

ELIZABETH
IN RETREAT

MARGARET WESTRUP

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BY MARY W. B. ...
LONDON: ...

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ELIZABETH'S CHILDREN
(SIXTH EDITION)

HELEN ALLISTON

THE YOUNG O'BRIENS

PHYLLIS IN MIDDLEWYCH

ELIZABETH
IN RETREAT

BY MARGARET WESTRUP
(MRS. W. SYDNEY STACEY)



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TO
MY HUSBAND

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Elizabeth in Retreat

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CHAPTER I

IT was so like Elizabeth! From the wild scrawl at the beginning—"Oh, Hugh, you must help me"—down to the wilder hieroglyphics at the end, which, painstakingly deciphered, read—"Your ever grateful Elizabeth"—it was so like her! So like Elizabeth! And Hugh Latimer, striving to frown, smiled. People always tried to frown over Elizabeth, and always ended by smiling.

Latimer looked into Muriel's lovely face, and shamefully accused her: "You're laughing, Muriel! It's not a laughing matter. How long does she give me?—a fortnight to find her a furnished house——"

"Eighteen days," Muriel put in.

"What is eighteen days? A mean thing that is neither a fortnight, nor three weeks—a thing without a definite label."

"Oh," said Muriel, "I shall love to see those boys again!"

"You interrupted me, Muriel——"

"Yes, and I'm doing it again! Now, what does she want? How many rooms did you say?"

"Rooms? You don't think Elizabeth cares about such unimportant things as rooms? She must have heaps of deep window-seats and cushions, and odd corners, and beams across the ceilings, and roses growing all over the house, and she wants me to try to get

her some good spider destroyer or 'keep-them-away-thing.'"

"They're none any good," Muriel said reflectively. "What sort of sized place do you *think* she wants?"

There was a little silence, then Hugh said:

"You've never seen your face amongst pink anemones. You never will."

The face, earnestly peering at him between the bowls of anemones, grew as pink as they.

"You're frivolling, Hugh," she said. "Go on with Elizabeth's business."

"Oh, hang Elizabeth's business! I want to look at you. You've no conception of what you are, Muriel, in a blue frock on a sunny morning in January, at a man's breakfast table! You—you're adorable!"

"I shall talk to Sol," she said, bending her beautiful head over the dog.

"Sol," she said, "did you always know what a goose you had for your master? Or is it, alas! only matrimony that has brought his latent geese-like proclivities to the surface? Poor Elizabeth! So trusting! So unwitting of the real nature of the man to whom she has entrusted the important business of finding a temporary home for her and her husband and children—— Hugh," she broke off, "why don't you interrupt me?"

He laughed at her tenderly.

"I like to see you so ridiculous," he said; "it just gives me the touch of superiority I need to keep me from becoming Uriah Heepishly 'umble!"

"You!" she said.

"Muriel, let's read her letter together; it tires my voice to read it all out loud. Come along, sweet."

Laughing, she rose, and went to him. "That's better," he said contentedly. "Now!"

"I can't read her writing. Read it to me, Hugh."

"Well; I've read a good deal. Let me see. She is tired of gaiety, and feels a sudden longing for the deep seclusion and peace of an English country village. Where is it? Oh, here we are—'a little nestling village, Hugh, with warm red roofs—a sun-trap, I want—warmth and utter quiet and fragrance; in fact, my wants are real bookey wants, and *will* explain themselves in a family-magazine sort of language. I want to be near you. Don't flatter yourself too much—it's for the sake of peace, as those boys are always asking for their "cher Monsieur." I've told them we are going to live near you, and they are mad with delight. Renaud observed: "I wish to see how dis marriage dat we arrange have gone on," so you will have a chiel among you taking notes.'

