the great discomfiture of Giles. . . .

"Hodge mustn't know about it," said Janet; "you see, she'd tell Mamma; there'd be an awful fuss. Mamma would probably influence Stephen. . . ."

Sara's face grew serious. "I don't mind your being afraid of your mother—considering the way she brought you up, it's only what she deserves!"

But I can't have you afraid of Hodge, my dear Janet!"

"But I've been afraid of her ever since I was a little girl."

"But you're not a little girl any more, and it's bad for your character—your will—to cherish a fear of that kind."

"When I'm ill, she treats me like a little girl . . . she's so rough that she often hurts me, and I'm sure she does it on purpose. I'm so afraid of those attacks, Sara, for when I wake up Hodge is always there, generally giving me injections to bring me round. I'm in her power then. . . ."

"Have you been ill lately?" inquired Sara.

"Twice since Mr Lorimer came. The first time, he carried me down to my room. . . ."

"Oh, he knows, then?" said Sara, feeling slightly relieved. It would not have been quite fair, she thought, to keep him in the dark. But if he'd seen her in that helpless unconscious state and still persisted, he would only have himself to thank or to blame.

Janet flushed a little. "Yes—he knows. It didn't make any difference, except he thought the treatment was all wrong and said so. He's seen lots of queer cases of unconsciousness in France—he thought once of being a doctor."

Lorimer might be one of two things, Sara reflected—a quixotic individual who desired to rescue this unfortunate Andromeda bound hand and foot to the rock of parental authority, or he was simply a crafty and impecunious adventurer bent on appropriating her money. Her worldly mind, it must be confessed, was strongly in favor of the latter theory. She couldn't bring herself to believe that a young man of twenty-nine could really feel a chivalrous love for this pitiful childlike, faded creature. . . .

But her compassion for Janet was so keen that it

smote her like a sharp physical pang. She couldn't even now believe that any happiness of a permanent solid kind could await her. It was pitiful—this pathetic combination of an untried, passionate heart, and the elderly dowdy creature from whose exterior appearance all semblance of youth had prematurely vanished.

She had known her for sixteen years, had seen her first when she was not quite twenty, and even then Janet had never looked like a young girl.

She thought: "John ought to have converted her, and then she might have become a nun—she would have been happy in a convent." Sara held the conventional idea that a nun need possess no attractive qualities of character or intellect—an idea that Charles Kingsley did a good deal to crystalize by his lines:

I was not good enough for man,  
And so was given to God. . . .

She was not aware that in Catholic families it is often the flower of the flock, the pretty gay, enchanting daughter, that receives that urgent spiritual impulse, incontrovertible, irresistible, that is known as a religious vocation, triumphing over all earthly enticements and promise of temporal prizes. . . .

"What sort of looking man is Mr. Lorimer?" she asked.

"Very handsome," said Janet, who had no talent for describing people. "Tall—very tall—taller than John. With odd thick black hair pushed right off his forehead. I think it was perhaps the way he wore his hair that first prejudiced Mamma against him."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," subjoined Sara.

"And large dark eyes . . ." continued Janet.

"But he's very thin; since his illness he looks quite wasted—when I saw him he was almost . . . ugly." She paused before uttering the word. "And his arm . . . it was bad luck, wasn't it, getting it hurt so badly that he'll never use it again? Worse for a poor man . . . and then not having it hurt in the War. I don't know how it happened, but it wasn't very long ago, while he was in Italy. Denis has lived a lot in Italy; he speaks Italian well. He was there with his father as a little boy."

"And where's his father now?" asked Sara.

"Oh, he's been dead a long time, and his mother died when he was a little child. He never had any brothers or sisters."

"When did he ask you to marry him?"

"It was the day I first went to see him after he was so ill. He was a little better, out of danger, they said, and he asked me to go. The nurse came down to fetch me . . . I told him I'd been praying for him, and he said in a curious changed voice, '*So you did care?*' And when I said yes, he asked me to marry him. . . ." She looked up at Sara with grave shining eyes. "It was a wonderful moment," she added simply.

"I'm sure it was," agreed Sara, with unconscious dryness. "And you promised—there and then?"

"Yes, Sara. . . ."

"You must have guessed what Mrs. Ponsford would say. . . ."

"Yes," said Janet. "I knew she would be very angry."

"You didn't think that perhaps she was right?" suggested Sara.

Janet shook her head. "How could she be? She doesn't really know Denis at all. . . ."

There was a little pause, during which Sara occupied herself by trying to put together Janet's somewhat unilluminating shreds of description in

order to form some kind of mental picture of Denis Lorimer. But the task was beyond her. Of course he must have heroic qualities, although the action of plunging into the lake had been almost forced upon him. He was the only spectator of adult age present, and what man can wilfully let a small boy drown before his eyes and make no effort to rescue him? Still, for a man who was practically one-armed it had been a clever feat of strength and courage. Sara was too strong a woman to have an exaggerated admiration for mere physical courage in a man; she possessed plenty herself and knew how greatly it was a matter of controlled and highly disciplined nerves. But to Janet, of course Lorimer's action must have appeared unique and wholly heroic.

"Mamma called him a mountebank," said Janet presently; "I didn't know what it meant, so I looked it out in the dictionary. It said it was an itinerant quack who addressed the crowd from a platform. It didn't seem to fit Denis at all. . . ."

Sara laughed.

"Well, it's getting late, and I expect you're tired. Come into the study and have something to drink before you go to bed."

They went downstairs to find a sleepy Stephen, who roused himself at their approach.

## CHAPTER XXVII

SARA'S letter to Lorimer was very brief. "My sister-in-law is staying with us in London for the present. If you are well enough to come for a few days on the 5th of January, we shall be very glad to see you."

She showed the letter to Janet.

"I'm so afraid he won't come. It was different for him to stay with us, he'd known Johnny so well, but he's poor, he may not like to stay in this rich house."

Janet looked round Sara's little sitting-room as she spoke. It was exquisitely furnished, with all the clear and bright coloring of modern decoration. Sara changed it nearly every year. Janet found it difficult to picture Denis there, with his shabby clothes and mended boots. Only, wherever he was, he managed, in her eyes at least, to look like a king. . . .

"Oh, nonsense," said Sara, "if he wishes to marry you he must naturally be prepared to stay with your relations. We aren't so very formidable, are we?" And she laughed gaily.

Janet did not dare give any further explanation. She knew that Sara preferred rich opulent people who lived their lives on the same lines as herself, or perhaps even on more luxurious ones. She wasn't fond of lame dogs.

"And now if you'll give me your letter I will put it in mine," said Sara.

Janet produced the letter. Writing was easier to her than speaking, it gave her more time to collect and arrange her thoughts. The letter, she felt, was a nice one. Perhaps Lorimer would answer it. She had a great wish to hear from him; she wondered what his handwriting was like.

Sara enclosed the letter in a typewritten envelope, and attached the stamp, first moistening it with a tiny sponge affixed to a delicate gold handle. All Sara's appurtenances were dainty and valuable. Janet looked almost with envy at the exquisite writing-table so beautifully appointed down to its smallest detail.

Sara thought her own letter sufficiently friendly,

and yet it would show Denis that Janet had rich powerful relations to whom her welfare was of importance, and who made her interests their own. He should see her in a very different environment from that of the Grange, and he would soon learn that if his object was only to possess himself of her money, steps would be taken to prevent the marriage.

Hodge had left for Wanswater that morning, morose and resentful. She was obdurate at first, assuring Sara that she had received no instructions from Mrs. Ponsford to leave "Miss Janet" alone in London.

"She's not alone, she's with me," said Sara. "And I'm sorry I really can't have you here, Hodge; there isn't room. Besides, I think Miss Janet wants a complete change. I know you're very faithful and all that, but you're inclined to overdo it. You don't give her room to breathe in. I thought I should like to look after her myself for a while."

"One of her attacks is about due now," said Hodge darkly, "and after a journey she generally gets a baddish one."

"Well, there are excellent physicians in London, you know, Hodge, if she does happen to get ill," rejoined Sara, in her bright decisive way.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Ponsford will be very much annoyed. She particularly didn't want Miss Janet to be away alone, for fear Mr. Lorimer should follow her up here when he's better."

"I really can't argue with you, Hodge. Please tell Mrs. Ponsford that I'm taking all responsibility, and Miss Janet shall have every attention."

Sara had one quality in common with the Ponsfords—an iron will. One did not always immediately recognize this characteristic in her, for her exterior appearance suggested only a bright charm, an adroit knowledge of how to emphasize

her own good points, and a serene temper when things under her hand were working smoothly. But Hodge at that moment began to recognize qualities in "Mrs. Stephen" for which she was no match.

She departed for Wanswater, washing her hands of so uncompromising and unusual a situation.

Janet betrayed few signs of anxiety in the days that followed, and she had evidently no doubt that Lorimer's desire to see her again must be at least as great as her own to receive him. Sara, on the other hand, reflected that if he did not wish to abide by his rash proposal, he could now find a reasonable loophole of escape. So much tacit hostility and opposition, this departure of Janet's without a single farewell word, his own physical weakness when the offer was made, might all, she considered, be quite justly adduced as fair reasons for "crying off." She did not tell Janet so, but when some days had passed and no answer had come from Wanswater, she began to feel a genuine anxiety as to the outcome. Lorimer's defalcation would produce nothing but relief in the Ponsford family—a relief which Sara could not bring herself not to share—but it would indeed go ill with Janet if he played false. There was something so complete and complacent in Janet's belief in his love for her. Even Mrs. Ponsford's "bludgeon blows" had done nothing to modify it.

Sara found a letter with the Wanswater postmark on it, a few days later, reposing with her usual morning heap on the breakfast-table. She really preferred to breakfast in her own room and only partook of that meal downstairs in order to see that Pamela had everything she wanted. To the less partial observer there was small likelihood of such a calamity as insufficient food befalling Pamela, but Sara was far too good a mother to leave anything to chance.

Janet breakfasted in her own room. Sara had recommended this course, assuring her that she would find nothing to do if she came down so early. The extra rest would be good for her. There would be lots of time to do the shopping if she were ready by eleven.

Pamela opened her mother's letters for her, when she was down sufficiently early, with a little silver paper-cutter. She picked up Lorimer's and examined it.

"Who's that from? I don't know the writing. Wanswater postmark too." She scrutinized it.

"It's from Mr. Lorimer probably," said Sara taking it from her. "I've asked him to come in January when you and Gilbert are both away."

"Why when we're away? We're dying to see him. Aren't we, Gilbert?" She turned her head towards her brother, who had just come into the room.

Gilbert was a thin, slight boy, much more like the Ponsfords than his sister, for he had their blue eyes, their fairish hair.

"Aren't we what, Fatty?" he asked.

"Dying to see our future Uncle Denis."

"Yes, I want to know the worst," said Gilbert with cool impertinence. "Bit of a bounder, I think, from what Cosmo says. Not that he's seen him, but Aunt Violet's had a furious letter from Gran. She says she's glad she refused to go down there for Christmas, there'll be such a turmoil."

While making this speech he had embraced his parents and Pamela severally, and taken his seat at the table.

"Fatty, you've eaten all the cream! And it's very bad for your figure. You're an awful lump—soon no one will want to dance with you!"

Sara and Pamela said respectively but simultaneously:

"Ring for some more," and "Oh, yes they will."

Stephen seldom took part in breakfast conversation; he was generally too deeply immersed in the *Times*, and the latest pronouncements of the Prime Minister, as well as that page, consecrated in all properly conducted newspapers, to Finance, the City, and the price of Stocks. But he liked to know that Sara was sitting opposite to him as faultlessly arrayed as if she were going to receive her smartest friends, and that his two handsome, healthy children were one on each side of him. There was something cheerful about the scene that deprived the gray, chilly December day of something of its grayness, its chilliness.

He pricked up his ears when he heard Lorimer's name.

"Asked him here! But, my dearest Sara, what on earth made you do that? You know she was sent here to be out of his way." He looked genuinely alarmed, for even at fifty years of age he had filial qualms about resisting his mother's authority.

"I want to see him for myself," replied Sara, "and I thought the best thing to do was to ask him to stay with us. It's not fair to Janet to drive her into a hole-and-corner business."

"Hear, hear," said Pamela, between mouthfuls of scrambled eggs.

Sara took up Lorimer's letter and scanned it. It was written in pencil and the handwriting was weak and somewhat illegible. The contents were simple and straightforward enough, and gave Sara a better impression of the man than any she had hitherto entertained.

"Dear Mrs. Ponsford," the letter ran, "I can only say I thank you from my heart. When I leave here (it will be quite soon, for I am left in no doubt as to my hostess's feelings on the subject) I shall go to London. If you will really let me stay

with you, that will be a great solution of my difficulties. I shall place myself unreservedly in your hands, and thank you for the opportunity you will give me of seeing Janet again and arranging with her the date of our marriage. I am sure from the kindness of your letter that you will help us both."

"Let's see the letter, Mum," said Pamela, putting out her hand.

"Your father must read it first," said Sara, handing it across the table to her husband.

"Bags I next," said Gilbert.

Pamela snorted. "I'm older than you," she reminded him.

"It'll be simply awful if he is such a bounder as Cosmo seems to think," remarked Gilbert rather lugubriously. He hoped they would not take it into their heads to visit him at school. He was to go to Eton after Easter, and they might want to come down for the Fourth of June. With the snob-bishness of extreme youth, he felt his heart sink at the prospect.

Stephen threw the letter down on the table, whence it was immediately retrieved by Pamela.

"Not bad. Rather too gushing, though," she said coolly. "Still, Aunt Janet's old-fashioned, she'll like it. Gush and sentiment and all that kind of tosh."

Stephen, perhaps actuated by Sara's example, began to finger his own letters. He had early discovered the unwisdom of allowing Pamela to interfere with them; he had certain innocent financial secrets which he fondly imagined he had succeeded in keeping from the knowledge of his wife and daughter. They humored him in this flattering belief.

"By Jove—there's one from the mater," he said.

He opened it and glanced at its contents. "She's awfully annoyed with you for sending Hodge back," he said, wondering why he had never been able to

teach Sara the family creed that Mrs. Ponsford must never be contradicted or thwarted.

"I knew she would be. All the same, I really couldn't have that woman here, terrorizing poor Janet into an attack."

She had always held an adverse view of Hodge; this was attributed to an airy antagonism she maliciously displayed towards anything that the Ponsfords regarded as specially sacred, among their own personal belongings. Nor did she feel it any part of her duty to humor old Mrs. Ponsford when she saw clearly that she was in the wrong. Sara had always pitied Janet, although it was only lately that her compassion had taken a practical form, and showed itself in a strong desire to befriend her.

"Janet's been ever so much better since Hodge left. Even those few days have made a difference."

This cumulative fear had been growing, she believed, ever since Janet's delicate and ill-managed childhood. Doubtless in its earlier stages it was the result of the sheer physical terror which a strong coarse woman can excite in a frail shrinking child. Janet, weak and sensitive, accepted the rule that "she must obey Hodge like a good little girl or else she would have to be punished," and she had never dared to complain. She was like one wandering in a blind alley. The only way was to endure, and sometimes you fell asleep—quite suddenly in the daytime—and even Hodge couldn't punish you when you were asleep. Once or twice she had dreamed that Hodge had stabbed her when she was thus sleeping, so sharply, too, that it had wakened her. It was only as she grew older that Janet realized the stab meant the administration of a hypodermic injection. . . . Much of this Janet had confessed to Sara's wise, sane ears, since her arrival in London.

Sara had thought indignantly: "How can people permit such things? Fancy allowing such a terror

as that to crystallize. . . . Why, such a thing could never have happened to Pamela—she would have told me, and we should have laid the ghost together.”

It was curious that she should so often think of Janet not as an elderly faded woman, nervous and timid, but as a little injured girl.

“Let’s hear what your mother says, Stephen,” said Sara. Of course she had known that Mrs. Ponsford would not take the return of Hodge “lying down.” It would result, if not in a declaration of war, at least in an abrupt temporary severance of diplomatic relations.

“Quite apart from Janet, I didn’t want to have Hodge here,” she continued, scanning her mother-in-law’s letter. “She always sets the other servants by the ears. I can’t imagine why your mother keeps the woman.”

“Oh, she thinks all the world of her,” said Stephen, feeling slightly uncomfortable. He didn’t of course believe that Hodge could really terrorize Janet as Sara seemed to suggest; it would be absurd to imagine such a thing as that to be possible “in the twentieth century,” as he would have expressed it. And then his mother had always said that Janet wanted a “firm hand over her,” to prevent her from doing very stupid and imprudent things that would certainly affect her health. He had sometimes thought that Janet was kept a little too strictly, but supposed it must be all right, since the reasons given for the procedure seemed so excellent and plausible. He had not supposed that Janet had suffered under the treatment, since she had never been known to complain.

There was no reference to Mr. Lorimer in Mrs. Ponsford’s letter, an omission which struck Sara as rather significant, since the last one had been so

full of him. The vision of a humiliated Hodge, returning in obedience to Sara's high-handed decree, had evidently driven lesser grievances quite out of the old lady's mind.

"Well, you did it off your own bat, and I suppose you knew what you were doing," said Stephen, feeling a trifle dejected. He didn't want to be mixed up in this affair of Janet's at all, and wished he could have made his wife observe a similar abstinence. If things turned out badly—as they certainly would, if Janet married this adventurer—they would be blamed all round for encouraging the affair.

Pamela had finished her breakfast, and now rose from the table.

"I shall go up and see Aunt Janet," she announced; "she'll want to hear what Mr. Lorimer says. Shall I take the letter up to her?"

"You can if you like," said Sara.

Gilbert said: "What are we going to do to-day? It's awful rot spending Christmas in London. We ought to have gone to Switzerland, or to the South of France with Aunt Violet. There's simply nothing to do."

"I can't take you abroad this year," said Sara; "and it's no use letting you and Pamela go with other people. You only stay up till all hours dancing, and come back looking perfect wrecks."

She followed her daughter out of the room. Janet's affairs were perturbing her a good deal, and she would have been glad to go abroad with the children and forget all about them. But having put her hand to the plough, she was resolved not to look back. If Lorimer proved in any way possible, she was determined to see the thing through to its logical termination. A wedding in Westminster Cathedral, perhaps, as Pamela had suggested. . . .

## CHAPTER XXVIII

CHRISTMAS came and went, and no further news had been received from Wanswater. After the New Year, Sara busied herself with choosing clothes for Janet. She wanted her to look as nice as possible when Lorimer arrived. Pamela's maid did her hair, and made the most of the abundant auburn locks, which looked quite glossy and burnished under these practiced ministrations. Sara would have imparted one or two innocent little secrets of the toilette, especially in regard to the complexion, but she came to the conclusion that Janet wasn't of the type that looked well even with those very slight aids to beauty. Besides, if Lorimer had liked that old-fashioned simplicity of hers and recognized its sterling qualities of fidelity and devotion, he wouldn't want to come and find her too much changed. Dresses, of course, she must have, and the new clothes, chosen with all Sara's skill and forethought—her taste in the matter of dress and decoration being really remarkable—proved extremely becoming to Janet.

She had been perfectly well since coming to London. Hodge's dark prognostications had so far remained unfulfilled. She was looking forward tremulously, but with unshaken faith, to Lorimer's arrival. The fifth of January was drawing near, but he had not as yet written to say on which day he would arrive.

Pamela had left for Paris, and Gilbert had gone to Hampshire to stay with his school-friend. The house was rather silent without the children, and Janet missed them. They were always pleasant and affectionate to her, and she found their company stimulating and amusing. But, evidently, Sara did not wish them to be there when Denis came; per-

haps she was afraid that they might voice their opinion of him too openly.

Sara and Janet were sitting alone in the drawing-room one evening after tea. They had been shopping all the afternoon, and both were tired. It was raining, and they could hear the great drops splashing on the windows. A strong wind was blowing.

The door opened and the manservant's voice announced:

"Father John Ponsford."

Janet sprang to her feet and ran eagerly towards her brother. He stooped and kissed her saying, "Well, my dear Jane . . ."

Sara watched them. Then she held out her hand to John.

"What a night for you to come! Did you leave Wanswater to-day?"

"Last night. I came up from Kenstone by the night mail."

"Well, what news?" asked Sara brightly. "I hope Mrs. Ponsford's well."

"Quite well, thank you," said John.

"And Mr. Lorimer?"

"He's better. He left two days ago . . . before I did, in fact."