"Then she goes on about the need for strict economy. It appears they have lost a lot of money. Do listen! 'We've lost a lot of money some way. I don't know how, but it's gone, and I'm *sure* I haven't spent *quarter*, so it must have been lost or stolen or something. And I'm getting scared at the thought of the boys' education. Alphonse and I hold *frightfully* strong opinions on the *wickedness* of not spending heaps of money on one's children's education, so we've got to economise rather drastically. I've been making out economical menus. Alphonse says I'm wonderful. We're going to have soup one evening and fish the next, and things like that; and there must be shooting and fishing, because it saves such a great deal. I'm going to be most *awfully* economical, but always hospitable. If my friends find only a mutton-bone-and-crust-of-bread sort of thing, we will share it with smiles, you know. I'd rather the house wasn't furnished *too* prolifically, mon ami, because I'm

bound to hate it all, and buy fresh things. And if there's no hot water laid on, will you see if it's possible to have it done? Oh, and a wistaria over some wall! I love them. And a glorious garden full of old-fashioned flowers and things——' I don't know what she means by 'things.' "

"Oh, I do," said Muriel.

"What?"

"Oh—why—*things*, you know."

"Oh, I *see*! Of course! Well, Elizabeth won't have her old-fashioned flowers, and her sun-traps in January, I'm afraid! She——"

"Cherry Cross!" burst out Muriel. "Oh, Hugh, Cherry Cross!"

He stared at her.

"Muriel, you're a genius!"

She laughed delightedly.

"The dear little old white-washed place! And the roses all over it—and window-seats—and only two and a half miles from us. Oh, Hugh, you must go this morning! Suppose it is let!"

"I wonder if Elizabeth minds rats," he said.

"Oh, we'll put traps. Have you finished your breakfast, dear?"

"I did mean to eat another piece of toast," he said mournfully. "However——"

"Oh, of *course* you are to have it! Here's the marmalade. Poor darling! there's no hurry really, only it's always being let and sub-let, and things like that. Oh, Hugh! isn't it exactly what Elizabeth wants? And that lovely little orchard with the cherry trees! And that dear old high wall all round it——"

Hugh jumped up.

"Dear, you make me afraid to sit here another

minute ! One letter I must write before I go, and I must see Parker for a minute or two ; then I'll ride over to Underwood, the agent."

" Yes. And Hugh, I shouldn't think it would be a large rent, would you ? The rooms are very small, you know, and there aren't many. Oh, and Hugh, there is very little furniture ! Don't you remember, old Mrs. Haikes sold all her nice things ? "

" Yes, and it'll be so economical for Elizabeth to buy new stuff for a month or two ! "

Muriel laughed.

" Oh, she'll never get tired of Cherry Cross ! "

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH never had the opportunity to prove if she would tire of Cherry Cross, for Cherry Cross was let—had been let for a week—when Latimer approached Underwood on the subject. Underwood, of course, re-assured him. He told him impressively that he need not feel any anxiety as to securing a suitable house for Madame Du Pierre ; they had several desirable residences on their books. Hugh, scouring the country during the following fortnight, opined that the desirable residences would remain on their books. In the end, it was Miss Hoakes who came to his rescue. (Elizabeth flippantly pronounced the name a bad omen, and persisted in looking for some hoax that lady had left behind her.) Miss Hoakes was stout and brisk and determined ; she had, on hearing of Elizabeth's proposed visit, decided suddenly that she would like to go and "do" Rome. In two minutes she had planned it all ; in three, she had, hatted and coated, set out to call on the Latimers, to tell them that Elizabeth was to rent her place, Elm Hill, from January 20th. Miss Hoakes was one of those intensely practical people who never see any point of view but their own ; she was also one of those enviable people who are incapable of perceiving any flaw in anything pertaining to themselves. So that although, had Elm Hill belonged to any one but herself, her practical mind would have been aghast at some of its inconveniences, it was to her now perfect. Briskly, readily,

with unanswerable firmness, she bore down all objections.

Rats? Oh—a few in the stables. Of course there are always rats in stables. Come into the house? Oh no! Well—once or twice it had been thought so—easily got rid of. She hadn't troubled, as she didn't mind them. A really old house? Well, part of Elm Hill was Queen Anne. Of course it had been renovated; but just look at the added comfort and convenience. Damp? Oh, not the slightest—perfectly dry and beautifully sheltered; the stains on the wall-papers were due to defective papering, that was all. Broad window seats——?