"Oh!" . . . Janet breathed sharply. Denis had left Wanswater! Why had he not written to say so—to tell them that he was free and could come? She glanced sharply at Sara, whose calm face betrayed no surprise or anxiety.

"I'm sorry Stephen won't be in this evening," said Sara, "but of course you must stay and dine. Where did you say Mr. Lorimer had gone?"

"He didn't leave any address," admitted John.

He looked at the two women, and felt vaguely glad to think they seemed on such friendly intimate terms. A change of this kind would do Janet good.

John liked Sara, indeed she was a general favorite with all the family. A little worldly perhaps, but she had a fund of common sense in her pretty little head. A bold move of hers—that of sending Hodge summarily back to Wanswater.

“But, Johnny, why did he go like that without telling you? You—you haven’t quarreled with him?”

“No, indeed I haven’t,” said John. “But he seemed to want to go, although Stokes said it was a risk. I wanted him to wait and come with me to-day, but he wouldn’t. To tell you the truth, I thought I might find him here.”

“No, he hasn’t been here,” said Sara; “I asked him to stay, you know.”

Janet cried: “Oh, you shouldn’t have let him go like that! You know he hasn’t any money.”

John looked at her. “Yes, he had some money,” he said.

Sara, listening, felt that fresh and ambiguous complications were still further darkening the horizon. She could see that Janet was alarmed and anxious.

“Did Mamma say anything to him?” said Janet. She was very white now, and Sara noticed that her hands were shaking.

“Yes,” said John, rather reluctantly.

“About me?”

John nodded. “She told him quite clearly that he wasn’t to marry you, and she forbade him to try to see you. I’m awfully sorry, Janet,—I would have prevented it if I could. You needn’t go home again till you wish to. I’m settling about going to Gillingsea—there’s a cottage quite handy where you can live, and the air’s good.” His voice was very tender; he was offering her far more than she knew.

But she brushed aside the issue with extraordinary impatience.

"I'm not thinking of myself, Johnny. Do you suppose I care what becomes of me? I'm thinking of Denis, alone and ill . . . and poor." She spoke with unusual passion.

Sara listened, and as she listened all her misgivings deepened. There was something so intensely mysterious about the personality of this man, and all she heard of him only served to deepen it. And with this mystery, she felt there was a touch of something sinister. She could not tell exactly when or why she had received that impression. She longed to see him, in the hope that he might dispel these shadowy suspicions and create a clear and lucid and normal situation.

"Dear Jane, he'll soon get something to do. I shall help him to find a job. He's a clever linguist—men like that can always get work." His tone was firm, but he was nearly at the end of his tether. He had seen Lorimer leave Wanswater in a white-hot and wholly unreasonable passion of anger, and had been powerless to restrain him from doing so.

Janet broke in: "Mamma can't separate us . . . I've told Sara—she knows everything! And you're not against it, are you, Sara?"

"I can't form any opinion till I've seen Mr. Lorimer. But I want to see him—I want to help you if I can." Sara spoke in a cool decided tone.

John said bitterly: "He's six years younger than Janet, and he hasn't a penny in the world. You must admit that my mother's only taking ordinary precautions. You've a daughter of your own, Sara."

Janet said: "I'd rather he had my money than any one in the world! I'd give it all to him tomorrow if I could . . ."

"That is childish," said Sara; "women don't give their money to impecunious young men unless they are fools. If you want me to help you, Janet, you must be sensible!"

She was thinking: "He can't care for her . . . it must be the money. And they're all quite right. . . ."

Her words silenced Janet, as she intended that they should. Perhaps, after all, she had done wrong to interfere in the matter at all. The Ponsfords were not acting unreasonably, and it was quite evident that the glamor of Mr. Lorimer's ambiguous personality had not cast its spell upon them.

Perhaps they had not reckoned upon encountering resistance from Janet. But she, the delicate, the nervous, the cowed, was ready to fight for her love and happiness now. It seemed to imbue her with a strange new strength. Away from Wanswater, and without Hodge, she was a new creature of unsuspected violence and obstinacy.

Then there supervened one of those dramatic moments which are certainly much more common in every-day life than is generally supposed. The door was again flung open, and this time the servant's voice announced: "Mr. Denis Lorimer."

Janet and John sprang up quickly; relief was on both their faces, for John had felt a disquieting anxiety about Lorimer, ever since he had shaken the dust of the Grange from his feet two days ago. He had been in a reckless turbulent mood, had refused to listen to John's kindly words, and had snatched the proffered money as if he had been conferring a favor on him by accepting it, departing thereafter into the unknown, with scarcely a word of farewell.

Denis had expected to see Janet and perhaps Mrs. Stephen Ponsford, whose letter had been kind and friendly. But he had not expected to see John's

tall black-clad figure, and the sight deprived him a little of his self-possession. He paused for a second near the door, as if his feet refused to carry him any further into the room.

Sara rose and came towards him. She was calm, self-possessed, with a little touch of haughtiness in her manner. She gave him a quick scrutinizing glance. She saw a tall lean man, with a pale emaciated face, dark eyes, and very dark hair that was slightly tumbled. At first sight he did not look very young, not appreciably younger than Janet. But illness had perhaps given him that thin worn appearance. Illness . . . and poverty.

"Queer-looking, like an actor out of work," was Sara's first impression. "What can Janet see in him?"

The word *mountebank* recurred to her mind with unpleasant insistence. But what had made John take this straying sheep to Wanswater?

Lorimer recovered himself, shook hands with Sara, then greeted the brother and sister.

"Well, John? Well, Janet?" He gave them each his hand in turn, and for a second his eyes met Janet's. He smiled feebly. Sara's calm assured manner made him a little nervous. The unexpected atmosphere of wealth had also astonished him. One did not readily associate the Ponsfords with the more opulent and complicated forms of luxury. Sara's house was very perfectly appointed. Compared to the overflowing rooms at the Grange, her drawing-room might have been considered a little bare, but every piece of furniture or china would probably have proved of priceless value if examined by a connoisseur.

And in Sara, Denis readily recognized the modern woman of the world, clear-sighted, free from all illusions, sane, balanced, almost cruelly normal.

"Do sit down, Mr. Lorimer," said Sara,

"you've been very ill, I'm afraid. And this is bad weather for you to be out in."

She sat on the sofa, and to her left Lorimer leaned back in an armchair just vacated by John. John sat between him and Janet, whose face was averted. Silence fell upon the little group.

"I've been expecting to hear from you, to say when you were coming to stay with us," said Sara. She wished she could have been alone with Denis, it would have been easier to talk to him then.

"I wasn't sure if you still wished to have me. After what Mrs. Ponsford said—" He broke off abruptly, and then he looked at Janet. Had she changed? Was she going to sacrifice him? But the mute averted figure did not stir or respond.

"I'm so utterly in the dark!" he cried suddenly. "Won't any of you speak?"

The voice was soft, almost womanish, and full of appeal. Sara realized that he was suffering. . . . She felt sorry for him. Then a sudden impulse of distrust banished the momentary compassion. Was the man acting? She could not tell. But he was at a disadvantage, uncertain of his welcome. . . . She must remember that.

John was silent. His face was very calm and impassive. Janet crouched a little closer to the fire, as if she felt mortally cold. Sara rose and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Janet, dear, I want you to leave us for a little. Come with me," she said in a kind firm tone.

Janet stood up and allowed Sara to lead her to the door. As she passed Lorimer, he snatched her hand for a second and held it crushed in his own. The gesture comforted her. The sudden sight of him had unnerved her; she was glad to go away. . . .

"You shall come back—you shall see him," whis-

pered Sara, as they stood facing each other on the square landing outside. "Are you all right, dear Janet? You don't feel faint or anything?"

"No—no! I'm quite all right, Sara. But promise that you won't let him go till I've seen him again. . . ."

"I promise, Janet," said Sara. She put her arms around Janet and kissed her. She rarely displayed any demonstrative affection, and Janet was touched by the embrace.

"Sara—dear Sara, you'll be kind to him won't you?"

"Yes, yes," Sara assured her.

She went back into the drawing-room. Janet paused for a second and then went up to her room.

John rose as Sara came back. "I daresay you'd like to have a talk with Lorimer alone. I'll go down and have a smoke in the study."

He went downstairs. The situation seemed to him pretty hopeless, but he could trust Sara to deal with it adequately.

"Now, Mr. Lorimer!" said Sara encouragingly.

She drew her chair nearer the fire. Outside, the wind howled dismally, with its harsh winter voice, and the rain slashed the windows with savage violence.

Denis was silent and ill at ease. His shabby boots looked more than ever shabby in Sara's charming, perfect room.

"Where have you been staying since you left Wanswater?"

"I've got a room with a friend. I'm pretty hard up, as I suppose they've told you."

She noticed then for the first time the straight stiff way in which his left arm hung helplessly. She wondered how he had come by such a disabling wound. Janet had told her that he had not re-

ceived it in the War. It made another point of mystery in addition to so much that was already mysterious.

"Yes, they told me," she answered.

"Of course you think, too, that I'm after Janet's money," he exclaimed angrily.

Sara had desired a lucid situation, freed from all ambiguity. She felt that she had it now with a vengeance. She answered coolly:

"I only see the surface, and that's what it looks like of course. But I'm very fond of Janet—I want to help her—that's why I'd like to hear your side."

"She's miserable at home," he said sullenly; "I'd make her happier than that."

"But you know . . . how delicate she is. . . ." pursued Sara.

Lorimer laughed ironically.

"She's never had a chance! You must have seen that, haven't you?"

"And she's many years older than you . . . she's, in a sense, prematurely aged. . . ." Sara did not feel, however, that she herself looked greatly older than the man who sat there, haggard and rather wasted, with those great staring sunken eyes.

"She's looking years younger than she did when I went to Wanswater first. She looks younger, too, since she came here," said Denis.

"Oh, well, I've seen to her clothes," said Sara, feeling rather gratified that her efforts had not been wholly wasted upon him. Then she went on: "Janet is very sweet and charming, I know, but her mind's rather like that of a child. Not stupid, but undeveloped. . . ."

"No wonder!" he broke in. "I'm aghast to think that such cruelty masquerading as kindness should exist in the world to-day! That woman, Hodge! . . . Janet's not undeveloped—she's been literally

stunted. . . . She's been shut in a cellar, deprived of light and air. . . ."

Sara looked at him with her calm steady eyes.

"What do you propose to do?" she inquired.

"Marry her as soon as I can, and look out for some quiet place where we can live cheaply."

"Do you care for Janet, Mr. Lorimer?" asked Sara. When she had uttered the words, she felt a little astonished at her own temerity.

Their eyes met.

"Yes," said Lorimer.

"You're a Catholic, aren't you?"

"Yes, as far as I'm anything. She can be one too if she likes. She wants to be one. I've learned from her what confession can mean to children. She's been suffering from repressed fear all these years. Her first attack was brought on by fear. Fear is a sentiment that timid children invariably repress. It breeds fear, fear of consequences,—fear of punishment. The child who suffers from it needs an outlet. A Catholic child finds that outlet in the confessional, with its secure inviolability. I'm not a shining example of a Catholic, Mrs. Ponsford, but I recognize the sanity of the system side by side with its sanctity."

"I daresay there's a good deal to be said for it," said Sara. "I mean—even from a psychological standpoint."

"I never realized it so clearly until I knew Janet," Denis continued; "she began by interesting me. . . . She made me think of the words *A Spirit in Prison*. . . . It attracted me—I wanted to talk to her—to learn more. She helped me, you know, that day when I pulled the boy out of Wanswater. She was cool and competent—you wouldn't have known her. You'll think I was hypnotizing her, I suppose? But it was nothing of the kind. I just told her

what to do, and she responded. And she was so grateful to me that it almost hurt. . . .”

“You know that John wants her to go and live near him at Gillingsea. There’s a cottage she can have. She’d be perfectly independent, and she’s devoted to John. Wouldn’t it be best to leave it at that?” said Sara.

“Do you want me to throw her over? Does *she* want it?” demanded Denis.

“I’m only suggesting what I think would be the wisest thing to do. You’re a young man, Mr. Lorimer, you’ve got your way to make—”

“I shall make it, don’t be afraid, when I’m fit again. . . . She’ll help me, you know—I’ve felt that about her. She’s got such perfect confidence in me. . . .”

“But you’re nearly thirty. You ought to have made good by this time. It’s a little late to begin. In my country a man who hasn’t made his way at thirty is a failure.”

“Isn’t this all beside the point? And I lost those years of the War. That made a big slice out of all our lives.”

“What were you doing before the War?”

“I was agent to Lord Farewether at Sledwick.”

“Couldn’t you have gone back there? I know the present man.”

“I wouldn’t go back there for the world! I was leaving in any case. Lord Farewether and I had . . . had a disagreement.” Denis’s face had grown very pale.

Again that sense of mystery teased Sara. “I wonder why he left,” she thought. “I daresay he doesn’t pull well with other men. Still, Lord Farewether was such a dear old man, I should have thought any one could have got on with him.”

“It was one of the greatest misfortunes of my life that I ever went to Sledwick,” said Denis, harshly.

"It's no use going into all that now. I've come here to find out how soon I can marry Janet. For I mean to marry her—if she'll have me, Mrs. Ponsford."

"Against all our wishes and advice?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You know her so little. . . . And what does she know of you? I am thinking of the risk for you both."

"I know everything that can possibly be said against it—Mrs. Ponsford didn't mince matters, I can tell you!"

"I can well imagine it," said Sara dryly.

"I felt how impossible it would be for Janet ever to live at home again after that."

"There isn't any question of her living at home. John will arrange to have her near him."

"You don't seem to take into consideration that Janet . . . Janet cares for me. . . . Worthless as I am, and as you all think me . . . she *does* see something in me that isn't utterly detestable. . . ."

"I know she does," said Sara, in a softened tone. "She hasn't the least wish to give you up. If the whole thing is to be put an end to, you must do it, Mr. Lorimer."

He dashed his hand across his eyes with a gesture of despair.

"It's no use your telling me all this! I feel as if we were two outcasts who've suffered a great deal, and can comfort each other. Now will you send for Janet, please? Let's hear what she's got to say. . . ."

Sara put a white finger on the enameled bell. To the servant who appeared with significant promptitude, she said:

"Will you send up to tell Miss Ponsford I should be glad if she would come down?"

They waited in silence for Janet to appear. . . .

## CHAPTER XXIX

IT was not long before Janet Ponsford came into the room. She was very pale, and she moved feebly. Lorimer rose immediately, went towards her and took her hand in his.

They stood side by side in front of Sara. . . .

"I've just told Mrs. Ponsford that I want you to be my wife if you'll marry me, Janet." His voice rang sharp and clear. But he looked down from his height at Janet as he spoke, and his whole face softened.

"Sara knew that we were engaged," said Janet. She trembled a little. Why was it—oh, why was it—that they should all seem to grudge her this transcendent happiness? Lorimer slipped his arm about her.

"You'd better sit down. . . ." He led her to a chair. "I daresay you thought I was a brute not to write, but after all the things your mother said to me, I did wonder whether I oughtn't to clear out altogether. I did wonder whether I shouldn't be doing you a great wrong to ask you to join your life to such a miserable worthless one as mine. And I—if I'd been taking you away from a very happy home, I should have thought twice about asking you to make such a sacrifice for me. But as it is—" He stopped abruptly.

"If one could only be sure that he isn't acting," thought Sara again.

"Denis—you couldn't have done anything so cruel! . . ." Janet's voice struck across the pause that followed upon Lorimer's speech. "To go away—and never write—to *leave* me. . . ."

Denis moved a step nearer to her. "You would have cared?" he said.

"Denis . . . how can you ask?"

"But you know that I could only have taken such a course for your greater happiness. You mustn't think I wished to go away. . . . All I want is to make you happy." He looked at Sara. "Have you anything to say?"

Cool and detached as Sara was, he felt curiously convinced of her sympathy. She was quite fair, and he liked the way in which she at once protected and supported Janet.

"Nothing," said Sara. "I'm going to find John."

She went out of the room. Directly the door had closed behind her, Lorimer sat down near Janet and drew her to him.

"All this is about killing you," he said tenderly. "What on earth are they all making such a fuss for?"

Janet leaned half-exhausted against him. He thought there was something almost beautiful now about that white delicate-looking face with its wistful blue eyes, its heavy crown of reddish-auburn hair. She looked younger, too, in those new modern dainty clothes of hers. Less sophisticated than Sara, but with something very tender and gracious about her.

"Denis—half the time I'm in agreement with them. You *are* young—you have your way to make. I may be a great drag on you. . . . Are you sure you care enough?"

"I'm absolutely sure. I'll prove it to you one of these days."

"I'm old and ill. Your wife ought to be so young. . . ."

"Ought she?" His lips twitched.

"And pretty and clever and rich. More like Sara. . . ."

Lorimer smiled. "Dear Janet, I've a fancy to marry some one who loves me—and who'll forgive me."

"I should always do that. But there'll never be

anything to forgive," she assured him gravely.

It was that dreadful, serene trust in him that tortured him so. If she only knew all! . . . But he wasn't going to hurt her by telling her anything. No one knew the whole truth except John, now that old Lord Farewether was dead. And John had learned it in such manner that he must hold it in his heart forever as a sacred, inviolable secret. Oh, he was safe enough, and he need not spoil that charming confidence in his perfection that was so flattering a part of Janet's attitude towards him. The dark sinister shadow of Angus Ferringham wasn't likely to arise a second time and come between him and happiness. For it *was* happiness of a calm, sober and equable kind, and Denis had the sense to see this and to appreciate it. The opposition he had met with, silent and tacit on the part of John, violent and vituperative on the part of Mrs. Ponsford, had only stimulated his ardor in the adventure. And Janet's love moved him deeply. He was not the first man to choose a frail and suffering woman for his wife, and devote his life to making her happy. Other men had tried the same experiment, and had succeeded. The only thing that really stood between them was not disparity in age or in fortune, but that past sinister record of his, so deeply stained with shame and dishonor. It was the knowledge of that record which had changed Pio Ascarelli from staunch friend to bitter implacable foe. Denis would bear the mark of that pitiless vendetta to his dying day. And it would always be associated with Angus Ferringham's revelations and disclosures. It had seemed to him as if Pio had exacted from him a double retribution. . . .

"You're really feeling better, Denis?" she asked. "You're still very thin."

"Oh, I'm much better," he assured her. "I shall

be quite fit soon. I'm pretty strong, you know—I've weathered some stiffish storms."

"Shall you come to stay here? Sara has been expecting you. . . ."

"I don't think so. This place is rather too smart for me. But I'll come and see you every day if you'll let me. And when shall we be married, Janet? I'd like it to be as soon as possible, you know. The first week in February, do you think? Easter's very early this year, and we can't be married in Lent."

"Whenever you like, Denis. Sara's made me buy so many clothes that I don't think I shall have to get many more."

"And when we're married I'm going to take you South to the sunshine and palm-trees. I know a place in Algeria—close to the sea. It looks south, and the sun pours on the white houses all day long. You'll love it, Janet."

"I've never been abroad," she said wistfully; "I've always wanted to go."

"Well, we'll spend months and months there—till you're tired of it. I want you to forget Wanswater for a bit."

"But you mustn't think I hated it . . . all," she said; "there are things I have always loved about Wanswater—the lights on the mountains and lake at dawn and sunset, and my garden. The flowers—you never saw it in summer, Denis. Such roses—they seemed never tired of blossoming. . . ." Her eyes shone. Yes, there had been pleasant hours at Wanswater, when the tyranny of Hodge had been a little relaxed and she could wander alone in the garden and watch the light fading on the lake, and the shadows of night folding like a cloak about the everlasting hills.

"And then perhaps we could go and see John in

Rome," she suggested. "I'm sure he was only trying to settle at Gillingsea on my account. Now he'll go back and it would be nice, wouldn't it, Denis, to visit him there?"

Denis did not speak at first, and a curious stiffening of his features made his face look suddenly hard.

"No—I shall never go back to Rome if I can help it," he said at last. "Anywhere else, Janet, but not Rome. . . ."

It would indeed be an act of foolishness to disturb those ghosts that still had power, as he was well aware, to arise, and mock and torture him.

"You haven't quarreled with John?" she asked nervously. It was the only explanation she could think of to account for his point-blank refusal of her request.

"Of course I haven't quarreled with John. Even over this business he's been kindness itself. He's the best friend I have in the world—and he's your brother, Janet."

"I'm so glad. . . I was afraid of what might have happened after I left home. I couldn't bear it if you and Johnny weren't friends. . . ."

Sara did not return to them for some time. They would certainly have much to say to each other, and this was the first time they had had any sort of opportunity for that exchange of thought which is never so necessary as between the newly-engaged. Besides, she herself had a great deal to say to John. He had apparently known Denis for some time; it was possible, therefore, that he might have some light to throw upon the intriguing mystery of his character and past life. She badly wanted John to reassure her on those points which at present baffled her, and prevented her from giving the pair her whole-hearted support.

There was much in Denis that had pleased her.

She had liked his thoughtful analysis of Janet's situation; his evident appreciation of her sterling qualities beneath that surface timidity; his stubborn determination to make her his wife and to promote her happiness. After all, if there was nothing definite against him it would be wiser to let the matter pursue its normal course to the wedding in Westminster Cathedral as suggested by Pamela.

John was restless and anxious. In his heart he was inclined to blame Sara for encouraging Lorimer, and for inviting him to her house. Secretly he prophesied disaster of the marriage. In a few months Denis would tire of Janet; he would probably desert her. He would spend her money and break her heart. She knew nothing of the man. . . .

But he did not voice these thoughts; rather he endeavored to put them from his mind. He had been ready to sacrifice much for Janet, but it was of no avail. She had rejected the proffered sacrifice. Her heart was wholly set upon Denis Lorimer.

"What I want to know is," Sara's cool voice was saying, "why you ever took him to Wanswater?"

"I never dreamed of anything of the kind happening!"

"Don't you ever think of eventualities?"

"My dear Sara, I should as soon have thought of any one falling in love with my mother as with Janet."

"You should have remembered that the perfectly unselfish woman is hard to find," rejoined Sara.

"Besides, I knew—it isn't a secret—that he was desperately in love with an Italian girl last spring. I thought he was still very unhappy about it. . . . I tell you he seemed the most unlikely person in the world then to fall in love with Janet or any one else."

"You forgot the proverb about hearts on the re-

bound," said Sara. "And then he's a very poor man, and she has money. . . . Don't you think she's improved very much since she came here? Mr. Lorimer noticed it, too. She looks younger and happier. Really to-night she's almost pretty."

"Yes, I thought she was changed. Oh, she's happy enough now. . . ."

Sara looked at him with her calm eyes.

"I wish you'd tell me what you know about him, John," she said. "You see I've got nothing to go upon. He's not very communicative, is he? I'm working in the dark and I may be criminally foolish in giving him any encouragement."

John rose rather abruptly. "I really can tell you very little about him, Sara. I have seen a good deal of him from time to time, especially in Rome, but we were never at all intimate. I know he had a love affair when he was there, and it was broken off and caused him a great deal of pain. So much was common knowledge. I don't suppose Janet would think any the worse of him for that." He looked at the clock. "I must be getting back. I don't think I'll stay to dinner to-night after all."

There was nothing in his speech either to cause or quiet uneasiness. Sara was left in doubt as to whether John possessed exact knowledge of Denis Lorimer's career or not. It was quite evident, though, that he was not prepared to throw any light upon that complicated and mysterious subject. He didn't like the thought of this marriage for Janet, but obviously he was going to give no special reason for his disapproval. Sara sighed. She had had no idea there was so much of Ponsford obstinacy in John. . . .

When he had departed, she went slowly back to the drawing-room. She was deep in thought. The events of the evening had certainly held dramatic possibilities, and she confessed to herself that she

felt slightly excited. She liked Denis better—much better—than she had intended or expected to, but she trusted him even less than she had imagined possible. She was inclined on the whole to sympathize with old Mrs. Ponsford's view of the case. She would like to have been present at that final encounter between the two belligerent parties. And yet on the other hand it was a consolation to feel that just for once the old lady had met her match.

"We've settled everything, Mrs. Ponsford," was Denis's greeting to her, as she came into the room. "The first week in February. . . . Janet thinks she can be ready by then. And I want to get her South into the sunshine as soon as possible. I'm going to be her physician in future and prescribe only agreeable remedies!"

He smiled confidently at Janet, who sat there very still with a soft glow of happiness suffusing her face. It had been such a wonderful half hour alone with Denis, making plans for the future, listening to his eager hopeful words.

"I really can't think what Stephen will say," said Sara. This rash haste took her by surprise. Why couldn't they wait a little? Or did Denis perceive some subtle danger in delay?

"What right has he to say anything at all?" demanded Denis.

He was more assured himself now because he was so certain of Janet. The time was past when they could have frightened her into reluctant submission.

"Well, he happens to be her brother and the head of the family," said Sara. "However, we won't have any more discussions to-night. And dinner will be ready in about five minutes. You must stay and dine, Mr. Lorimer. I couldn't persuade John to—he's just left."

"Left? But he never said good-night to me," said Janet. She felt a little upset at hearing of

his departure. It was as if he had not wanted to come in again and to hear the results of her conversation with Denis. Was he angry with her—with Sara—with Denis himself perhaps? . . . And then the teasing thought came back into her mind, as if she had received it from Sara's brain by some queer process of thought-transference: *What did John know?* Why was he so silent in his disapproval? After all, Denis was his own friend. . . .

She felt as if something of constraint and sadness had crept into her perfect happiness. It made her turn to Denis and slip her hand confidingly into his. Not to reassure him—that was unnecessary—but to win assurance from him. To make quite certain that he was truly there, that he did love her, that it wasn't only a bright and beautiful dream. . . .

Denis took her hand and lifted it to his lips.

## CHAPTER XXX

ON THE whole it was a relief to Sara that Denis Lorimer had decided not to stay with them during his sojourn in London. There was a great deal to be done to get Janet ready, and very little time to do it in. In addition to which, after a fortnight in Paris Pamela suddenly returned under the escort of Lord Cullingdon; she had not, he explained, wished to prolong her visit, and as he was returning to London himself, he offered to let her accompany him.

After his departure Sara questioned her daughter delicately. She was afraid that Pamela might have acted in what Lady Cullingdon would consider an outrageous manner, and she wondered what had happened in this particular instance.

Pamela was looking very pretty. She wore a new hat, and a very smart fur coat. Her skirts in that brief absence were if anything a little shorter, and she seemed to have assimilated the air of a sophisticated Frenchwoman of twice her years.

"Simply couldn't stand it, Mum," she said. "Lady Cullingdon is a most fearful martinet. She doesn't let Doris do anything amusing. Not one play—she said they weren't proper for young girls. She was horrified when I told her I'd been with Dad to see the 'Spin of the Coin!'"

"That doesn't surprise me," replied Sara dryly.

She was disappointed on the whole, for her prophetic eye had sometimes pictured Pamela safely married in the distant future to young Lord Skipton, the Cullingdons' son and heir. They had always been, as Pamela expressed it, "tremendous pals." And hitherto Lady Cullingdon had encouraged the friendship between her children and Sara's.

"Doris has an awfully thin time," continued Pamela. "I think Lady Cullingdon's rather like Gran. Quite nineteenth-century and eighteen-seventy-ish! Why, we were never allowed to go out without Mademoiselle, not even if Skipton came with us. I stood it as long as I could, for I simply loved the shops. But we had all our meals in their private sitting-room, and we weren't taken to dine at a single restaurant. Lady Cullingdon said we weren't old enough and that Doris had gone to Paris to improve her mind."

"I hope you didn't argue, dear Pamela," said Sara nervously.

"Not I! I said I'd a sore throat—it really was a little bit sore—and that frightened Lady Cullingdon into a fit. She began to suggest it might be better for me to travel back with Lord Cullingdon, and of course I jumped at the idea. How's Aunt Janet getting on, Mum?"

"She is to be married in February."

"February? How topping! What have you chosen for me to wear?"

"Oh, she's not going to have any bridesmaids. It's to be very quiet," said Sara.

"And what's he like? Presentable?" inquired Pamela.

"Yes," said Sara. "Quite. But you see, being so very poor is a disadvantage. He preferred not to stay here."

"Are they all making a fearful row about it?"

"Yes," admitted Sara. "Your father isn't very civil to him yet. And I've had letters from nearly all of them to say they're coming here to-morrow morning. Why they should want to hold a family committee meeting in my house I can't imagine."

"It'll be frightfully funny. I'm so thankful not to miss it. I shall simply love to hear Uncle Gerard!"

"But, Pamela—I wasn't going to let you come. You see, they're all very angry about it. I really think you'd better not be present."

Pamela at once twined her plump young arms about her mother's neck.

"Was it going to take a leaf out of Lady's Cullingdon's book? I should go mad if I were snubbed and kept in order like Doris. Why, she's afraid of her mother! Would you like me to be afraid of you, my darling little Mum?"

Sara released herself.

"I shouldn't like it at all," she responded in her crisp decisive voice, "but that's no reason why I shouldn't have my own way sometimes." She looked at Pamela attentively. "If you do come, you must keep very quiet. I can't have you joining in—they'll all tell me afterwards that I spoil you so, I shall ruin you."

"Don't listen to them—they're always grouching

about something. But you and Aunt Violet must stick up for poor old Aunt Janet. Don't let them separate her from the first best boy she's ever had in her life!"

"You see, they all think he's marrying her for her money. I'm not quite sure that it isn't true. And yet sometimes when he's been talking to me about her, he's almost persuaded me that he does care for her. It seems an odd thing to say, but he looks upon her as an interesting case."

"Has he ever seen her in one of her fits?" inquired Pamela, with a crude bluntness that would have caused old Mrs. Ponsford to swoon with horror had she been there to hear it.

"Yes," said Sara. "He thinks she's never been properly treated, and that they are probably due to repressed fear."

"Fear of Gran?" inquired Pamela, who considered such an emotion not impossible.

"More of Hodge," returned Sara.

"She must have had a perfectly rotten time all these years," Pamela pronounced. "Well, you must see she's not sat upon to-morrow, anyhow, or I shall feel simply bound to chip in."

"My dear child, I do beg you won't. You'll only make matters worse."

"When shall I see my new uncle? I'm bursting to get it over."

"To-night—he's coming to dinner. Mind you don't talk too much. . . ."

"I'll be very discreet," Pamela promised. "And I've a duck of a new frock to wear. You never saw anything so . . . so cosy!"

"I think I'd better have a look at it first," said Sara, nervously. "Where on earth did you get it?"

"In the Rue de la Paix, and it cost the earth," said Pamela. "I spent all the money on it that I'd intended to spend on Aunt Janet's wedding present."

But I thought I could get something that she'd like in London just as well, whereas I should never, *never* be able to find a frock like that here."

"Did Lady Cullingdon see it?" asked Sara uneasily.

"No, she didn't exactly see it, but I'm sure Mademoiselle told her all about it—she was there when I bought it—we couldn't shunt her, you know, for five minutes. It was soon after that, that Lady Cullingdon began to take such a passionate interest in my sore throat, and to say she wasn't sure if the air of Paris suited me. I took the hint, Mum, for I felt if I stayed much longer I should really disgrace myself in her eyes, and probably get poor Doris into a row, too. Skipton was awfully sick about my coming away, but I had five minutes with him alone and made him see that I was quite right."

Given such an unpromising situation, Sara thought her young daughter had handled it with considerable skill.

She accompanied Pamela upstairs to inspect the new frock. It was already unpacked and was lying on the bed in masses of silver paper. It was of pale shimmering green and it was slightly more ample than Sara had dared to hope.

"It's quite a girl's frock," Pamela hastened to explain. "You see, it's got sleeves—and the sash . . ." She looked eagerly at her mother, as if anxious to detect any signs of approval or the reverse. But Sara's face was studiously non-committal. She felt the flimsy material as if to appraise its value, and then considered the shoes and stockings which were placed in readiness by its side. There was also a little fillet for the hair—a simple band of pale green and silver.

"The woman said it was exactly my color. She didn't approve of my wearing pink. Blue, yes, or

pale yellow—people are wearing yellow again, you know—but green was the right thing for me. I thought perhaps you could give me a string of jade on my next birthday.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Sara, “but, Pamela, you had better not wear this to-night. It’s rather too smart when we’re quite by ourselves.”

Pamela pouted.

“I want to make a *good* first impression upon my new uncle!”

“Then wear your new white frock. It’s very pretty and not quite so . . . smart.”

“Well, will you give a dinner-party soon, when I can wear it?”

“Yes—I’m having a few people on Tuesday. You could wear it then.”

Pamela dressed early that evening. When she heard the bell ring, she descended the stairs and waited in the hall while the door was opened to admit Denis Lorimer. She saw a very tall man, very thin, with haggard cheeks and hollow sunken eyes.

“Aunt Janet must feed him up,” was her first rapid mental comment.

She went up to him and held out her hand.

“I’m Pamela,” she said, in a frank kindly tone, calculated to put the most timid man—and Denis was far from being that—at his ease. “I only arrived this afternoon from Paris. We had a vile crossing. I wasn’t ill though, and it brought me one blessing—I never saw my chaperon from the time we went on board till we reached Folkestone!”

“I’m sure you made every use of your opportunities,” said Denis dryly.

Having been told that Pamela was “about fifteen,” he had certainly not expected anything so mature and self-possessed. So this was Janet’s niece, the child of the new generation and curiously

typical of it. He realized suddenly that Pamela made him feel old. It may be observed that she frequently had that effect upon people.

She mounted the stairs in front of him. But the glimpse she had had of him had satisfied her. Of course he was too young for Aunt Janet, but that was, as she would have expressed it, his "own look-out." He was quite well-dressed (John had seen to that) and his slightly cynical reply to the recital of her cross-Channel experiences had pleased rather than offended her.

"I'm sorry to hear that Aunt Janet isn't going to have any bridesmaids," she said, turning her head and looking at him. "I've been one so often that I'm quite a professional at it. Only I've never figured at a Catholic wedding, and that would have been a new experience. Don't you adore a new experience? I do, when they're nice ones. And even if they're horrid, there is something to be said for them—at least they *are* new."

"I hope you will always be able to regard unpleasant novelties in that same philosophical manner," said Denis.

"Well, I mean to try to, anyhow," she said. "Don't you agree with me?—It's mean to edge away from things just because one doesn't like the look of them or because you're afraid they may hurt you!"

"Perhaps I've had too many experiences that were both new and exceedingly disagreeable," said Denis, with a touch of bitterness in his soft voice. And as he spoke, he seemed to be standing there in the dim Umbrian woods, with Pio Ascarelli's dark revengeful face glowering in front of him.

"Oh, yes, of course, you were fighting in France," said Pamela, suddenly grave. She looked at his helpless arm. "Was that where you were wounded?"

"People always ask me that. But, as a matter of fact, I got hurt in an accident . . . in Italy."

They entered the drawing-room and found that Sara and Janet were already sitting there.

"Well, Denis," said Sara, "I see Pamela's introduced herself."

"Yes—we had quite a philosophical discussion on the stairs," he answered. He went up to Janet and took her hand. "I hope your shopping's nearly done. You look tired out."

Janet smiled a little uneasily. When she had seen Denis and Pamela come into the room together, the thought flashed into her mind: "He ought to marry a young girl. Pamela would make him a more suitable wife than I should." Then the next moment she comforted herself with the reflection that she could give him perhaps what another woman could never give him. So much tenderness . . . so much affection . . . after his starved penurious unsuccessful life. Pamela would doubtless make a very different kind of marriage. She would insist that the man she married should be in a position to bestow upon her all the manifold and complicated luxuries of modern life.

Yet with it all she was a lovable, loyal, affectionate little creature, very frank and straightforward and sincere, with an ardent desire that every one else should also have a "good time." She adored her mother, and submitted to her decisions on those rare occasions when Sara insisted upon being obeyed. They were on the best of terms and enjoyed each other's society.

"Weren't you surprised to hear that I'd come back, Aunt Janet?" Pamela inquired at dinner.

"I was rather," said Janet, smiling at her young niece.

"I've told Mum all about it, and she thinks I was quite right to take advantage of Lord Culling-

don's escort," said Pamela, with an admirable imitation of Lady Cullington's precise and dignified enunciation. "It was all right directly I'd made poor Skipton see that I should probably get into irremediable disgrace if I stayed on. 'Such a terrible example for dear little Doris!'" She again imitated Lady Cullington. "I wish you could have been an invisible spectator, Mum. It was really too funny for words. She never guessed I was smiling in my sleeve."

"I'm sure you behaved horribly; you never try to do me any credit, Pamela," said Sara, with undiminished cheerfulness. "I shall have to take you myself next time."

"That will be topping," said Pamela. "There are such heaps of things I wasn't allowed to go and see. I'm simply dying to go back. By the way, where's Dad?"

"He and Gilbert are dining with Violet—they're going to the pantomime."

"Aren't you looking forward to to-morrow, Aunt Janet? I am—I think it'll be the loveliest stunt!"

"Why, what's going to happen to-morrow?" asked Janet, uneasily.

"Oh, they've all written to say they're coming—the whole family, I mean," said Sara. She had been wondering how she should break the unpleasant intelligence to Janet, and was somewhat relieved that Pamela should have thus brusquely introduced the subject.

"Why are they all coming?" asked Janet. She looked across the table at Denis. Was it to make a final effort to separate them? Denis smiled back encouragingly.

"We must look to Pamela to support us during the ordeal," he said ironically.

"Of course I'm going to support Aunt Janet," said Pamela.

Sara said: "Remember, I've told you to be perfectly silent! It will only annoy your father if you 'chip in,' as you call it!"

"Can't you picture Aunt Louisa? And Uncle Gerard? And fussy Aunt Margaret. And Cosmo looking down his nose as if no one in the room were worth speaking to? I wish we had a dictagraph to perpetuate the accumulated Ponsford wisdom! A hundred years hence people won't simply be *able* to believe that it really happened just like that!"

"Are we supposed to take any part in it?" asked Denis.

He was not quite sure that he liked the prospect. Colonel Fortune had held diplomatic posts at various European capitals before the War, and it was more than probable that he was acquainted with Angus Ferringham. He might find out things . . . if anything were really known. After the happenings at Villa Ascarelli, Denis could not but believe that Angus knew enough to condemn him utterly in the eyes of the assembled Ponsfords. Even Pamela's cheery demeanor did not chase the look of despairing dejection from his face.

"Well, they'll want to see you, I expect," said Sara. "They have all said they were coming to meet you. It was only odd that they should all have chosen the same day and the same hour. I couldn't ask them to lunch—I'm lunching out myself."

"What time are they coming?" asked Denis. He looked almost as uncomfortable as he felt. A sense of guilt weighed him down. He could not meet the calm, frank, friendly eyes of Sara and her daughter. What would they say if they knew of all those smudged pages in his past life? He thought that Pamela at any rate would turn from him in frank and astonished disgust.

Sara perceived that, for some reason or other, Denis disliked the thought of encountering this assemblage of his future relations. He was evidently prepared for a hostile demonstration; perhaps he overrated the influence of old Mrs. Ponsford upon her numerous descendants.

"Eleven o'clock," replied Sara, "and I've telephoned to John to beg him to come. So you'll have his support as well as mine and Janet's and Pamela's."

She rose from the table as she spoke, smiling at Lorimer as if to give him courage. But the cloud did not lift from his face.

So John was coming . . . But would John be on his side? . . .

## CHAPTER XXXI

**B**EFORE eleven o'clock on the following morning Sara's pretty drawing-room presented, for such an early hour, an unusually animated appearance. The Ponsford clan, so long scattered, had assembled to combat a danger that menaced one of their tribe. As individuals they agreed less well with each other than most families, but as a clan and for the purpose of driving away an interloper, they could present a formidably united front.

Mrs. Dacreson, the eldest daughter, was there, a singularly large but handsome woman, who had not forgotten the days when Algernon Dacreson had been by no means *persona grata* at Hawford, when as a timid suitor he had first faced a "righteously indignant" Dean. Algernon was with her this morning, a slight fair man with a straw-colored beard which did its best to conceal or at least to modify

a weak chin. Next to Margaret sat Lady Bradney, beautifully dressed in velvet and furs, as befitted so dismally cold a day. She was still very lovely, dark-eyed, dark-haired, with a charming expression. Her son, Sir Cosmo, lounged gracefully near her, looking bored and supercilious. He had come, as he expressed it, to "have a look at the boulder poor Aunt Janet wanted to marry," for hitherto no sight of Denis had been vouchsafed to him. They had always "just missed" him when they had come to Green Street. The next sister, Margaret, came in a little later, supported by her husband, Colonel Gerard Fortune, who subtly combined in his immaculate appearance the twin rôles imposed upon a man who has played the part of military attaché for a considerable number of years. He was not tall, but he made up for his lack of inches by an erect military bearing, and his face was still handsome enough to account for his having been known in his youth by the nickname of "Beauty" Fortune. Margaret was thin, fussy, nervous, and inclined to be loquacious. She and Janet had been the two sisters nearest in age, and it had always been considered suitable that as children they should "pair off" together. Margaret had bullied and dominated Janet, who had turned to John for support and sympathy. There had never been much love lost between the two sisters, and Margaret had preferred to form a triangle with Louisa and Violet rather than consent to "pair off" with Janet.