At this point Miss Hoakes' eloquence was stopped by sheer disgusted incredulity.

"You really mean that Madame Du Pierre would let the chance of such a house slip for an utterly unimportant reason like that?"

"It happens not to seem unimportant to her, you see," Hugh replied.

Miss Hoakes snorted; she really did snort, just like some one in a novel. In the end they took Elm Hill.

"I wish," Muriel said, "that there had never been any chance of Cherry Cross."

She said it to Mrs. Darlington, and Mrs. Darlington primmed her lips.

"I fancy we may all end by wishing Madame du Pierre were there," she said.

Muriel did not ask her her reason for her fancy, because the mysterious manner of the utterance warned her of the nature of the communication she would receive. But Mrs. Darlington, unable to keep away from a subject so congenial to her, soon reverted to it.

"Their name is Wingfield. He's one of the Kent Wing-

fields ; his uncle is Sir John Wingfield. He disinherited this man a few years ago."

"Hugh knows Sir John ; he's a charming old man, I believe. More tea ?"

"No, thanks. This man's an invalid. There is one child—a boy. My maid comes from Chiverton in Devonshire, where they stayed a good while. She says there were all sorts of stories about. In fact, I fancy there's something really wrong. The man has an awful reputation, and she—well, one hopes it isn't true."

"Probably it isn't," said Muriel. "Do have a cake."

Mrs. Darlington shrugged shoulders that looked meagre beneath a huge hat.

"One hopes not, but I fear—— It's very awkward."

"Why ?" Muriel said.

Mrs. Darlington looked taken aback. "Oh—well—about calling, you know——"

"But no one bothers about Cherry Cross. It's always being let for a month or two months, and it's nearly three miles away, you know."

All of which was so true that Mrs. Darlington was greatly annoyed.

CHAPTER III

THEY had arrived at Elm Hill—Elizabeth, Alphonse her husband, and the three boys.

Hugh, eyeing the boys, thought of that day when they had arrived on a visit to him, and he felt thankful that this time they had brought their parents with them, and were provided with another residence than his roof. But, looking at Muriel, her arms full of soft little André, he felt a stirring of deep affection for them, and he smiled. Immediately, as of old, Renaud's dark little face lit up with an answering smile.

“By Jove! Monsieur, are you not den pleased to see us, n'est-ce pas?”

“Hugh,” broke in Elizabeth's petulant voice, “couldn't we have these window-sills cut *down* some way? They're broad enough to sit on, but so ridiculously high! And the windows—can't they be altered? They're so perfectly *hideous*! I did so want leaded windows and that sort of thing—— What is it, Louise? Oh, Hugh! she says there's no water laid on upstairs at all! It *can't* be true. Why, we need tons and tons of water. What will she do about baths and things? *No bath-room!* Oh——” Elizabeth sank into a chair and became quiet.

“We can no doubt arrange these matters,” Alphonse said courteously; and he looked anxiously from Elizabeth to Hugh.

“Oh, *cette pauvre Maman!*” shrieked André suddenly. “Oh—ooo! See—she cry! She weep!

O—ooh!” He flung himself upon her, rending the air with sympathetic howls.

“De Eau de Cologne!” cried Renaud.

“Louise, de Eau de Cologne! Papa! See—she sad—she ill—— Oh, la pauvre Maman!”

“De Eau de Cologne!” yelled Armand. “Eau de Cologne! De smelling peppere!”

“Bah, foolish one! It is de smelling *salt*—not peppere!”

“Does it not make one sneeze? It is den peppere! *Peppere! Peppere! Pep—pep—peppare!*”

“Salt, I tell you! Little donkey! *Salt! Salt! Sal—sal—salt!*”

Hugh, eyeing the two slim little figures executing an excited war-dance round Elizabeth’s chair, shouting and gesticulating, felt as if he were in a dream. Even André’s sympathetic howls were just as they had been wont to be!

“Dear Elm Hill!” he murmured to Muriel. “It may have no water laid on upstairs; it may have no bathroom; but at least it has a roof to shelter those charming heads!”