The Ponsford sons were only represented by Stephen and John. Curtis could not be there, owing to his absence in India, but had he been in London it is extremely doubtful whether he would have availed himself of the unique opportunity of meeting so many of his relations at once. Giles was in Devonshire and did not wish to spend so much of

his slender balance on so long a railway journey. But his eldest son Edwy—a young man of nineteen—was there, having come up to spend a few weeks with the Dacresons, who lived in Surrey. It was felt that Edwy would hold, metaphorically speaking, a watching brief for the Giles Ponsfords, who would be the principal sufferers in the long run, should Janet persist in this disastrous marriage.

Giles, usually so little prone to telegraphic communications, had wired to Louisa to say that it must be stopped at all costs.

The two culprits had not as yet put in an appearance. Indeed the earliest arrivals had had the room to themselves. Sara had come in nearly ten minutes later. She was the one thoroughly cool and composed person in the room. But then, as Louisa had said in confidence to Violet, it could make no difference to her, and that was why she was encouraging it. Having them here under her own roof, smiling upon it. . . . *Her* dollars were safe enough, which was all that Sara cared about! . . .

There had been indeed a few whispered comments of an acrimonious nature from Louisa, before the appearance of Mrs. Stephen Ponsford, but after her arrival on the scene of action, there had been a marked disinclination to open the debate, which was the more significant because every one present was conscious that he or she had ready a torrent of eloquence only awaiting a suitable opening.

A few minutes after Sara had joined them, the door opened and Pamela came into the room. She wore a grass green silk jumper and a white woollen skirt made very short. Her black bobbed hair framed her healthy smiling face attractively.

Mrs. Dacreson's face fell a little. She was not at all prepared to say all that she had fully intended to say in front of Pamela. It was ridiculous the way Sara thrust the child forward; she had all the

self-possession of a woman of twenty-five. Pamela shook hands with her aunts and uncles-by-marriage and then sat down near her mother. She was perfectly aware that every one there regarded her presence as both unnecessary and embarrassing; the thought enchanted her.

Violet Bradney, however, gave her a friendly little nod and said:

"Wouldn't they keep you in Paris any longer, my child? I thought you were to be there a month."

"I left on account of Lady Cullingdon's health, but she thought it was on account of mine, Aunt Violet," said Pamela demurely.

Her eyes danced.

Louisa Dacreson broke in with:

"Sara—we've come to discuss this disastrous business of Janet's!"

"Oh, I thought you'd all come to be introduced to your future brother-in-law," said Sara carelessly. "He'll come in presently, if he feels equal to it. Our numbers rather scare him." She identified herself cheerfully with the assembled Ponsfords, as their quick tribal instinct readily and approvingly recognized. They hoped Sara might instil a little of her own sound common sense into Janet's silly head.

"It's all nonsense, of course, and Janet must listen to reason," pursued Mrs. Dacreson. "The man is after her money."

Edwy Ponsford stroked a beardless chin and said in a rather high falsetto voice:

"If Aunt Janet marries at all, she ought to marry some old chap. This Lorimer might outlive us all."

"Janet is far too delicate to marry at all," said Margaret Fortune, "Mamma has always said so, and we know she is invariably right."

Pamela controlled a smile, and received a warning look, enjoining silence, from Sara.

"If Mr. Lorimer were to see her in one of her . . . attacks," continued Mrs. Fortune fretfully, "he would be quite disillusioned . . . she has always been ill ever since I can remember her, and she's silly and nervous into the bargain. I've always said I wouldn't have her in the house for the world."

Gerard Fortune nodded his handsome head twice, very slowly and deliberately, as if in tacit agreement of this statement.

"Buy him out," said Sir Cosmo, "he only wants money. Poor beggar hasn't a cent. He knows Aunt Janet's prepared to give him a free hand with her six hundred a year."

"What I say is," continued Louisa Dacreson with increased firmness, "that when once you let Roman Catholics into your house there's no knowing what will happen. All this could have been avoided if John had not become a priest." She shut her mouth firmly and looked with a challenging glance across the room at her brother. "People ought to be satisfied with the Church of England. Dear Papa always was—if any of his congregation joined the Roman Church he used to think they were mad. And John had a good chance of an excellent living."

"What on earth made you take the man to Wanswater for, John?" inquired Colonel Fortune, fixing a monocle in his right eye and directing his gaze blandly in the direction of the priest.

John had had an intense desire to refuse Sara's entreaties that he should be present. He had nothing to say, he could be of no use, but Sara had told him that for his sister's sake he certainly ought to come. Besides, Denis was his friend—he could surely find things to say in his favor . . . He had yielded, and now they seemed to be bent on attacking him.

"I met him on my way home. He—he was very

poor. I couldn't think of any other plan. And I never dreamed of course that Janet—!"

Colonel Fortune was not popular in the family. Too much side, his own generation said; too much "swank" was the expression used by profane young persons like Cosmo and Pamela.

"What-er sort of a looking chap is he?" he asked, aware from personal experience of the value of a good "presence."

"Mamma called him a mountebank," said Louisa Dacreson.

Edwy gave a slight giggle.

Margaret Fortune, who had always found it diplomatic to adopt a slightly sycophantic attitude towards her mother (it had certainly paid best when she was a child) here remarked:

"Dear Mamma has a wonderful faculty for hitting the right nail on the head."

Then Sara struck in: "Oh he's all right to look at, if you come to that. Very tall"—(Colonel Fortune's lack of inches constituted the one drop of bitterness in an otherwise cloying cup)—"and dark. Rather unusual and perhaps a trifle actorish. But it's really useless to discuss it now. Janet's got the bit between her teeth and she means to marry him."

"She ought to be shut up," said Louisa Dacreson, purple with anger.

John gave a quick movement almost as if he were going to answer his sister, as perhaps she deserved to be answered. But he kept silence. He was thinking of the old house at Wanswater lying in its setting of dim brown woods and still silver lake and the low banks that were green all the year round. He thought, too, of the night when Denis had lain in danger of death, and of the confession he had made. He tried to chase the thought of it from him, but it clung persistently to his mind; it would not be driven forth.

"Well, Johnny, he's your friend, let's hear your verdict!" said Violet, smiling.

"I am afraid I haven't one, except that Janet is of an age to choose for herself. I am only responsible for taking Denis to Wanswater. . . ."

"But what's your opinion of him, John? That's what we're trying to get at." Colonel Fortune assumed a debonair "man-to-man" tone; he had rather liked John until he became a priest.

John was silent for a moment, then he said:

"I am afraid my opinion would hardly weigh with any of you."

"Johnny's scored one there," thought Violet. Yet if the man were Johnny's friend why could he not speak up for him and tell them so?

"I'm afraid that we've been forgetting all these years that Janet was a human being—a starved, miserable woman," said Sara.

"What do you mean, Sara? She has never been out of Mamma's sight! No one ever had a better and more comfortable home or greater care taken of her. I've often urged Mamma to send her away—to some family used to such queer cases of heart where she could be well looked after. But dear Mamma had far too high a sense of duty for that. She spoke to me quite severely for suggesting such a thing." Margaret's voice waxed almost pathetic as she related this instance of Mrs. Ponsford's unparalleled devotion to duty.

"I can't help feeling," said Sara, with admirable patience, "that this is a matter for Janet's own decision. She's old enough to know her own mind!"

"No fool like an old one," put in Edwy.

Sara looked at him with steady eyes.

"That depends," she said, so dryly that an angry flush of chagrin rose to the young man's cheek. "And then thirty-five isn't old."

"Nearly thirty-six—her birthday's in June," said Margaret Fortune.

"How old's this Lorimer?" asked Louisa Dacreson.

"He's a little under thirty," said Sara, "but he looks more. . . ."

They were all, John felt, talking beside the point. The real objections did not lie in disparity of age or inequality of fortune, but in something that lay hidden and out of sight, something that must never be revealed. Unless indeed Denis chose to reveal it and to put Janet to the supreme test, so as to discover if she was prepared to marry the man he was, instead of the man she had believed him to be. But Denis wouldn't run that risk. He had seen the result of such disclosures at Villa Ascarelli. He would let Janet marry him in ignorance, and perhaps he would keep her in ignorance until her dying day.

Margaret's thin fussy voice broke in:

"And the money? It's too late to tie it up, I suppose? Can't you insist upon a marriage-settlement being made? Why should Janet be allowed to leave all her money—I may say, all Giles's money—to this mountebank?"

No one answered this question. A gloomy silence prevailed. Margaret proceeded querulously, "But as I said before, he's only got to see her in one of her attacks!"

"He has seen her, as it happens," said John quietly; "it didn't make the slightest difference except to deepen his interest in her. He thought she could be treated."

"You can't do much for valvular weakness!" pronounced Louisa Dacreson stormily. It seemed to annoy her that any one should think her sister could possibly be curable.

"Lorimer doesn't think it's got much to do with

her heart. Nor does Stokes—this new man who has come to Wanswater in Dr. Taylor's place. He's changed the treatment—or rather he was going to, only Janet came to stay here."

Sara dropped her bombshell quite calmly.

"Hodge has terrorized her for years. Janet's subconscious mind has been shadowed with fear since she was nine years old. If she had been happy—if she'd been allowed to live a perfectly normal life—she'd have got quite well."

"Nonsense!" said Colonel Fortune, dropping diplomacy and speaking in a loud angry tone. "It's her heart. It's always been her heart. Her mother told me so."

He had acquired something of his wife's determined faith in the infallibility of old Mrs. Ponsford. Besides, heart was one thing. Any delicate child might suffer from valvular weakness.

"Well, then, it isn't her heart. It's her *brain*," said Sara.

The ominous word passed from lip to lip.

"*Brain!*"

Edwy's falsetto voice shrilled it above all the rest. "Brain!"

It was remarkable how much significance the assembled Ponsfords contrived to put into that single monosyllable. Long after the rest had uttered it in varying tones of consternation, incredulity and dismay, young Edwy was heard to repeat it stupidly, shrilly.

"Pooh! A little twopenny-halfpenny country practitioner like Stokes to go against a man with a European reputation like Sir Oswald Metcalfe!" said Colonel Fortune. He glanced nervously at his wife.

"And poor old Hodge—so faithful and devoted!" said Louisa Dacreson. There was a general sense of indignation at Sara's blunt speech.

"If it had been brain," said Margaret Fortune, with the manner of one who states an incontrovertible fact, "dear Mamma would have known, and she would have told us."

"Sara and I both think there's a good deal to be said for Stokes's view of the case. Janet ought to have had more freedom."

Stephen spoke for the first time. It was as if he were replying to their combined but unuttered condemnation of Sara's frank words.

"What are you all making such a fuss about?" said Pamela, for the first time refusing to pay the slightest attention to her mother's warning gestures and glances. "Aunt Janet's as right as rain, and I don't believe any of us would have come out of it as well as she has. She's been boxed up at Wanswater for I don't know how many years, seldom seeing a soul except Gran and Hodge, and she can hardly go out into the garden without Hodge following her. Bad luck she's never had a best boy before to take her away from it. And of course as she isn't very young she's taken it more seriously than I should, for instance. It's like having the measles when you're grown up."

Every one present with the exception of Sara, Stephen and Violet, literally gasped with horror. Sara laughed. It was certainly expected of her that she should rebuke her forward young daughter and perhaps send her out of the room, which she ought to have done half an hour ago. But Sara took no steps of the kind. The assembled Ponsfords were appalled at this exhibition of criminal indulgence.

"If you were my daughter, Pamela, you'd have your ears nicely boxed," said Colonel Fortune, in a bland crushing tone that would have annihilated any one less resilient than Pamela.

"Oh, I know Peggy and Polly have a perfectly rotten time," said Pamela witheringly, "and, besides,

it's very dangerous to box people's ears—you must be dreadfully nineteenth-century not to know that."

Still no reproof forthcoming. It was intolerable that Pamela should be permitted to address her uncle in this way.

Colonel Fortune's complacent and self-satisfied demeanor was slightly but quite obviously impaired by the encounter. He was actually disconcerted. There was an uncomfortable pause. Pamela, the chief offender, was apparently the least affected or embarrassed by the stormy atmosphere. She was secretly enjoying herself immensely.

"I can't think what your dear grandmamma would say, Pamela, if she could hear you speak like that," said Margaret. "I'm afraid she would think you very ill-bred. She was always so severe if any of us did not answer our elders quite politely. We should have been *afraid* to behave as you are behaving."

This time Pamela heeded the warning nudge bestowed upon her by Sara, and sat there, silent but unrepentant. She felt that she had struck a blow in favor of Aunt Janet. Poor Aunt Janet who had been down-trodden and brow-beaten for so many years.

A diversion was created at this somewhat critical juncture by some one opening the door rather hesitatingly.

Janet Ponsford came into the room.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE first impression that Janet made upon the assembled Ponsfords was a favorable one, in so far as her own appearance was concerned. Mrs. Fortune bent over to Louisa Dacreson and whis-

pered: "I never saw her look so well before. And younger. . . . But, of course, Sara's been seeing to her clothes." She was voicing the secret opinion of all the ladies present.

Janet was pale but composed; there was no sign of the old timidity, and her blue eyes were shining. She wore a dark blue dress with a little touch of white showing at the base of the throat. They all tried to catch a glimpse of her left hand to see what kind of ring she was wearing. Unconscious of this, Janet lifted her hand to her hair, and her sisters caught the gleam of a diamond. A diamond! How on earth did this pauper manage to give her a diamond? Probably she would receive the bill for it after her marriage. They all feared there were many unpleasant experiences of the kind in store for her. . . .

"Good-morning, my dear Janet," said Colonel Fortune in a brisk encouraging tone. He was anxious to establish friendly relations at once. It would never do to quarrel with Janet, it would only crystallize her determination to marry this highly ineligible person.

"Good-morning, Gerard," said Janet. She gave her hand in turn to all present. But when she came to John, she smiled a little and sat down near him. There was such a sense of solid protection about John.

She sat there, mute, motionless, a certain pathos mingling with her attitude of untoward determination.

"We've been discussing this—er—proposed marriage of yours," said Colonel Fortune.

Pamela's clear and bell-like voice sounded across the room.

"You must be very careful what you say, Aunt Janet, or Uncle Gerard will want to box your ears!"

She enjoyed playing the conscious rôle of *enfant*

*terrible*, and Colonel Fortune's attack had roused within her an ardent desire to shake something of the "Ponsfordishness" out of the little assembly.

Appealing glances were shot at Stephen and Sara as if to entreat that this almost blasphemous impertinence should be severely rebuked. It was seen, however, that while Stephen preserved an expression of decorous immobility, his wife was trying to restrain her laughter.

"That's a bit too thick, Pamela," growled Cosmo Bradney; "if you don't dry up some one will throw you out of the room and punch your silly little head."

"Don't squabble, children," said Sara. Cosmo turned an angry red at this light reprimand which beyond doubt included himself. He flashed a furious glance at Sara and Pamela. There was a brief uncomfortable silence, during which Janet was seen turning to John and murmuring something in his ear.

"Janet, I may as well tell you at once that we all highly disapprove of your marrying this man. We know nothing at all about him except that he has no money, and that dear Mamma dislikes him very much and is opposed to the marriage. Of course if you intend to go against her. . . ." Margaret's voice came thin and querulous across the room.

"I have nothing to say except that I'm engaged to Mr. Lorimer and that I mean to marry him. He is a friend of Johnny's—that ought to be enough for us all," said Janet.

She looked up at John's stern and immovable face as if entreating him to say something in his friend's favor or defence. But John maintained a rigid silence.

"A protégé, I should say. Not a friend," corrected Louisa Dacreson.

Again that swift glance at John—a look at once

tender and pleading. But John did not meet the glance; his silence chilled her.

"Does it matter so much to you if I marry him or not?" said Janet. There was a little break in her voice.

"Of course it matters a great deal—especially to Giles. Besides, the man's an adventurer—he's after your money. Every one says so. Mamma is convinced of it—she saw through him almost as soon as he entered the house. You'll be back on our hands penniless in a few months." Louisa Dacre-son's voice was somberly prophetic.

"Aunt Janet's only got to keep her securities locked up in the bank, and her check-book in her own hands, and her money'll be quite safe." Pamela spoke with something of her mother's crisp decisive tones.

Janet shot a glance, half-astonished, half-grateful at her young niece. That fearless courage at once attracted and slightly repelled her. Never at any time of her life would she have dared address her own uncles and aunts in such a manner. She wondered that Stephen should permit it, even though he had relinquished all things connected with the education of their offspring into Sara's hands.

"I mean to marry him," said Janet; "of course, I'm very sorry Mamma doesn't like the idea. I hope you will soon see Denis for yourselves—he's promised to look in this morning. He . . . he wants to see you all."

She looked around nervously at the assembled Ponsfords, and wondered what Denis would think of them, seen thus as a tribe—as a collective group of individuals firmly united in their hostility, which was directed wholly towards himself. But she felt that it was precisely now that Denis's cosmopolitan training would stand him in good stead. He had in the course of a roving, purposeless life encoun-

tered men and women of varying nationalities. He was intimately acquainted with several countries besides his own. Yes, she felt that he would be equal to them all, bright, courteous, but hard as tempered steel. When they saw him she was certain that, despite their preconceived prejudices, they would understand why she loved him. The beauty of his face and voice—the charm of his manner . . . She longed for, even while she dreaded, that moment of his dramatic entrance. For it would be dramatic. . . . While she instinctively disliked the histrionic touch he sometimes displayed, she believed that beneath it was the fine gold of absolute sincerity and truth.

“She’s quite changed,” murmured Louisa Dacreson to her sister; “she doesn’t seem at all afraid of Mamma any more. It’s extraordinary. . . .” She looked aggrieved; she did not know this new Janet, calm, assured, almost self-possessed.

“I never thought she could be made to look so nearly pretty,” said Margaret. “It’s the clothes, of course. But I never liked Sara’s taste, and I can’t bear the way she dresses Pamela. She looks horribly bad style.”

They glanced at Pamela, at her black bobbed hair, her wide forehead, the dark calm eyes that surveyed them with such cool dispassionate criticism. That bright green thing made her look so conspicuous. No wonder Lady Cullingdon took the first opportunity of packing her off home from Paris.

“A love affair always makes a woman look younger,” said Louisa Dacreson. “It’s the first time Janet has ever had an offer. I wonder what he sees in her?”

“He sees six hundred a year, and more when dear Mamma dies,” replied Margaret Fortune bitterly.

“I must say she’s extraordinarily improved in appearance,” said Louisa. “Of course she always

had decent features . . . but being so ill and neurotic . . ." She shrugged her shoulders.

The Ponsfords all possessed sharp hearing, and a slight stir upon the landing outside communicated as if by magic a suddenly alert, vigilant expression to their assembled faces. They were like soldiers who have become aware of the presence of a foe who is still invisible to them. And like good soldiers they nerved themselves for the encounter. Colonel Fortune drew himself up to his full height of five feet six inches, and his face assumed a bland but haughty expression similar to that one he had found useful in repelling the advances of the profane in foreign embassies. The sword of the officer and the tongue of the diplomat were both, so to speak, in polished readiness for the fray. This man must be made to see that Janet's relations were people of importance. He had been misled perhaps by that dilapidated old Grange where Mrs. Ponsford lived. . . . Louisa and Margaret looked disdainfully critical, as if they knew their most profound fears would be more than fulfilled. Edwy fixed his eyeglasses upon his nose, and wished he had thought of getting a monocle like Uncle Gerard's. His mouth dropped open foolishly. Pamela darted across the room and sat down on Janet's other side and took her hand in hers with a spontaneous gesture of sympathy. Violet smiled significantly at Sara, and Father John's face became if possible more impassively rigid than before.

The door was thrown open and Mr. Lorimer was announced. He came in very quickly as if he had hastened hither with the knowledge that he was reprehensively late. He stopped short, however, soon after crossing the threshold, and gazed around him, astonished perhaps to find the room so full of people. He towered above the assembled Ponsfords, a great rather gaunt figure, and his black eyes swept them

with an amused, interrogative glance. Then his gaze fell upon Janet quietly sitting there between John and that handsome child, Pamela, and his whole face softened.

Sara rose and said: "Mr. Lorimer, let me introduce you. . . . You see, we're rather a large family. Lady Bradney, Mrs. Dacreson, Mrs. Fortune—my sisters-in-law. Sir Cosmo Bradney . . . Colonel Fortune . . . Mr. Dacreson . . . Mr. Edwy Ponsford . . ."

Her easy voice relieved the tension. She and Pamela were the calmest people in the room. Even Stephen in that moment seemed to range himself nervously and half-unconsciously on the side of the Ponsfords in the presence of this common foe.

"Actorish" . . . yes, that was Sara's word . . . It was no doubt that very quality in him that had made Mrs. Ponsford dub him a mountebank. An actor—yes, and a provincial actor at that. The kind of good looks that very young girls were wont to lose their heads over. So ran Louisa's thoughts. But Janet . . . Why, her very fear of her mother, her regard for her peace of mind, her deeply-instilled respect for her opinion, should have deterred her from listening to such a man as that, no matter how honeyed and specious the phrase! . . .

Colonel Fortune looked at his sister-in-law, now that he had seen for himself the object upon which her first and only passionate love had been bestowed, as if she had been something quite monstrously unfathomable. Janet—so delicate, so sheltered . . . Janet to be sought in marriage by this needy adventurer! And Janet with all her careful upbringing, after so many years of almost cloistered life, not only to listen but to respond. A sense of impotent anger shook him. He violently disliked Denis. He flattered himself he knew the type quite well. One meets that kind of adventurer in the dregs of an

English colony in foreign cities—the sort of man who generally for very good reasons has had to leave England and bury himself abroad. What on earth had Johnny been about, to dream even of taking such a man as that to Wanswater? . . .

Denis leaned towards Janet and said:

“Not too tired to-day, darling?”

“No, Denis,” she answered.

“Have they been here long?”

“Yes—a good time.”

“What a lot of them there are! I don’t think any families look attractive *en masse*, do you?”

He was obsessed by an uncomfortable conviction that somewhere, at some time or other, he had seen Colonel Fortune before.

“It’s been rather awful, you know,” she whispered.

Yes, she was really in love with him, and he could play upon her like an instrument. That, watching them, was Louisa Dacreson’s opinion.

“Janet tells us that she is engaged to you,” said Colonel Fortune, wondering whether he had seen Denis before or only met his type a hundred times. “I’m one of her trustees, you know. There’ll have to be a settlement . . .” He paused and glanced swiftly at Denis.

“I understand that your trusteeship expires on her marriage,” retorted Denis. “And as to settlements, I’m afraid I’m not in a position to bring anything into settlement.”

It was a frank avowal of insolvency.

“It is true that our trusteeship expires, but our moral obligation to protect her interests continues,” said the colonel. “Her father, unfortunately, although under the circumstances very naturally, did not take into serious consideration the possibility of her—marrying.”

“Janet and I are going to be married the first

week in February, Colonel Fortune," said Denis. "We are not going to ask any one's consent, and I think you may take it that your moral obligation will cease on her wedding-day."

"Hear—hear," said Pamela.

"Oh, well, if that's your attitude, Mr. Lorimer—" said Colonel Fortune.

"Yes, that's my attitude," said Denis imperturbably, but as he spoke his eyes turned involuntarily towards the woman at his side. "We shall be married as soon as we can get through with all the formalities. Speaking for myself, I don't care about settlements, and I think I'm right in saying that Janet doesn't either. We shall be married as quietly as possible."

"Do I understand that you have no means at all—that you intend to live entirely upon your wife's money?" inquired Colonel Fortune.

"I haven't any money. But I can work." He held up his right hand. "I've got one arm anyhow."

They all glanced significantly at the stiff left arm that hung down as straight in the sleeve as if it had been an artificial one.

"But will you work? That is the question," said Cosmo, with a faint touch of insolence.

Denis laughed, almost boyishly.

"If Janet can trust me! . . ."

"Hear, hear," said Pamela again.

"If Janet marries you, you must both understand that it will be quite useless for either of you to look to us for any help in the future." Louisa Dacre's voice was firm and resonant.

"We shall wash our hands of her," said Margaret Fortune; "you have neither money nor profession. You took advantage of John's mistaken kindness in inviting you to the Grange, to make love to my poor sister. If she had had any experience of

the world, she would not have listened to you. You just took advantage of her weakness—of her ignorance . . . We know nothing about you, and you can produce no credentials. Naturally we are opposed to the marriage.”

“Of course, I know it sounds awful when you put it like that,” Denis agreed unexpectedly, “but we’ll hope for the best. I shall soon find something to do, and if Janet isn’t satisfied, she’s got lots of time in which to back out.”

There was something boyish in his easy confidence, in this appeal, as it were, for a little indulgence from them all. He could at least show them that their dismal prophecies had failed to scare him, and that he could still take a bright hopeful view of the future. And if Janet didn’t mind his lack of means, his maimed arm, why should they?

“Lots of people have got married on far worse prospects than ours,” he affirmed.

“Janet is many years older than you. And her health has always been bad and uncertain.” Louisa’s voice struck across a brief dismayed pause.

“Oh, I know all about her health,” said Denis; “she’s simply never had a chance. Boxed up at Wanswater from year’s end to year’s end with a harsh unsympathetic mother, and a fiend of a servant eternally spying on her. I flatter myself that I can make her a little happier than that!” His eyes flashed.

“I must request you not to speak of our mother in that impertinent way,” said Mrs. Fortune, indignantly. “Dear Mamma has devoted herself to Janet—her one thought all these years has been for her welfare. She can have received but little thanks or gratitude, since Janet is willing to accept the first stranger who comes along and invites her to marry him.”

“Can you tell me that Mrs. Ponsford has ever

been anything else but harsh and unsympathetic to Janet?" demanded Denis passionately. "To me it's appalling to think of what her life must have been. She has never complained—you mustn't think that—she's too much of a saint. But I've been there—I've seen for myself."

"I am not going to stay and hear dear Mamma abused," said Margaret, rising from her chair with flushed and agitated countenance. "I wonder that Janet allows it. But I am afraid we must cease to look for any evidence of good feeling from Janet."

"You must have seen how she was terrorized," continued Denis; "it's that more than anything, that's affected her health. I'm never going to let her be frightened again." He looked down at Janet with a protective glance.

"I'm sure you'll make good, Denis," said Sara in her unruffled way, "And anyhow, Stephen and I don't mean to wash our hands of you and Janet. You'll always be welcome here whenever you like to come. We shall hope to see quite a lot of you when you're in London."

They all looked at Stephen, expecting at least an indignant disclaimer from him, a denial of his own participation in any such friendly and hospitable intentions; something, in short, to show that he was not meditating such perfidious infidelity to Ponsford principles. But there was, alas, nothing of the kind forthcoming from Stephen, who only smiled sheepishly, though quite acquiescently, at his wife. He didn't of course think she was right . . . but there it was. . . .

"I cannot think that the continuance of this discussion can serve any useful purpose," said Colonel Fortune, in his loftiest and most diplomatic tones. "If Janet persists in flying in the face of the advice of all those who truly care for her, she has at least

reached an age when women are presumed to be responsible." A dry smile flickered about his lips. "I can only add that I'm sorry Mr. Lorimer has spoken of Mrs. Ponsford in the way he did just now. That alienates any sympathy we might have learnt to feel for him." He looked at his wife, who came obediently towards him. "Margaret, we're lunching out, you know." He shook hands with the assembled Ponsfords and their mates, gave a couple of fingers to Cosmo and Pamela successively, bowed very haughtily to Denis and Janet, as if to emphasize the disgrace into which marriage would plunge them, and made a dignified exit with his wife. Mr. Dacreson collected his Louisa and Edwy and departed. Soon the Stephen Ponsfords were left alone with Father John, Janet, and Denis Lorimer.

"That's over, thank goodness," said Sara, with a sigh of relief. "Denis—you must stay to luncheon with Janet and Pamela. Stephen and I are going out. I just wanted to say that of course Janet'll stay with us till the wedding, and you must come and see her as often as you can. I think we might start in with her trousseau this afternoon—there's no time to be lost."

He felt that her kind little speech signified his formal adoption into the family whose members had for the most part explicitly "washed their hands" of him and Janet. He was so grateful, that a lump rose in his throat. If only Johnny would say something nice like that, to show that in spite of all things he didn't wholly disapprove! . . .

"It's most awfully kind of you to befriend us like this," he said gratefully.

"Well, somebody must see to things," said the practical Sara.

But she was touched nevertheless by his words.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

TO Janet the succeeding weeks flew, and she was even a little dismayed to find how rapidly February was approaching. There was still so much to be done, although she had relinquished the task of buying her trousseau, into Sara's able hands. There were other matters that needed her time, and she could not possibly divert all her attention from Denis. Yet the spiritual things claimed her, convincing her of their paramount importance. She was increasingly aware, too, of the part they were to play in that new life of hers. . . .

But her path was not altogether easy, in spite of Sara's unvarying kindness, and Pamela's careless confident courage, stimulating though impossible of adoption. Mrs. Ponsford had written once to her daughter, a long and bitter letter, intimating that she could not receive her at Wanswater after her marriage to that "mountebank." Janet wept over the letter, which seemed to cut her off abruptly from all her former life. . . . Stephen also received a very severe missive from his mother, wondering how he and Sara could possibly have lent themselves to helping Janet in this way. Stephen was dismayed to find his mother's attitude so inflexibly condemnatory. He wondered whether even now it wasn't too late to draw back, and refuse to keep Janet with them in Green Street, advising her to return home. Sara, however, speedily crushed these faint signs of "wobbling." Why shouldn't Janet marry Denis if she wanted to? They knew nothing whatever against him except that he hadn't any money. That was probably more his misfortune than his fault.

Mrs. Ponsford's letter to her son went on to say that Janet was a prodigal daughter. She was bent on becoming a Catholic (of course they had Johnny

to thank for that, he was beginning to reap the punishment he deserved for having left the Church of England)—and she obstinately refused to give up this man, who would most certainly run through all her money as fast as possible, and then desert her. Gerard Fortune had written to say that he looked just the kind of man who would poison his wife in order to obtain possession of her money. And of course Janet would be fool enough to play into his hand by making a will in his favor. She was weak-minded, she wasn't normal. She—Mrs. Ponsford—only wished she had followed dear Margaret's advice and placed Janet long ago in a home, where she could have been well looked after and kindly treated. Nothing of the kind could possibly have happened, then.

Sara treated all the Ponsford correspondence with cool imperturbability. There was a great deal of it at this critical juncture, and it included a letter from Giles, full of reproach and anger. No one spared poor John. He was primarily responsible for becoming a Catholic, despite the strict training he had received at the hands of their dear father, and then for bringing this needy adventurer, this vulgar mountebank, to Wanswater. "And now, from what they tell me, this Lorimer will probably take poor foolish Janet to some little remote place abroad and slowly poison her," wrote Giles. "I fear John's conscience will reproach him bitterly in the future for all the suffering he will have been instrumental in bringing upon his sister." There was a marked tendency in all the letters to fix the whole of the blame upon John.

Gerard Fortune's suggestion about the poison had been eagerly adopted by the Ponsfords. One read of such things—men who had made away with wife after wife, to secure their money for themselves. Some one really ought to stop the match, even if it

were necessary to keep Janet hidden in durance vile for a time. They must be cruel in order to be kind. Then there was sometimes a final appeal to John. Couldn't he use his influence? He had always been able to manage Janet in her more obstinate moods, when even Hodge couldn't do anything with her. It was surely John's duty to rescue his sister from the terrible position in which his carelessness had placed her. . . .

But John gave them no reason to think he could change the stars in their courses. The mighty love that had swept poor repressed and suffering Janet off her feet, was not a calm stream that could be deflected by another's will. It was a strong impetuous full-flowing river. It endowed Denis with every quality that was noble, chivalrous and true. One could hardly recognize Janet now in this loving determined woman. Sara believed that she might even change Denis, giving him strength of purpose such as he had never known before. But in any case the wedding preparations went forward without word of remonstrance from Father John.

The brilliant ceremony in Westminster Cathedral which Pamela had pictured with so much imagination was not destined to materialize. Instead, the wedding was to take place at a quiet little church in the byways of Notting Hill, near which Denis was at present staying in a couple of small and cheap rooms, which were all that he could afford. John, who was staying on Campden Hill near the Carmelite Church, had strolled once or twice down Holland Park Avenue, turning off to the right before he came to the bottom of that long wide thoroughfare, to seek the gray mean little street where Denis was living. He had knocked at the door, but had always received the same answer—Mr. Lorimer was not at home. John had supposed him to be out with Janet, yet sometimes when later he had gone

round to Green Street to see his sister, it was only to learn that Denis had not been there all day. His absences never disturbed Janet in the least. She neither questioned nor doubted him.

John wondered sometimes, if Denis was purposely avoiding him. This suspicion deepened his slowly growing distrust of the man his sister was determined to marry.

He was engaged in making plans for a speedy return to Rome after the wedding. He was studying hard, and the old ambition to become a Benedictine was much in his thoughts. But always there was the hope—the fear—that the marriage might not take place, that Janet would still need his help.

One morning he heard a timid knock at the door of his sitting-room. He rose and opened it and saw Janet standing there on the threshold. The day was cold and the wind had touched her cheeks to a bright rosiness.

“Johnny dear—I’ve been received. I’m a Catholic now.” Her blue eyes were shining.

He looked at her in astonishment.

“But, Jane darling, you know so little. I thought you’d put off the idea of it until after your marriage, as there was so little time.”

“No—I’ve been working hard. That’s why I’ve seen so little of Denis and you and Sara.”

“But who received you, dear?”

She gave him the name of a well-known priest. “You see, mine was rather an exceptional case—I did so want to be a Catholic before I was married. And Denis wouldn’t wait till after Easter, and then I thought, too, it would be a trouble for Sara to have me for so long. And I’d been thinking of it for ages—I learned a lot by heart out of that book you gave me at Wanswater. You know, I’m stupid about remembering unless I learn a thing by heart.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t quite so precipitate as I

thought at first, Janet," he said feeling rather relieved. "I've always hoped you'd be a Catholic one of these days. I remember Lorimer speaking to me about it when he first came to the Grange. And I told him I felt it would be impossible during my mother's lifetime."

"I've often noticed," said Janet, "that there's seldom only one convert in a family. If one comes, another is sure to follow. I'm glad I've been the one to follow. . . ."

"It will help you a great deal," said John. "Lorimer even then said it would." He was thinking of how swift and strong had been the interest and sympathy she had aroused in Denis. He had seen everything so clearly, even if he had committed the error of somewhat exaggerating the culpability of Hodge. Nor had he been quite just to Mrs. Ponsford in his haste to condemn the "treatment" meted out to Janet.

John felt that the Catholic Church would endow her with that so essential spiritual equilibrium which reacts powerfully upon the physical nature, bringing it into a kind of harmony. It would give her poise and stability in that new and strange liberty which had come to her. For it was a dangerous experiment—this freeing of her from a servitude whose measure John had only lately begun to gauge. And the circumstances of her coming marriage were such as promised but few elements of security. She was marrying a man of whose reverse side she knew nothing at all. There might be very bitter moments of disillusionment ahead of her, should she ever discover that side of her husband's character. John was glad to think she would have the wise spiritual guidance of the Catholic Church through all these dangers and difficulties. . . .

"Johnny—I understand now what is meant by the Rock. Why, I can almost feel it under my feet.

And it's wonderful—that sense of welcome—it is the only thing on earth I think that can give one any idea of the joy of the soul when it enters Heaven. . . . The poor little weak erring soul admitted to that wonderful home—yes, and welcomed. . . .” Her whole face was curiously ecstatic, as of one who had tasted to the full an ineffable spiritual joy. “Johnny—I'd like to tell you something. I used to think it would kill me if anything separated me from Denis . . . I felt I couldn't live without him. Even if *you* had been against the marriage—if you hadn't been Denis's friend—it couldn't have prevented me from marrying him. But now it's all different, and I feel I could let him go if he wished it, without breaking my heart. I could let him go and still be happy. I could pray for him—we shouldn't really be separated . . . I should feel that his soul still belonged to me in some inexplicable way—that I could help him with my prayers. Even if he were to die, I don't think he would seem so very far away. Catholics keep so close to their dead with their constant prayers for them—their constant thought of helping them.”

So she was beginning to learn her first steps in spiritual detachment—a quality that so often seems to set the devout Catholic a little apart and aloof from his fellows.

“Dear Janet, I hope you'll be the best Catholic that ever was.” He touched her hand lightly. “I'm so glad you came to tell me directly. Does Denis know?”

“Not yet,” she confessed; “I didn't want to tell him till it was over. He would have wanted to come—I should have been thinking too much of him. Johnny—I was jealous—I wanted to give all my thoughts to Our Blessed Lord to-day. Can't you understand the feeling? Even Denis didn't

count—before that tremendous thing I was going to do.”

“I think you were quite right. I know I couldn’t bear any one near me at the time. You want to give yourself up so completely.”

“Yes,” she assented.

“Shall I come back with you to Sara’s now? You mustn’t overtire yourself, you know.”

His tone was one of gentlest solicitude.

“Oh, I’m not a bit tired. I never felt so strong—so well. But I should love you to come with me, if you’re not too busy.”

“No—I’m not busy now. And I’d like to see Denis. Is he to be there?”

“Yes—he’s coming to lunch. Sara and Pamela are both to be there, too.”

Soon they were driving eastward together in a taxi. On the way, John said:

“You’ll have to help Denis, you know. He’ll need a lot of help.”

“Will he? But I’m the weak one,” she answered, with an incredulous happy laugh.

“Sometimes I wish you were going to marry a different sort of man.”

“You mustn’t be anxious. I’ve such a strong feeling that it’s going to turn out all right. If I hadn’t, I think they would have frightened me that day when they all came to try and induce me to break it off.”

He changed the subject.

“I’m going to Wanswater for the week-end to see Mother.”

“But you’ll be back in time? You mustn’t let her persuade you to stay.”

“Oh, I shall come back in time, unless anything very unforeseen happens.”

“Because you see . . . it’s to be on Thursday week. . . .” she reminded him timidly.

"Yes, dear, I haven't forgotten."

"You must try to make Mamma see things differently. I wish she were to be there. I'm afraid she thinks I've behaved badly."

"I'll do my best to make peace, you may depend," he answered.

"And say *kind* things of Denis. . . ."

"Yes—all I possibly can."

She observed again that curious reticence which seemed to characterize him whenever he spoke of Denis. But she did not dare question him.

"You must tell her that I've become a Catholic."

"Yes—she ought to know that too. But she must have been expecting it."

The taxi drew up before the Ponsfords' big brown-brick house in Green Street. They found Sara in the drawing-room, glancing at a novel. She looked up as they came in.

"Denis has just telephoned to say that he's been kept in the City, so he won't be here to lunch."

Janet's face fell a little. She had been eager to communicate her wonderful news to Denis. She looked at John, but his face was grave and impassive as usual. She felt then that if she had a secret that she did not wish any one to know she could tell it to John without fear. Even without the seal of the confessional. . . .

But what could have kept Denis to-day? His absence seemed to cast a slight shadow over her radiant joy. John felt it, too, although his face showed no sign of disappointment. He wondered if Denis would continue to grieve Janet in the future by still longer and perhaps more inexplicable absences. He was angry with him, and angry with himself too, for entertaining such harsh thoughts of him on so slight a provocation.

After luncheon Sara suggested that Janet should go up to her room and rest a little. "We have

to go to that tiresome dressmaker at four and you must lie down for a bit," she said.

Janet was too tired not to comply. "But you'll send up and tell me when Denis comes?" she said as she was leaving the room.

Sara promised. But when Janet had closed the door she turned to John and said: "If he does come. I can't say that my confidence in him increases on better acquaintance. I've been trying to hide this from Stephen and Pamela, and from Janet herself. But I must speak openly to you, John."

It coincided so exactly with what John himself was feeling, that he had some difficulty in concealing from Sara his complete agreement.