Muriel, dashing to Elizabeth’s rescue, cast him a reproachful glance.

“You adored and spoilt them worse than any one!”

Then she seized Renaud’s shoulder, and lifted her voice in indignant protest.

“Renaud, you are making your mother’s head worse! Be quiet.”

With startling rapidity the gesticulations were stilled, the voice dropped to a contrite whisper.

“See, I become as a leetle mouse, Madame!” and Renaud was mute. Armand, as was his wont, followed suit, and a sudden dead silence succeeded the hubbub,

for André had rolled off Elizabeth's lap on to a rug, and into sleep.

They all looked at each other. Elizabeth broke the silence. "I know I'm behaving in a perfectly disgraceful way," she said pathetically, and she looked at Hugh with tragic, weary eyes.

Latimer immediately declared she was behaving perfectly, and Alphonse assured her she was an angel of goodness and sweetness.

"I'm very tired, and so ugly," Elizabeth said. "My temper is always worse when I'm ugly. I was fearfully bad coming over. So was André; and he took a dislike to Louise, and wanted me."

She leant back limply in her chair, and Hugh and Alphonse brought more cushions, while Renaud brought a wrap, and Muriel hurried out of the room to see what was happening about tea.

"Hugh," Elizabeth said, "I'm not sure whether I shan't dislike your wife; she's almost irritatingly lovely. I thought she'd be more the placid, goddess-like sort of beauty that would never clash with my elusive charms."

"You're irresistible together," Hugh said.

"Um," said Elizabeth; "but is that the new husband or the old friend speaking?"

"Both, of course."

"Of course you had to say so. Renaud, if you whisper in that ghastly way I shall smack you! Alphonse, take me upstairs; and some one find Amélie. I want renovating."

At the door she turned and looked back at Hugh.

"Dear old Hugh!" she said, "I'm an utter wretch; but it's only temper." And she smiled.

Muriel, re-entering, was just in time to be included in the smile.

When Elizabeth had gone, she said: "I'm glad I came in just then. I was beginning to feel that Elizabeth was rather *too* rude and childish."

Hugh laughed.

"My dear, unless you make up your mind to that, you'll never like Elizabeth."

"Then," said Muriel, "I don't think I shall like her much."

It was half an hour later that Elizabeth, tall and very thin in a clinging tea-gown of a wonderful deep pink hue, re-appeared. She came in with slim hands outstretched, her beautiful dark eyes appealing, her clever, sensitive, mobile mouth very sweet.

"I'm so sorry I was so horrid," she said gently. "I'm like that sometimes, but I am trying very hard to grow better."

"Oh," cried Muriel, "you weren't! You were so tired. Now, sit there. I'll pour out. Is that comfortable? Hugh, that green cushion is softer, I think."

"She shall have the pink one as well; it looks so ripping with her gown," Hugh said, and he smiled.

CHAPTER IV

ELIZABETH wrote at once and insisted upon Mark Ridgeway's coming to stay with her.

Ridgeway was not at all sure he wanted to come just then ; he said he was busy painting. To which Elizabeth replied that Hugh Latimer would lend him a splendid mount ; and Ridgeway came down in a few days.

But he came as an artist, and he had grown a beard.

"Has your horse broken his neck and you can't afford another ?" was all Elizabeth said.

To which he replied that his horse had strained his shoulder rather badly, but it was only a question of time, and that he himself had been painting pretty hard.

"I suppose your horse strained his poor shoulder carrying you and your paint-box and easel and things ?" Elizabeth said. "It's a pity you've come, Mark, for I'll never look at you with that hideous growth on your chin."

To which he replied, stroking his beard :

"Oh yes, you will. You'll want to see if I still think you're as charming as ever."

But at the end of two days he sought Latimer at the Hall.

"Razors are messy, but prussic acid is, I believe, exceedingly painful. It must be razors, I suppose. Mine are blunt for want of use. Lend me yours, Latimer, will you ?"

"To shave off your beard ?"