"I mean," continued Sara, "that I should never be surprised if he weren't forthcoming on his wedding day. He's elusive—and then I often feel he's playing a part."

"I wonder if that sort of thing ever strikes Janet?" said John.

"She'd never say so," said Sara. Her tone was slightly lugubrious. She hated being mixed up with any matter that seemed predestined to failure, like a clever barrister who will not undertake a case that promises little or no chance of success. Sara was not one to lead a forlorn hope. She had helped Janet hitherto, because she was really fond of her and genuinely sorry for her, and she wanted to release her from the life she had led at Wanswater. But lately she had felt much less sure of Denis, and in this new light it did sometimes seem to her that old Mrs. Ponsford, the Grange, Hodge, and all the rest of it did spell security, even if it were the kind of security extended to prisoners in their cells. Light and air and liberty were all terribly lacking, yet the want of these essentials would hardly justify a person in rushing to the other ex-

treme and seeking freedom in a land perpetually shaken by severe earthquakes. If one had to deplore anything, it was that the doors of that prison-house should have been opened by a Denis Lorimer, handsome in his way, plausible and attractive. Dangerously attractive to a woman so guarded and sheltered as Janet had always been. Not that Sara had been influenced in the least by Gerard Fortune's dismal prognostications, but setting aside all exaggeration, there was ample reason for misgiving.

When Lorimer was present, Sara always liked him to the point of approving of the marriage, but his absence stirred anew her anxiety and doubt.

It was a relief to pour out her thoughts in this way to so safe an ear as John's.

"Of course, all marriages are a risk," she said suddenly. "Even those when everything seems quite perfect. One has seen them smash up over and over again."

"Yes," agreed John. He felt that his thoughts and Sara's were traveling down twin roads.

"And then if she weren't so *dreadfully* happy!" pursued Sara.

"You can't do anything," said John, with sudden decision. "And she has cut herself free from Wanswater by becoming a Catholic. You know how much my mother dislikes it—I don't think she's really forgiven me yet in her heart of hearts. Of course she looks upon it, too, as an insult to my father's memory. So if Janet doesn't marry Denis, what is she to do in the future? She never really liked the idea of living near me at Gillingsea."

"Oh, she could live alone in a flat with a good maid," said Sara. "She could manage quite well on her income. Janet has no expensive tastes—she dislikes spending money on herself—even for her trousseau!"

John shook his head. "She'll never give him up," he said.

It was an opening, and Sara instantly took advantage of it.

"But if he gives *her* up?"

John stared straight in front of him. Denis's absence that day had emphasized his own private fear that had sprung from the feeling that he had of late persistently avoided him.

"Has he done anything to make you think he intends to? You surely can't be going on his not turning up to-day."

"Oh, no—but it's an accumulation of little things. I daresay you'll think it's too subtle a view to take of the case . . . but he expected opposition, and except for that one family council, it's all been tacit and invisible. He played up so gracefully to the gallery that day, didn't he? I admired him so much that I almost believed in him! And then one saw he was enjoying himself. . . . But now he hasn't got any part to play and I think he's disappointed. I've made everything so simple and easy for him, just taking it for granted that he and Janet are like any ordinary engaged couple—eager to see as much of each other as possible, and all that. I wanted to deprive him of all scope for histrionics . . . and it's made him restive. He doesn't realize it's just my way of testing him. I'd do a lot for Janet, you know."

It certainly sounded rather complicated and subtle, still there might be a good deal of truth in it. On the other hand Denis might have discovered, as the wedding day drew near, that he had made an appalling mistake. He might be simply seeking for a loophole of escape. It would hurt Janet grievously, but the words she had spoken to-day reassured John a little. It would no longer kill her, as she had expressed it, to lose him. She could never

feel such separation complete. John believed that the conviction had been a genuine one with her, and not merely a fugitive product of that first wonderful fervor of the new convert. . . .

"Dear me, I hope Pamela will never give me all this trouble," said Sara, with a little laugh. "She's got such a tremendous will of her own . . . she's absolutely American, you know. I can't find any lurking trace of Ponsfordism in her."

John smiled dryly. "It is too British a quality; perhaps, to flourish on American soil."

"There's a lot of it in Gilbert, though," she said. "He's as English as Pamela is American. I suppose that's why I really care most for Pamela. I understand her better."

Her thoughts were momentarily diverted from her sister-in-law. But she soon resumed the tale of her woes concerning Janet.

"If I dared, I would give her a hint . . . of what I'm thinking. But it would be cruel, and then it might prove to be unnecessary. Stephen had another odious letter from Giles this morning. It seems that Edwy has gone home and given a very unflattering account of Denis. Told them he was certain that he'd hypnotized Janet—he had such peculiar eyes, and that was why she didn't have those fainting-fits any more."

"Adding, too, that he intended to poison her and get hold of her money," added John grimly. "Well, we may be sure of one thing, that he'll fall short of their gloomiest prophecies. Denis wouldn't hurt a fly."

There was a little pause which Sara broke by saying:

"John, what do *you* know about him? Where did he come from? You have known him a good long time, haven't you? You wouldn't have taken a complete stranger like that to Wanswater."

"I acted under a sudden impulse," said John. "I met him at Euston, as you know, on my way home, and it seemed the only charitable thing to do. He was in pretty low water, and I believe he was nearly starving. I thought that a week or two of quiet, of rest, of good food . . ."

He stopped abruptly. Sara's eyes were bright and searching.

"Of course, it's all turned out very differently from what I hoped and expected," he continued. "I never foresaw complications. I'm afraid I was too hasty. But I knew he'd been hard hit in Rome—by some love affair . . . I am not betraying any confidence, for it was freely gossiped about last winter there. And he was so utterly at the end of his tether—spiritually and physically. I don't think any priest could have refused to hold out a helping hand to a fellow-Catholic in such distress."

"He was acting, of course," said Sara bitterly.

"I can't be sure of that. But he literally had no money—that was true, at any rate. As for his people, I never knew any of them. His mother died when he was a little chap, and his father was a bit of a rolling-stone. Educated him when he could afford it, which wasn't always or even often. And to go back to that night—I felt I simply could not let him go. But I ought to have hit upon some other scheme. . . ."

"Well, there's no way out that I can see," said Sara; "Janet's made up her mind to marry him, and marry him she certainly will, unless he throws her over, which I've begun to consider isn't quite improbable. I've felt sometimes as if he were a guilty man, afraid of detection. We must only hope that if the wedding does take place, it won't all end in disaster and tragedy. . . ."

"I hope and pray not, indeed," said John. Her

words made him feel thoroughly uncomfortable. A guilty man . . . he alone knew how guilty.

"You see, she's never led a normal life. She knows far less of the world than my Pamela," said Sara.

There was no doubt of that. Pamela possessed the premature knowledge of life which characterized her generation, and she had the premature wisdom also which gave balance and poise to her mind, combined with the clear unclouded vision of her mother and that capacity for not shirking the truth, but for regarding and examining it fearlessly, which was part of the equipment Sara had bestowed upon her young daughter.

Their conversation was at this juncture brought to an abrupt conclusion by the entrance of Denis Lorimer.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

JOHN tried to believe that Denis's face had not changed at all, as he caught sight of him, sitting there talking to Sara; and yet it had certainly seemed to him that a faint cloud had gathered upon it, adumbrating an inward dissatisfaction at having to confront him.

But it cleared at once; so quickly indeed, that John tried to assure himself that it had been but the effect of his own imagination, stimulated perhaps by his recent conversation with Sara.

Denis shook hands with them both. His first question was: "Where is Janet?"

"She's gone upstairs to rest—I promised to let her know when you came." Sara handed him her cigarette case. Denis selected a cigarette, lit it, and then said:

"She's not ill, is she?"

"No, but I thought she looked tired at lunch. I urged her to lie down, as she has to go to the dressmaker later."

"Janet was received into the Church this morning," said John, quietly.

"Received into the Church? But she never told me!" said Denis in astonishment. "Did you receive her, John?"

"No—she didn't tell me either, till it was over. Then she came round to look me up and I brought her back here."

"But how could she be ready in such a short time?"

"Well, it wasn't such a short time as we think. She's been learning about it by herself, but I knew she had never had any doubts since she came to my Mass that morning she fainted."

Denis's face grew very grave.

"That was the reason then," he said, more to himself than to John. The sudden flood of faith, the realization of that tremendous and transcendent Mystery, had illuminated the mind with such swift and strong force as to deprive it of physical consciousness. Fear of a kind—the holy fear that is born of awe. . . . Janet then had gone quietly forward into the fold of the Church, that in that moment had seemed to hold out welcoming arms to her.

"I'm glad," said Denis: "I'm very glad. . . ."

His face was grave, even slightly depressed.

"Of course, it was far better that she should be received before her marriage," said John.

"Yes—I suppose so." Denis paused a moment and then said: "I'm afraid she'll expect too much of me now."

He looked from one to the other as if the idea dismayed him.

"Oh, but we all expect great things of you, Denis," said Sara, and though her voice was light, he knew that she was in desperate earnest. "We know so little about you that you *must* make good, so as not to disappoint us, or make us feel that we've done very wrong in entrusting Janet to you. Stephen and I both feel rather responsible, you know."

Denis was silent. Oh, they hadn't the least idea what they were doing! They knew nothing of the man to whom they were entrusting Janet. In that moment he had a strong insensate wish to confide in Sara and throw himself upon her mercy. . . . Then he looked at John—at his grave non-committal face with its touch of holiness, and he remembered. . . .

"You and Stephen aren't Catholics," said Denis. "You wouldn't expect the same things from me that Janet will."

"Of course she'll want you to be a good Catholic," said John.

Sara rang the bell, and told the servant who appeared to let Miss Janet know that Mr. Lorimer had come. A little silence fell upon all three as they waited for Janet.

Denis felt as if he were going to see a stranger. For this Janet—this woman in her first fervor of conversion, who had just passed through that strange powerful spiritual regeneration, inconceivable by those who have never experienced it—was indeed a stranger to him. She would come to him with new demands, new insistencies. Sara's idea of "making good" largely consisted in his obtaining adequate employment and pursuing it with diligence and perseverance, but Janet would ask very different things of him. She would have an increased horror, perhaps, of those past sins of his, which hitherto he had believed she would readily forgive. . . . They

would put a new barrier between himself and her, should she ever come to know of them.

He was plunged in these intolerable thoughts, and when he looked up in response to some slight stir, he saw her coming towards him. His eyes sought her face for proof of that change. She still looked pale and tired, but her eyes were shining with a strange almost fierce light. He sprang up and went towards her and took her hand.

"Darling, why didn't you tell me? I should like to have been there."

Janet smiled up into his face.

"But I didn't want you to be there, Denis. I've told John why I felt as if I must be alone. I should have been thinking of you—you would have given me distractions. I didn't want . . . even you. . . ."

She sat beside Sara on the sofa.

"Janet's learning to be independent," smiled Sara.

"So I see," said Denis.

His fear had a little diminished. Janet's manner to him was full of an unchanged confidence.

"Oh, but you're not angry, Denis?" cried Janet.

"Angry? My darling child, of course not!"

"I mean . . . I ought perhaps to have told you . . ."

"You need never tell me anything you don't wish to," said Denis, smiling at her.

They seemed almost forgetful of the presence of Sara and John.

"Well, I'm going out," said Sara, rising. "Janet, don't forget to meet me at Madame Blanche's at four. John, are you coming with me?"

"Yes," said John.

"Come back to tea if you like, Denis," said Sara.

"If you'll have me. . . . Don't let Janet kill herself over all these new frocks."

Sara said: "She must be decently turned out.

But I'll see that she isn't overtired. You can bring her to Madame Blanche's."

She smiled upon them both in a frank friendly way. John said good-bye to them and then followed her out of the room. On the landing he said to her:

"It must be all right. . . . It *must*. . . ."

He thought Denis was at his best when seen with Janet. There was a touch of gaiety in his kindness, that seemed to put her completely at her ease. She had developed enormously since her engagement; it was as if she had been waiting for this soft and kindly influence to come into her life.

Sara said quietly:

"I suppose . . . you pray a great deal for her, John?"

"Always—every day. . . ."

"You must pray—even more," said Sara, with unwonted seriousness.

Left alone with Janet, Lorimer drew her nearer to him and said:

"So I'm to have a Catholic wife?"

"Yes, Denis. You'd rather, wouldn't you?"

"I told John I was afraid that it would make you expect too much from me."

"But of course I expect everything from you. And then you can teach me—I don't know half enough yet." She smiled confidently into his face.

He looked straight in front of him as if he were unwilling to meet that tender candid innocent gaze of hers.

"You mustn't expect a great deal from me," he said in a voice that sounded almost harsh. "If you do, you'll only be disappointed. I'm not a good Catholic . . . I've neglected everything for years. Don't you ever wonder why dear old John's so against our marriage?"

"But he isn't against it! He's always been so kind about it," she contradicted passionately.

But in her heart she felt that his words were substantially true. It was almost a relief to hear her own vehement denial of the accusation.

"You know he's not," she said, clinging to his hand in her excitement. "Why, you were his own friend . . . he brought you to Wanswater. I liked you first because you were his friend, and he asked me to be kind to you—to try to make you feel at home. . . ."

"I'm afraid he must be rather sorry when he looks back upon that quixotic action of his," said Denis grimly. "And he's only kind about our marriage because he knows he can't stop it. But he and Sara and Stephen are making the best of a bad job. . . ."

"Oh, what do you mean, Denis?" Her voice trembled.

"I am only warning you that I'm not worthy of you," said Denis, still looking fixedly in front of him so that he should not see her distressed face. "I shall disappoint you—perhaps make you unhappy."

Janet's heart sank a little. She had never known him in this mood before. It frightened her. Did he want her to send him away?

She choked back her tears.

"Denis—Denis—don't talk like this—I can't bear it! . . ."

He turned suddenly and put his arms round her and kissed her.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, very gently; "you've been an angel to me. And I love you. But that doesn't mean that I shan't make you very unhappy sometimes."

Janet released herself. "I'd rather be unhappy with you than happy without you. And it isn't as if I didn't know the meaning of suffering—you've

seen that for yourself, haven't you? You've taken me away from all that—the misery—the suffering . . . you opened the door of the cage! You set me free, Denis! I shall bless you for that till the last hour of my life. Whatever you do—whatever you say—to hurt me, I shall remember that and . . . forgive you. . . .”

She was standing up in front of him, and it seemed to him that there was something both noble and passionate in her attitude. She was almost violently alive, awakened from that long coma that had atrophied all her powers, physical, mental and spiritual. She was splendidly aware of her freedom, and she was ready to worship that hand that had opened the door of the cage, endured for twenty-six years.

He came and stood beside her and gathered her closely to him. “My darling, darling Janet,” he said.

But he was genuinely touched, and profoundly moved by her words. His love had called her almost fiercely to life. She, the poor prisoner, watched and sheltered and guarded till she was ready to pine away and die, had responded to the sound of his voice, to the touch, the words of love. And in return she gave him unquestioningly and with a prodigal generosity, the whole love of her life. Worthy or unworthy, she cared passionately for him. . . .

And whatever happened, she would always love him, always remember that his had been the hand to open the cage-door and set her free, as surely no woman had ever been set free since that day more than seventy years ago when Robert Browning had gathered his delicate bride in his arms, and borne her away from the sofa in a darkened London room to the soft reviving airs of Italy. . . .

In the midst of an atmosphere of suspicion and

thinly-veiled distrust, Janet's confidence in Denis had retained its crystal clearness unimpaired. He was grateful to her for that, grateful too that John with all his knowledge, had done nothing to try to diminish it. Yes, John had kept scrupulously aloof and silent. Yet a word from him and would not the house of cards have fallen about his and Janet's ears? She was too good a woman to be able to regard indifferently those deep disfiguring stains of dishonor that should have made it impossible for any man or woman to trust him again.

His touch soothed her.

"You must never frighten me again like that, Denis. You made me feel as if you wanted me to ask you to go away. . . ."

"Ah, my dear, it's because I'm afraid of so many things!"

Only he could not put her love to that supreme test. It would have been more fair, but looking at her now, he was incapable of doing it. He wasn't going, with his own hands to deprive her of that love and confidence she bestowed upon him with such generous ardor. And in that moment of struggle with himself he realized that he loved her now as never before. It was impossible to run the risk of losing her. . . .

Later he took her to the dressmaker's where she was to meet Sara. Janet mutely detested the whole performance of buying clothes; indeed after the first novelty of possessing dainty raiment had worn off, she regarded it as an odious waste of time. But she submitted to Sara's inexorable will in the matter, feeling that it would have been churlish to rebel under the circumstances. Sara was so deeply convinced of the vital importance of an adequate trousseau, that it would have hurt her feelings to question it. But that afternoon Janet felt even less

inclined than usual for the distasteful task of "trying on."

At the door, Denis left her.

"Tell Sara I don't think I shall come back to tea," he said. "I have one or two things to do. And you'll probably be here for hours."

"Very well, Denis," said Janet.

Yet she felt a little disappointed and perhaps even a little anxious, as she saw him stride away down the lighted bustling street, his tall figure so soon vanishing amid the crowds of pedestrians who were strolling along the narrow Bond Street pavements that winter afternoon.

She remembered then that they had made no plans for meeting on the morrow. This little omission, combined with the new strangeness of manner Denis had displayed that day, gave Janet a saddened depressed feeling that was almost like a definite presentiment of coming evil. . . .

## CHAPTER XXXV

**T**HE evening was warm for the end of January. A mild southerly wind was blowing with a dampness in it that suggested rain. If he had been in Rome on such a night, Denis would have murmured "sirocco" and felt the climate to be enervating. But surely one could not feel the sirocco blowing so far north as London.

He walked back to his lodgings, all down busy Oxford Street and past the marble arch, disdaining both omnibus and Tube that would have taken him so close to his abode. He faced the immense length of the Bayswater Road, and on his left the trees in

the Park stood up black and skeleton-like in their winter nakedness, their branches rocking in the wind. Even now it was not quite dark, and a misty yellow radiance showed in the West. The twilight was colored a cold ashen blue—a dusky hue that flowed over everything as if it had been poured from a gigantic cup.

Now he was nearing Notting Hill Gate, and houses and shops rose on either side of him. The road between him and the opposite pavement was thronged with vehicles of every description. Motor-lorries competed with motor-buses as to which should take up most room, travel fastest, and produce the greatest amount of noise and odor. Luxurious private automobiles slipped past with a swift almost aristocratic ease, as if with secret contempt for the more vulgar taxi. There were not a great many horses to be seen, and the few that dragged broughams or carts looked overworked, listless, and tired. At a street corner a boy was hawking newspapers. At another a woman sat before a basket of oranges. A flower stall struck a note of almost wistful color in those sordid surroundings. Denis quickened his steps and began to descend the long steep wide hill that goes down to Shepherd's Bush. The air that touched his face was fresher; it seemed to come straight from country fields, to bring a whisper of dew and greening grass, of brown woods and pale gleaming rivers stealing cautiously along between twin rows of willow trees, with stars watching overhead. The English landscape—the familiar, intimate English fields. . . . He could remember how in the trenches during the War just a little green hill in Somersetshire had always risen up before his mind, teasing him with a desire to walk along its summit once more—that summit crowned with woods gay in their spring foliage, with a wild cherry-tree standing among

the rest like a gay little bride. It was always the same hill, the same woods, and the time of year was always spring. He wondered to-night why he had never returned thither when he was free. But once out of the trenches it had ceased to haunt him, just as those lines from Richard II had ceased to haunt him:

This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land. . . .

He turned to the right, crossed a square presided over by a church with a tall spire and pressed through a network of little gray streets. He came to a church half hidden there in the heart of this unlovely little neighborhood. He had intended to go straight back to his lodgings that night, and look through some papers, yet it was no sudden impulse that constrained him to enter the church. The door stood open, a woman with a shawl over her head passed him and went in. Almost mechanically he followed her.

It was a small church, built for the poor in a poor neighborhood. Its interior decoration was of the simplest kind. There were the usual statues of Our Lady, the Sacred Heart, St. Joseph, and St. Anthony. He saw the woman drop a penny into the box for St. Anthony's bread for the poor. She crossed herself and said a prayer. Denis watched her for a second, thought involuntarily of the widow's mite, and then went up to one of the front benches. He knelt down and hid his face in his hands.