“ No. To shave off my head ! ”

“ He kill himself ! For can a man live widout de head ? Monsieur, I beg you to wait till I have finish de picture I paint now ! ”

This was from Renaud, deep in contemplation at the window of the misty landscape outside.

“ Heartless little wretch ! Is that what I have come to ? To be valued only as the teacher of babes ! ”

“ I am not a babe ! But no, I am *not* ! See, I can spik de English now—oh yes, but jolly well, de deuce ! ”

André's placid little deep voice issued from beneath a lounge.

“ ‘ Oh, Mr. Moon,
We're all here !
Honey-bug, Tissle-dift,
White-imp, Weird,
W'y face, Billiten,
Tidmunc, Teered ;
We're all here,
An' de coast is clear !
Moon, Mr. Moon,
When you comin' down ? ’ ”

“ Sweet, may I look ? ” Muriel crept on all fours to the lounge.

“ S—s—sh ! De little man is *ver* shy ! You may jus' *peep* ! ”

She peeped. André sat in a nest of cushions surrounded by odd little bits of brown and white paper crumpled up into different shapes. His voice began again, while his bright blue eyes gazed up earnestly at the seat of the lounge above his head :

“ ‘ O Mr. Moon,
We're de lickle men !
Dew-lap, Pussy-mouse,
Fern-tip, F'eak,
D'ink-adain, Shambler,
Talky-talk, Stweak. . . ”

“Renaud, wouldn't you care if I cut off my head?” said Mark Ridgeway pathetically.

“Bah!” said Renaud. “I know dat you make de joke, n'est-ce pas? I am not an infant-babe, Monsieur!”

“You're not indeed, mon ami. How goes the picture?”

Renaud turned an earnest little dark face up to him, and flung out his hands expressively,

“Monsieur, I try and try, but I cannot make de colour like dat!”

The painter looked out at the line of ash trees, delicately dark yet so light against their background of soft green and brown meadows.

“No, Renaud, I can't make de colour like dat either, old man.”

“You, Monsieur? But you are de artist! You paint de beautiful pictures dat make one so glad!”

Ridgeway stroked the dark cropped head.

“‘Finis,’” exclaimed Hugh, flinging down a novel. “I wonder why I read piffle like that?”

“The cleverest minds require piffle physic at times,” observed Muriel demurely.

“Not that sort of piffle, it's dirty. You're not to read it, Muriel.”

She laughed.

“I should if I wanted to.”

“You would? Ridgeway, look away! It's not kind to gaze upon the pitiful spectacle of a hen-pecked husband.”

“It is now,” said Ridgeway, “quite ten minutes since I made the pathetic request for the loan of your razors to cut my throat with, and no one has fainted, or even exclaimed.”

"Well," Muriel mused, "it's not because a picture has gone all wrong. I can see that. What is it?"

"Where is Alphonse?" Elizabeth came gently into the room. "I have saved a child's life."

She ignored the buzz of talk and questions.

"Some one give me the most comfortable chair in the room. It's rather tiring—saving children's lives."

"What a tantalizing creature you are, Elizabeth," Hugh said.

She raised her delicate eyebrows.

"Mais, ma mère, what did you? Was it dat you throw yourself into de rivere and save de child from de drowing? Mais mon. See! she is not wet! She is drry!"

"Ah! she throw herself before de ttrain! By Jove! but where is de blood? I ask you, where is de blood den?" Renaud, hopping from one foot to the other, examined Elizabeth's skirt, her boots, her coat, even her hat, while Armand diligently peered into her discarded muff and gloves. André emerged from beneath the lounge, shrieking ecstatically:

" ' Tallenough, Stwaretoes,
Amble, Tip,
Buddy-bud, Heigho,
Lickle black Pip,——' "

"Poor people's children are undoubtedly inclined to be spiteful," Elizabeth said, encircling André with her arms. "I held it upside down, and it scratched me most cruelly. It was a very plain child, and quite dirty and hard. I'm always so glad André is such a soft baby."

Ridgeway stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"Perhaps that position—upside down—induces a longing to scratch," he observed.