At first he did not pray, did not even try to concentrate his mind upon the Living Presence within the Tabernacle. It seemed to him that he had come to ask for counsel rather than to pray. Two emotions had brought him hither that evening. One was his gratitude to John Ponsford; the other was the feeling that Janet's conversion had set her fur-

ther from him instead of bringing them nearer together. If she ever learnt of that past sin of his, she would have to regard it with Catholic eyes. She would not be able to make excuses for him in his irremediable dishonor. And though John was silent, could he himself keep silence? He knew in his heart, just as surely as if he had been told, that John was waiting, hoping, praying for him to speak. And he knew, too, that despite all Sara's kindness there lay hidden within her a deep instinctive distrust of him. He wondered sometimes, how it was he possessed this exact knowledge. Perhaps his own inward sense of guilt was like a mirror in which he saw reflected the invisible effect that guilt was able to produce upon the minds of others. It was like something tangible . . . that made people draw a little away from him. Only Janet had never been disturbed by it. There had been no least drawing away on her part. Her love was too great, and even now it seemed to enfold him with promise of forgiveness.

Only he dared not put it to the test. . . .

He thought almost inconsequently then of Pio Ascarelli's dark, sombre, passionate face when he had learned the truth—or as much of that truth as Angus Ferringham had been in a position to reveal. It had been a terrible thing to see a human face change suddenly from friendly kindness and affection to a fierce revengeful hostility. If Janet's face were no longer turned to him with its expression of candid and innocent love and confidence, he felt he could not bear it. He loved her, and only to-day had he learned how completely that love now possessed his heart.

There are moments in most lives when the soul has a sense of being stripped and naked, cruelly aware of its stains, its dark scars of past wounds. In the physical world the disease of leprosy is per-

haps the only bodily malady that can offer any similitude to the soul that is stained with what theologians call mortal sin—that deliberate, conscious, and wilful rebellion against the mandates of Almighty God. But it is a moment that, but for the sustaining conviction of Divine Love and obtainable pardon, might well produce despair within that soul.

Such a moment had come to Denis. He had entered the church almost carelessly, and now he seemed to be held there against his will, and constrained to make that deep inward examination that tortured as well as humbled him. He felt he could never forget that hour—the quiet stillness that prevailed within the building, the almost inaudible stir of far distant traffic, the flickering lights, the cold shadows . . . and Something within the Tabernacle that seemed to be speaking to him. . . .

He remembered how hard it had been for him to meet John's eyes that day. For John knew, and he had been scrupulously careful never to betray that knowledge by word or deed, never to show Denis himself that he retained the slightest recollection of what had passed between them as priest and penitent on that night at Wanswater. Nothing in all the Catholic Church has been more strictly guarded than the confessional. Its secrets have ever been inviolable. Denis was aware of the priest's inability ever to make a reference to anything therein revealed even to the penitent himself. The sin repented, confessed and absolved is blotted out.

Yet John, fully aware of all that had stained and darkened Denis Lorimer's past, had alone of all the Ponsfords made no effort to step in and prevent his marriage with Janet. For John's hands were tied, although he loved Janet much more than the others did. He tenderly loved her, had been prepared to make sacrifices for her sake. He must have looked on with a strange anguish, longing to

stretch out his hand and save her from marrying Denis, yet unable to do so. . . .

But Denis had known instinctively how greatly John had been opposed to the marriage, how earnest must have been his desire to save his sister from such a fate.

And his influence over Janet was great. He was perhaps the only person in the world who could have induced her to relinquish the thought of marrying Denis. He could have taken her away from Wanswater; he could have given her a home, close to his own. He had even made plans to accomplish this, setting aside his own desire to enter the Benedictine Order.

As Denis knelt there, a hot tear fell from his eyes and splashed down upon his hands, that were raised to hide his face. He looked up and found that his tears were blinding him. All the lights in the little church were blurred and seemed to assume fantastic forms seen through that fiery liquid mist.

The church was full of the dusk of the winter's evening; it was deserted now by all except himself. He had the strong sense of being alone with the Divine Presence upon the Altar, Whose nearness had become almost tangible. And in the presence of that transcendent perfection he felt that his own stripped and naked soul had become a visible thing, smirched, unsightly, sinister. . . .

He was hardly conscious of praying, yet once or twice the words of some simple remembered prayer rose to his lips and he muttered them inaudibly. Down the long yet swift years he seemed now to watch himself making a pilgrimage, protracted, desultory—a pilgrimage that was to take him at last to Wanswater and to the brink of a new life that offered him certain things he had never yet possessed. Wanswater and Janet . . . *To know the Universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads*

*for traveling souls.* . . . The words of the American poet came back to him, and it seemed to him that on that day when he first arrived at Wanswater, he had reached that piece of road whereon he was destined to travel for a space, side by side and hand in hand, with Janet Ponsford. Their two traveling souls had met, and now it appeared to him almost fantastically that they were destined also to free each other. He was to open the door of her cage, and she, with her tender winning love, was to take him for ever away from the sordid darkness of his past life. He knew that his own love for Janet had an enduring quality. Only . . . something stood between them.

He prayed again, and this time for strength to lay aside for ever that dark burden. He must go to John and place himself in his hands by telling the whole story to him, frankly and openly. Not under the seal of the confessional, but in such manner that he should be free to disclose it to Janet—to all the world. . . .

Denis had no idea of the passing of time. It must be getting late, he knew, and many hours had passed since he had last tasted food, his body was growing a little weak under the strain. In his searching self-examination to-night there was nothing of histrionic pose—he had laid that aside like some disgraceful and shameful motley. He suffered with that deep suffering of the soul that no mortal palliatives can touch. The agony seemed sometimes to become almost a physical one, tearing at and rending his heart. His love for Janet was after all one of the few genuine emotions of his life. The thought of possible separation from her became the more bitter as this consciousness assumed a definite shape.

There was only one course, if he had but the courage to follow it, and that was to go to John,

this very night. To place himself utterly in his hands. To give him the terrible power to separate him from Janet. . . .

Denis fought against this counsel of perfection. He could not be such a fool as to place himself deliberately in the hands of another man, to make or mar his own destiny. He would run no risk of losing Janet. After their marriage he would perhaps tell her . . . And then he thought of the quality of her love, its fragrance, its candor, its touch of adoration and hero-worship—things he had never before savored. She loved not the man he was, but the man she earnestly believed him to be. But if she knew the whole truth, her love would never again hold just that same delicate quality. It would be changed, because he himself would be changed in her eyes. There would be pity and sorrow in it, but never that hero-worship, that blind confidence, which had flattered and touched him. She could never look up to him again when once she knew of his tragic failure, his base ingratitude, his sin against the old man who had shown him nothing but a father's kindness. But for Lord Farewether's magnanimity he would have suffered as heavy a punishment as the law can inflict for such a crime as his. No—Janet could never forgive that past dishonor. She would turn from him in horror. Her disillusionment would be complete. The very slightness of her own personal experience of life would militate against him. She had so little knowledge of temptation. She would have pity and sorrow for him, but not forgiveness. And he wondered if a change would come over her face as she listened, the swift change from love to hatred that he had seen on Pio Ascarelli's face after he had learned the truth. . . .

A sob shook him. The struggle was becoming a little weaker. He was unable to resist the hard

counsels he had received. Janet as a Catholic would not ask less of him; she would ask more. He could not marry her with this terrible thing hidden between them. She as his future wife, had a right to know.

He rose at last, genuflecting as he passed before the Tabernacle, and making a profound inclination of his head. As he went out, he dipped his finger into the stoup of holy water and crossed himself. These little actions seemed to him the symbol of his determination to obey those counsels of perfection that had come to him that night in the little church. It had been a long struggle—a fierce combat—and now that it was over he was both spiritually and physically exhausted. His body felt weak and very light, he seemed hardly to feel the pavement beneath his feet. Even the wish to struggle had left him now, and he realized that he was cruelly spent.

He walked up the hill in the windy darkness, heedless of the busy traffic, of the people who jostled against him as he passed. He was going to see John now—this very night. He would not wait for the calmer, more prudent counsels of the morning. He must obey the fierce and impetuous impulse which was driving him forward, constraining him to seek out John Ponsford and throw himself upon his mercy.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

**F**ATHER JOHN was alone in his sitting-room. It was a small square room, furnished plainly and shabbily like the poorer kind of London lodgings. Its one window looked out upon a tiny blackened oblong strip of earth, adorned with a couple of

laurel bushes, that was dignified by the name of garden. A solitary plane-tree—hardiest of all London trees—lifted black boughs to the night sky. The curtains were pulled back, the blind drawn up, the window was slightly opened; the darkness of the night, as well as its soft airs, seemed to flow into the room.

John had arranged his books neatly on some shelves that hung on the wall. They were all without exception theological and spiritual books. Some of them were in Latin. On the table beside him lay an unopened evening paper, and a copy of a Catholic journal.

He was sitting at the table writing. The light of a small lamp fell on the sheet of paper. He was bending over it, and the lamplight brought out all the strong beautiful lines of his face. It was not a hard face, yet it gave one the impression of a man who could be very hard with himself, and perhaps correspondingly lenient with others. The firm well-cut lips were closed. It was a priestly face with still some hint of lingering boyishness in it.

There was a light knock at the door, and Denis Lorimer came into the room. It was with a kind of swift subconscious perception that John realized immediately there was something definite, purposeful, and significant in this unexpected visit from the man who had of late so persistently avoided him.

Had Denis come to tell him that he wished to break off his engagement to Janet? After his own conversation with Sara that day it would scarcely have astonished him. He believed, in common with the rest of the family, that Denis's sole motive for wishing to marry Janet was his desire to possess himself of her money. John had never believed that Denis had any real love for Janet. It had always seemed to him improbable that a man still suffering—as he himself acknowledged—from the

effects of a hopeless and disastrous love-affair should be able to experience any affection for another woman. He had believed that Denis's love for the beautiful Italian girl had been a genuine passion, and he had known, too, with what rage of humiliation he had seen all his relations with the Ascarelli family arbitrarily severed. He had been wounded most sorely both in mind and body, and was it possible that scarcely six months later he had been able to fall in love with another woman—a woman older than himself, delicate, prematurely-aged, and perhaps even unattractive? For John, although he tenderly loved his sister, knew that she was utterly deficient in those gifts of charm and radiant beauty that had characterized Donna Camilla Ascarelli, who was known as one of the most beautiful girls in Rome. Janet must have presented an almost painful contrast to Donna Camilla. . . .

“I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you, Father. But I've come to see you on very special business.”

Father? It was very seldom that Denis addressed his friend by the appellation. It meant perhaps that it was as a priest he was now seeking him. John looked at Denis and became aware of the subtle change that had come over him. Leaning back and folding his arms he waited for him to speak. . . .

He thought that Denis had the look of a man who had been engaged in a severe and prolonged physical conflict, during which he had been beaten to his knees, and known the anguish that such humiliation may mean to the proud and rebellious spirit. Fought on the spiritual plane, such a conflict may symbolize that conquest of self from which the soul emerges regenerated, purified, as if by a fierce and purging fire.

“When I was ill at Wanswater,” said Denis at last,

and looking wistfully into John's face, "I made a confession to you."

John nodded his head.

"I told you then what I had never told any one. I had taken the risk of being killed in the War without confessing that particular sin. But you thought I was dying that night. . . ."

"Yes."

"And I felt like dying. I didn't think I should get well. There was no other priest—I had to make my confession to you."

"Yes," said John, again.

That scene, so dramatic in its intensity, seemed to be present with him now.

"It didn't occur to you that I was wandering in my mind?"

"I'm quite sure you were not."

"You've been wonderful, Father."

There was a delicate stiffening of John's features. Praise was always distasteful to him, and praise from Denis, who knew that his silence had been obligatory, almost repelled him.

"I've come to see that it wasn't right to leave you in such a position. Janet ought to know. It isn't fair to you that you shouldn't be able to speak—to tell her . . . That's why I've come to tell you the whole story quite openly . . . to put myself in your hands. . . ."

John stared at him.

"Do you wish to break off your engagement to Janet?" he asked.

It flashed into his mind that Denis had chosen this drastic means of freeing himself from a situation he was beginning to find intolerable. Perhaps Denis became sensitively aware of this, for he said quickly:

"No—I love her very much, as I think you know.

I'd rather she knew nothing . . . but it's for you to choose. . . ."

He sat down near the table and leaned his chin on his hands. By the light of the lamp, John perceived that his face wore a look of livid, almost ghostly pallor.

"I love her very much," he said. "I know what you've all been thinking—that it was her money. But it wasn't that . . . I love her. And I'm not worthy of her. . . ."

John did not speak.

"If she hadn't become a Catholic," he went on, in that curiously mechanical almost "dead" voice, "I might never have seen things so clearly. I thought of her—as she is now . . . perfected . . . and of all that she would naturally expect me to be. I saw all I had to do before I could even begin to live a good Catholic life again. That's what made me come to you to-night. . . . I've fought it all out in church since I left her. It wasn't easy. . . ." He looked pitifully at John, but there was no weak whining for mercy, nothing theatrical or jarring that made his sincerity doubtful. . . .

"I'd better begin at the beginning," he continued, after a little pause in which John remained silent. "I was agent, as you know, to Lord Farewether for a year or two before the war. He took me in spite of my inexperience, because he had known my mother. He had complete confidence in me, and large sums of money passed through my hands. I began with borrowing a few pounds here and there, meaning of course to pay it back. . . . I expected money from an uncle. I falsified the accounts, and I'd taken some thousands, when my uncle died and didn't leave me a penny. You know what Farewether was—the most devout Catholic in England. The light wasn't extinguished in their

chapel all through the persecutions during the Reformation and under Elizabeth. He was more proud of that than of his old name—his place in the world. Mass had been said there regularly since it was built in the twelfth century. I'd counted on him, you see—if he ever did find out. And I didn't count in vain. He accidentally discovered I hadn't paid a certain sum into the Bank—it wasn't often he looked into things. The War had just broken out and he hushed it up—he let me go. I shall never forget it. He'd known my mother before her marriage—he knew she wasn't happy with my father, and before her death she had begged him to help me if he could. 'You must go away, Denis,' he said; 'I'm not going to prosecute you, for your mother's sake—I shouldn't like her son to be sent to penal servitude. You must promise me to enlist—to serve your country well in her hour of need. No—don't thank me, but try to keep straight in future.' I think he was more upset than I was. He died a few months later, and I believe he destroyed all evidence of my guilt. Angus Ferringham knows something—but not the whole truth. . . . ”

John sat silent, weighing each word carefully. He had prayed passionately for Denis, prayed that he might not marry Janet with this dreadful secret between them. The woman who was to be his wife had a right to know what manner of man she was marrying. And now he saw that his prayers had been in a sense miraculously answered. This penitent soul had come to him, torn with a passionate sense of guilt, and had placed its very destiny in his hands with scarcely a plea for mercy.

For a moment the sense of responsibility almost unnerved him. He felt that it was perhaps in his power now to separate Denis and Janet. But then what would be the future of this man, thus abandoned and flung once more into the whirlpool of

life, without any one to help him? John realized, dismayed, that he was thinking less of Janet than of Denis. Had not Janet herself told him that day that she could bear the loss of Denis more easily now—in that first fervor of conversion that brings with it such a thirst for sacrifice, such an eager desire of submission to the Will of God?

Yes, Denis would suffer in that separation more than Janet. He might even sense again with fresh revolt and mutiny, the humiliation and defeat as of one betrayed.

There was nothing in his reckless revelations to stand in the way of a marriage that should be lawful in the eyes of the Church. Sins, so humbly confessed, so bitterly repented, could be absolved in the Sacrament of Penance, surely the most merciful and consoling of Divine gifts and appointments. The Sacrament that is in itself a channel of the most overwhelming grace . . . poured out in full and generous and unstinted measure. . . .

It was substantially the same story that Denis had told him at Wanswater, though on that occasion he had dwelt more upon his own sin than upon the fine magnanimity of Lord Farewether. John could picture that little dramatic scene of parting, for he had known Lord Farewether with some intimacy at the time of his own conversion and abjuration. This man had long been regarded as an elderly and eccentric recluse, almost fanatical in his devotion to the Catholic Church. He had held more than one Papal honor, and was said to have lived frugally, in order that he might give away three fourths of his income in secret alms. Perhaps he had by now reaped the reward of his generous pardon of that wrong inflicted by the very hand he had tried to succor.

“I was demobilized after the Armistice and received a gratuity. I went to Monte Carlo with

another man—we had the most unprecedented luck.” Denis went on with his recital as if determined not to spare himself in any way. “I lived in Rome for months on the money I had won. People thought me a rich man—Pio Ascarelli, whom I’d known on the Julian front, invited me to his house. You know the rest—but I never told you that I showed them a photograph of Sledwick and allowed them to believe it was my own place and that I’d let it. Then Angus Ferringham—Farewether’s nephew—came and he gave the show away. I never knew him at Sledwick—but I think he must have found out something. My going away so suddenly would have looked suspicious at any other time, but every one was busy chucking their jobs in those first days of August. Well, Pio Ascarelli was furious when he found out I was poor and that Sledwick wasn’t mine. And then I had stayed out late with his sister and I’d asked her to marry me. He made me fight a duel with him, though I heard Angus urging him to horsewhip me instead.” Denis glanced significantly, at his left arm. “He had his revenge, hadn’t he? I shall never use my arm again. I’ve longed to tell Janet how it was done—she thinks perhaps it was wounded in some heroic feat. Oh, I have learned to hate the name of Ascarelli! . . . To think of all those weeks in the hospital, and Camilla never once troubled to ask after me—or to find out if I were dead or alive.” He broke off abruptly. Not a year divided him from that phase of peculiar suffering, and it still had power to shame him by the very remembrance of its defeat and humiliation. He turned, and his eyes sought John’s. “What are you going to tell me to do, Father?”

John put out his hand and touched Denis lightly. “I am going to thank you first of all,” he said, “for your courage in coming. I know it wasn’t easy. You’ve done the right thing, Denis, but I . . . I

can't take advantage of your generosity. I can only advise you . . . ."

"Yes?" said Denis almost eagerly.

"My advice is for you to go and see Janet, and tell her everything quite frankly. She has a right to know. It would be terrible for her if she found out anything after she was married to you."

"Janet will never forgive me," Denis said, in a tone devoid of hope; "perhaps there may have been some chance before, but now she's a Catholic, she can't possibly. . . ."

"Don't you think the very fact of her being a Catholic will make her more ready to forgive you?" said John gently.

Denis stared at him.

"More ready?" he repeated.

"I mean—she understands now the nature of sacramental absolution."

There was a long silence. Denis dared not hope, and yet those words of John's had taken that dead weight of despair from his heart.

"And then—she loves you," said John.

"And you—you'll do nothing to prevent our marriage?" said Denis.

"Nothing at all," replied John.

"But you must hate to see your sister . . . marrying a man like myself. I might have been in prison at this moment. They'd have given me seven years." His voice broke with a sound that was like a sob.

John touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"You're tired, my dear Denis. When did you last have anything to eat?"

"I . . . I forget . . . breakfast I think."

John rang the bell and his landlady appeared.

"Supper, please," he said, "and for two."

It was a frugal meal, but Denis ate ravenously. John gave him some wine. He did not encourage

him to talk, for he had a dreadful fear that even now he might break down. That spiritual wrestling had exhausted his body just as a protracted physical struggle might have done.

When the meal was over John said:

"I'm going to take you back to your place in a taxi. And then you must go to bed." His voice was slightly authoritative, but Denis was only too thankful to obey. He was very tired, so tired that he could have cried like a child. But he had an idea that would have upset John very much indeed.

They drove in silence up Campden Hill to Notting Hill Gate, and then down the long and busy thoroughfare of Holland Park Avenue. A slight rain had fallen, giving freshness to the air. The somber brown and purple of the London night was pricked at regular intervals by the great moonlight-colored globes of electric light, raised high on their immense posts that were like twin rows of watchful and luminous sentinels.

The taxi drew up before Denis's door.

"I hope you're pretty comfortable here," said John, a little anxiously. He had always considered it so wise of Denis not to stay in Green Street with the Stephen Ponsfords.

"Oh, well, it's not much of a room, but it's as good as one can expect for the money." Denis's voice was more normal. The swift drive had braced his nerves. "Shall I tell her to-morrow?" he asked, just as John was preparing to leave him.

"Well, I shouldn't delay if I were you. But see how you feel in the morning."

"Perhaps you could go around early and see her, and . . . prepare her a little," suggested Denis hesitatingly.

"Very well—I'll say that you're coming and that you've something important to tell her."

"Yes, yes, that would be best."

John's hand closed over Denis's in a warm and reassuring grasp. Then he entered the taxi once more and was borne swiftly out of sight. Denis stood for a moment longer on the door-step, then he turned and went into the house.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

FATHER JOHN appeared early in Green Street on the following morning. He found Stephen and his wife and daughter at breakfast. There were entreaties from them all to join them, and Pamela put a plate in front of him.

"Try some of this fish—it isn't half bad," she said. "I would have left more if I'd known you were coming."

But John would only accept a cup of coffee.

"Your coffee's delicious," he told Sara, tasting it.

"Well, it ought to be," smiled Sara.

"That means there's a row when it isn't," explained Pamela, with a shake of her handsome black head.

"I want to see Janet. . . . What time does she come down?"

"She won't get up before half past ten. If you're in a hurry you'd better go up and see her."

"I think I'll go up then," said John, finishing his coffee.

He put down the emptied cup. Sara's hand was on the coffee-pot.

"Another cup?"

"No, thanks."

"Any developments?" inquired Sara. She was intrigued by his early visit. "No hitch, I hope?"

"Hitch?" said Stephen looking up. "Isn't the marriage going to take place after all?"

"Of course it is," struck in Pamela; "Aunt Janet's crazy about him. And he—I think he's rather crazy about her. I hope I shan't ever fall in love with dear old Skipton!" she added meditatively.

Stephen looked up sharply from the *Times*. He found the conversation slightly disturbing, and it was difficult to give his whole attention to the newspaper. Yet things were beginning to look up in the City. If only there weren't this perpetual menace of a coal-strike. . . .

Pamela's remark had, however, effectually brought him back to earth from these lofty financial soarings.

"Why Skipton?" he inquired.

"Because I shall probably marry him in about two years' time," replied Pamela coolly.

"Marry him indeed! You shall do nothing of the kind! A baby like you to be talking about marriage. . . . Why, you're hardly out of the nursery! Never heard such nonsense in my life. I shall send you to school if I hear any more of it."

Stephen's voice was stern. But his severity did not produce any other effect upon Pamela than to evoke a sudden peal of silvery laughter.

"Dear old thing—you get more early-Victorian every day. And what on earth's the matter with Skipton, Daddy? You've often said yourself what a charming boy he is. I don't like his mother much, but I shan't have to live with her. He'll have lots of money, and then we're such tremendous pals."

"Nothing's wrong with Skipton except that you're far too young to think of these things, and he's no right to put such ideas into your head. Don't let me hear any more nonsense of the kind."

"He didn't put any ideas into my head," said Pamela, munching her toast and marmalade with

a perfectly undisturbed air. "I'd already wondered several times if he was going to propose to me. . . ."

"Pamela will probably change her mind twenty times before she's eighteen, and so will Skipton," said Sara calmly. She fully intended to encourage the Skipton alliance. It was in every way suitable.

Finding the conversation had assumed such an intimate family character John rose from his seat and said, "I think I'd better be going up."

He climbed the three flights of stairs that led up to Janet's room. She called "Come in," in response to his knock, and he found her lying on the sofa with the breakfast-table drawn up close to her.

"Isn't Sara making me indolent and luxurious?" she said.

"You want lots of rest—you've had a pretty strenuous time lately," said John, bending down and kissing her. In that blue wrapper of hers with her chestnut-colored hair all loose about her face, he thought she looked wonderfully pretty. "One thing, it doesn't seem to have hurt you much."

"No—I haven't fainted for ages. Denis thinks I shall be better, now I'm away from Wanswater, and that I shan't faint so often—perhaps not even at all—in the future. But I'm not happy about Mamma, John. You must try to make peace—I feel sometimes as if I'd behaved badly. . . ."

"I don't think you need feel that," said John kindly.

"I wish she would come to the wedding."

"So do I. But it's too long a journey for her in this winter weather."

"You've come round very early, Johnny. Was it specially to see me?"

"Yes," he answered gravely. "I had a long talk

with Denis last night. He told me to say he'd be round this morning."

"A long talk?" There was a look of fear, of anxiety in her face. "Was it about me?"

"About you—and himself. . . . He is worried about something, Jane dear. . . ."

"Does he want me to break off our engagement?" she asked sharply, remembering their conversation of yesterday. "Is it—that he *can't* marry me?" she asked pitifully.

"No, no; it isn't that. You ought not to break off an engagement without a strong, a vital reason. . . ."

"And is there such a reason?"

Still that sharp note of fear in her voice.

"Denis is afraid you may think there is. That's why he's coming to see you this morning. Jane—he has something very particular to say to you . . . But I want you to remember . . ."

He paused, looking wistfully at her.

"Yes—yes, John?" with a touch of impatience.

"That it will have cost him a great deal to come—that his fear of losing you is at least as great as your own fear that something may come between you. So I ask you not to do anything rash—but to pray . . . to ask advice . . . to make quite sure that you're acting wisely . . ."

She said suddenly: "I don't understand."

"No, I'm leaving Denis to tell you the principal part. But when he has told you and you know everything, you'll have to make a decision. And you may want help then."

She looked at him sadly.

"Do you want me to break off my engagement, Johnny? Denis thinks you do."

"Perhaps he doesn't think so now, after our talk last night. I daren't advise you, but it seems

to me that you can help each other. There's so much in Denis that's lovable."

He was pleading Denis's cause, almost against his will. Janet gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Yes, yes," she assented eagerly.

"Remember that, won't you? And that I'm not against it, although I'm not without fear and anxiety and many misgivings . . . Good-bye, my dearest Jane."

He stooped down to kiss her, and she clung to him a little. To his surprise he found that there were tears upon her face.

"You mustn't cry—you must be strong and brave, Janet. You've turned your back on the old quiet sheltered life, and the world isn't always smooth and easy."

"I know . . . I know . . . perhaps I shall feel better when Denis has been—when I know just what it is. I'm in suspense . . . Johnny, what can it be? Is it going to . . . hurt me?"

"Yes, it will hurt you," he said. "You'll want courage. But it need not necessarily part you from Denis, that's for you to decide."

"I shall never part from him of my own will. He's all my world." She spoke with a certain passion. John thought, not without irony, of Pamela's words that morning. "Skipton will have lots of money, and besides we're such tremendous pals!" But perhaps it was only exteriorly, in their speech, that the new generation differed so profoundly from the one which had immediately preceded it. Perhaps the difference lay also not so much in their feelings as in their manner of expressing them. But he thought that Pamela with her cheery matter-of-fact acceptance of life as it was with its rough and its smooth, was destined to be the happier of the

two women. If in the future she married Skipton, he would probably always remain a "tremendous pal."

John had hardly left the house when Pamela, observing his departure, came into her aunt's room. She brought with her a couple of illustrated morning papers.

"Well, old thing," she said affectionately, "is there anything up between you and Denis? Has Uncle John been grouching? You look a bit in the dumps."

Pamela sat down near Janet's sofa, shook back her heavy strong bobbed mane, and began to play with her aunt's rings.

"I say, old thing, you aren't going to chuck Denis, are you?"

"Why? . . . Has any one been saying anything?" Janet was painfully aware of how freely Sara discussed everything in her young daughter's presence. What did Pamela know?

"No, but it's all so queer. Like a storm in the atmosphere before it bursts. Uncle John turning up like that at cock-crow, and wanting to see you. And now—you've been crying, haven't you?"

"Only—a little," confessed Janet.

"It's a silly business, crying is, anyhow," pronounced Pamela, "and, besides it makes one look hideous. I'm seldom moved to tears myself, and it generally means I'm in a towering rage. Will you take my advice, Aunt Janet? I know I'm only a kid, but I've learned a lot about—things—one way and another. You just stick to Denis. He's awfully keen about you, any one can see that. But you mustn't expect too much of him. People always topple off their pedestals if they're uncomfortably high. He's been through pretty bad times—I'm certain of that. But if you chuck him, he'll go through worse."

"But I'm not going to 'chuck him,' as you call it, Pamela," said Janet.

"Yes, but if you think him a saint and then cry because you find he isn't, that'll make him feel bad too. He's just an ordinary sort of man," continued Pamela, "better looking than most, and he's very intelligent, and then he's got what the housemaids call 'a way with him.' But if you expect too much of him, you'll be disappointed, and a man jolly soon gets tired of a woman who shows him that she's disappointed in him. You're not offended are you, old thing?"

"No, I'm not offended," said Janet, smiling a little at the youthful philosophy of her niece. "But it's very difficult not to put people on pedestals when . . . when you care for them."

"Yes, that's the worst of falling in love," said Pamela; "I never mean to be such a fool as to do that, of course. We *don't* these days, you know. But I've just been telling Dad that I shall probably marry Skipton in two years' time. He didn't like the idea at all, and threatened to send me to school. I don't quite see what good that would do, do you? But I shall marry him, you'll see. He proposed to me again in Paris—I can't help thinking the old lady got wind of it and that's why she wanted me to go."

Pamela laughed merrily.

"And I don't mean to cry, even if it doesn't all pan out just as I want it to. If I can't have a good time one way, I shall get it in another. Now I must leave you to dress. Denis is coming round early, I gathered. Mind you put on that new blue dress—you look perfectly sweet in it."

She kissed her aunt with boisterous affection and then ran out of the room.

Janet rose and began to dress. Pamela's words had cheered her, had brightened the aspect of things

in general, and even given her a certain courage to face this mysterious interview with Denis.

She wondered what he had to tell her. Something grave, or John would not have looked at once so solemn and so sorrowful . . .

But Denis did love her—every one was convinced of that now. Even John . . . even Pamela. The thought comforted her.

She brushed out her thick reddish-auburn hair. Between those heavy folds of it her face appeared small and narrow and white. But she looked younger, and, in spite of all things, happier than she had done on that night when she had gazed at herself in the mirror at Wanswater and wept over her lost youth. That night had formed a turning point in her life. She had known then without doubt that she loved Denis, although she scarcely hoped that he loved her or could ever love her. She had known him so little then, and yet she had loved him. But she loved him much more now, he was more her own.

John had said the decision would rest in her hands. But whatever Denis had to tell her, however horrible was this thing he felt compelled to reveal, it could make no difference to her. She would never say the word that was to part them. Even John didn't seem to want her to do that. . . .

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

**J**ANET was alone in the drawing-room an hour later, when Denis was announced. Sara and Pamela had gone out, as if determined that the interview—which they somehow guessed would be a

critical if not a fateful one—should suffer no interruption.

While she was waiting for him in an agony of suspense that seemed to deepen and increase every moment, Janet kept repeating to herself: "Whatever it is, I must forgive him . . . I must forgive him. I mustn't show him that I'm hurt."

She had so little experience of the world, that imagination failed to provide her with any possible hypothesis; she was unable to picture any delinquency or incident in his past life that should have the tremendous power to separate her from Denis. But she felt too that it must be something of great gravity—terrible enough to make her decision by no means an easy one.

When she thought of Denis, conjuring up a mental picture of him with his dear face, his shining dark eyes, the curve of his mouth when he smiled, she felt that whatever he had to tell her would only make her love him the more.

He came quietly into the room.

"Has John been here?" was his first greeting.

"Yes. He came early."

"He told you that I was coming?"

All this time Denis had been standing there, a few paces from her, not attempting to draw any nearer or to take her hand or kiss her. His face was as hard as if it had been hewn out of stone.

"He said you were coming—that you had a communication to make. . . ."

A strange cold wave of fear swept her from head to foot. She shivered, and clasped her hands tightly together.

"You've no idea, I suppose, what it is?" he said, moving a step nearer.

"No. But Denis—I'm frightened. . . . Must you tell me? I think I'd rather not know. . . ."

At those words visible relief was expressed in

his face. She could have said nothing that could have tempted him more powerfully. For now that he was face to face with her, sensing once more that intense confidence which had always formed so large a factor in her love for him, he felt appalled at the task before him.

It would be like the deliberate ruin of something beautiful and hitherto untouched by despoiling hand. He could not do it. Not only because he loved her and feared to lose her, but because of the hurt to herself. She would be flung alone upon the waves of life, without support or anchor.

He thrust the temptation from him; it had come to him in seductive guise, diminishing something of his high resolve.

"If you are to marry me you have a right to know," he said, and as he spoke he watched her face narrowly.

She said pitifully:

"I don't want to know anything that could come between us—separate us. . . ."

"I promised John that I'd tell you. I think you must listen to me, Janet. And afterwards if you wish—I will go away. I shan't make a scene to worry and disturb you. . . ."

The pale hands lying on her lap were clasped so tightly now that the outlines of the knuckles showed sharply through the skin.

She thought: "I shall never perhaps see him again as I'm seeing him now. Perhaps he'll never seem so perfect—so dear."

. . . She listened to that strange, fearful recital. It was like seeing an idol deliberately and shamefully defaced by its own hands.

Denis did not attempt to approach her while he was telling her the story of his downfall at Sledwick. That level grave voice of his concealed and palliated nothing of the truth. The horror of it

was revealed complete, unsoftened by excuse. He would not play on her feeling for him; he would not sue for pity or mercy; he made no personal appeal to her love. But he watched her sensitive face, growing a little harder, a little more set and pale. Once he even wondered whether she would have the physical strength to endure the ordeal, or whether it would bring back a return of her malady, after these weeks of immunity, and strike her senseless to the floor. He had an idea that she would welcome such unconsciousness, as the sufferer from physical agony welcomes a narcotic. . . .

It was simply horrible—this telling Janet of his downfall and crime. Showing her his own hideous dishonor, the infamy too of his base ingratitude to the man who had loved him. And he saw with renewed anguish the slowly-growing horror in her eyes.

“You see, I thought you had better know you were going to marry a thief. I tried to keep you in ignorance—but it didn’t seem fair to John.”

She spoke for the first time.

“What had John got to do with it?”

“John knew. . . .”

“Knew? And never said a word?”

“He couldn’t speak. His hands were tied. I made a confession to him that night they thought I was dying at Wanswater. I told him the whole story in confession. He could not repeat it. And because he knew, he felt it would be dishonorable of him to take any steps to separate us . . . on other grounds.”

“It was splendid of John . . .” she said.

“He is a priest. He would tell you that he had no choice.”

His words rang in her head like the blows of a hammer falling upon something hard and resonant: “I thought you had better know you were going to

*marry a thief. . . .*" Cruel words, shattering the very fabric of her life.

"I tried to keep you in ignorance, but it was the thought of your being a Catholic—of all you would expect of me—I wanted you to see me as I am . . . not as a man you can love or trust any more."

She was silent. And her silence kept him coldly from her; he would not have dared to approach her now. They were strangers to each other. In that first dreadful moment of revelation it was impossible to readjust values.

He felt like a criminal, at the mercy of this hard, unloving, disillusioned woman who had once loved him.

At last she spoke.

"You shouldn't have told me . . . I didn't want to know. It was very cruel. If I have been living in a fool's paradise, it was still a paradise." There was a bitterness in her voice that seemed to proceed from her very heart.

"John agreed with me that you ought to know. He said, too, that now you were a Catholic, you would understand about a sin being washed out by sacramental absolution. A sin confessed, repented of, and atoned for. . . . I'm very sorry, Janet. I feared you would never wish to see me again . . . I will go away. . . ."

A mist came before his eyes, that were still fixed upon her. She sat there, very pale, very passive, as if some mighty cataclysm had shaken her life to its foundations and robbed her of all things dear and beloved, leaving her alone amid the ruins of desolation.

"I am sorry," he said again. "But it was my fault—I ought never to have asked a good woman like yourself to marry me." His voice was quite controlled.

She was saying to herself: "He must go—I can't possibly marry him." It was to her as if he had fallen from some great height into the very dust. I love him, but I'm loving a thief. A common thief who stole money—the money of a friend. . . ." She wondered how he could have ever seemed to her so heroic, so noble, so splendid. She had lived alone, aloof from the world, so long that she had become blind and undiscerning. Yet she had loved him . . . she had felt sometimes that she could have gladly gone through fire and water for him. Had she not said to John only this morning: "*He is all my world*"? . . .

A sudden trick of memory reconstructed before her eyes the scene down by the lake-side, when she had come upon Denis bending over the prone body of little Jimmy Nicholls, trying to bring back the life into it by means of artificial respiration. With that one arm of his he had worked away with a kind of passionate zeal, frustrated continually by his own helplessness. . . . He wasn't all bad. He was capable of courageous action . . . and of unutterable meanness. It was rather heroic, his coming here like this to-day with that story on his lips, knowing what the consequences must surely be both to himself and to her.

Her mind was imbued with an unusual and deadly activity. She pictured herself going home to Wanswater—perhaps to-morrow, for she felt that she couldn't bear to stay in London and listen to the relieved commiserations that would surely be her portion—she saw herself entering the old house like a prodigal child who had indeed eaten of the husks. Telling her mother that she had been right to refuse her consent to such a marriage—so dreadfully, cruelly right. Asking her pardon for that brief rebellion of hers . . . begging to be taken back. To be allowed to sit in the library, to crochet the

crossovers of gray wool for the old women in the village, thankful to have at least this refuge wherein to hide the shame of all that had happened to her. It would be a changed life now, because she was a Catholic, and that would make the little every-day duties easier because they would all be offered to Almighty God and done as perfectly as possible for His Sake Who consecrated them all. She would pray too that in time she might forget these past feverish and restless weeks of intense passionate happiness . . . Pray too that she might forget Denis, who loved her and whom she had loved . . . once . . .

She saw herself standing by the window in her bedroom, looking out over the delicately-colored mountains, that were almost like jewels in their wonderful sapphire and amethyst and topaz-like hues; looking, too, at the broad pale surface of the lake lying under a blue and silver sky; at the emerald banks dipping to the water, and the deep dim woods spreading above them. Then the great black fangs of the Eastern Pikes, outlined against the sky, softened and blurred with split rags of cloud. . . .

She saw herself a lonely woman, walking in the garden, tending her plants, always alone because she had ceased to love . . . Growing older in the great silences of Wanswater, amid its beautiful mountains and lake and skies.

He was still standing there. He lingered—he had said he would go away, but he had not gone. Could he be waiting for her to utter the words of dismissal? He had promised to make no scene—to go quietly . . . why did he torture her then by remaining? . . .

And then she heard inconsequently the echo of Pamela's words, childish and yet perhaps not wholly untrue:

*"He's been through pretty bad times—I'm cer-*

tain of that. But if you chuck him he'll go through much worse. . . ."

And she had almost laughed in Pamela's face at the bare idea of her ever wanting to "chuck" Denis.

And what had John meant by saying that now she was a Catholic she would understand the power of sacramental absolution? The sin washed away as if it had never been, if the contrition, the repentance, had been sincere—if it had been brought in all humility to that great tribunal of Penance and there confessed? The Church was very merciful . . . Was God more merciful than man to those who, despite their sins, still loved and feared and obeyed Him? . . .

"Ask advice . . . pray—" that had been John's counsel. He had not wanted her to act rashly, precipitately on that first impulse of horror, revulsion, disillusionment. And John was a priest, and her brother. He had always loved her tenderly, and tried as best he could to promote her happiness. He might have said to her this morning: "Janet, you will have to decide and I can only tell you it's your duty to yourself—to us all—to send this man away. . . ." But he had not given her that counsel. What had he meant? That she too should forgive? . . .

Denis saw only the rigid set look of her mouth. The lips firmly closed as if they had no words to say to him. There was no sign of pity, of pardon, in her eyes, that were of a bright clear and hard blue, reminding him of the glint of steel. . . .

He moved a step nearer.

"Good-bye, my dear, dear Janet," he said. "I am going . . . I quite understand. I won't ask you to shake hands with me. . . ."

*My dear, dear Janet* . . . No human voice had ever uttered such words as those to her until the coming of Denis into her life.

She looked at him. His eyes were shining like

some strange black jewels—shining as if with unshed tears. He was suffering . . . She looked at his stiff left arm, so helpless, such a handicap for a man who was poor and had his way to make in the world. He was alone and needed her . . . Even more, perhaps, than she needed him . . .

“Denis,” she said faintly, almost as if the word escaped from her against her will.

A gleam of hope irradiated his somber face. She put out her hand and he came nearer and took it in his firm grasp.

“Don’t go away, Denis. . . .” she said.

THE END

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Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process  
Neutralizing Agent: Magnesium Oxide  
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