"Don't talk to me until I have had some tea, please.

I hate talking to people without looking at them anyway."

"Then why not look at me, dear lady?"

"You know that I find you so horribly unattractive."

He sighed.

"Latimer—those razors!"

"Here comes tea," said Muriel.

"Maman, I wish to know! De child dat you save! If you will not tell, I will say damn!" cried Renaud.

"It was a little girl who had swallowed a bone," Elizabeth said languidly. "Her people were all standing around screaming and scolding, while she choked, and her face was a horrid colour. I think purple is a distressing colour."

"And you held her up by her feet, and the bone fell out?" Hugh said.

Elizabeth nodded.

"It was a most fortunate thing for me," she said. "I am trying so hard to interest myself in these poor people, and I find it harder still to interest them in me. The only ones who are really interested in me are those with some horrible disease or ugliness, and then I become interesting as a new audience. But I always run away. André, you mustn't take bread and butter under that lounge."

"S—s-sh, Maman! I will tell you." He came close, his cheeks growing very red. "It is a big sec'et, oh, but ver big! See," he told her in a loud whisper, "de lickle men are all under dere, waitin' for Mr. Moon to come down, and deys ver hungry, oh, ver hungry indeed! So now I may take de bed and butter, n'est-ce pas?"

Elizabeth looked down helplessly into the beseeching blue eyes, at the fat little brown fist doubled on the bread and butter.

“ You will make grease spots, dear one.”

“ André, come here. I want to whisper,” interposed Muriel.

He trotted over to her, his face full of tragic anxiety. Muriel bent her head.

“ Don’t you think the little men would like a nice biscuit better than bread and butter ? ”

And the next moment a beaming André disappeared beneath the lounge, clutching a harmless dry biscuit, and his voice, issued forth :

“ ‘ O Mr. Moon,
Dere’s not much time !
Hurry, if you’re tumin’,
You lazy ole bones !
You can sleep to-modder
While de Buz-buz dwones ; —— ’ ”

“ I’m going to call on those people at Cherry Cross,” Elizabeth said to Muriel.

“ Are you ? Why ? They were here before you.”

“ I know. But I adore that place. I want to see if they won’t change with me. There are only three of them, and we’re rather cramped at Elm Hill.”

Muriel laughed.

“ And you’re going in to suggest their turning out ? He’s an invalid, you know.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“ Much healthier for him up on the top of our hill.” She added : “ Have people called on them ? ”

“ A few. No one bothers about Cherry Cross, as a rule ; it’s always being let, and is a good way off, but——” She shrugged her shoulders.

“ You mean these people promise to prove more interesting than usual ? ”

“ To them—yes. Mrs. Darlington has called, of

course. Mrs. Wingfield sent down the same answer to them all: she could not leave Mr. Wingfield. She's not at home to any one."

"Shall you call?"

"I never bother about Cherry Cross."

Elizabeth smiled lazily.

"And you see no reason to alter your custom now?"

"No. Do you?"

"I'm not afraid of contamination, but I don't think I'd want to go unless it were that I want their house. As a rule, unrespectable folk are just as dull as respectable. It's only in books they're so scintillating and amusing."

Latimer strolled back from a discussion with Ridgeway about an illustration in "Harper's."

"Ever read that little essay of Mrs. Craigie's on 'Disreputable dullness,' Elizabeth?"

"No; it sounds promising."

"Oh, it's delightful! Listen a moment." He picked up a little slim book and turned its leaves. "'Dullness is a quality in the individual. If there are dull matrons, there is also an infinite crowd of very dull wantons; there are dull villains as well as dull patterns of propriety. If sermons can be dull, comedies can be much duller. . . ."

"'When a virtuous woman is tedious, she is not tedious because she is chaste, but because she is unimaginative or mentally stupid, and when an immoral woman is brilliant, she is not brilliant because she is immoral, but because she happens to have brains.'" He paused, turning over the leaves.

"It's good," said Elizabeth. "Go on."

He glanced down the pages.

"'Young people, as a rule, are warned against many

places of amusement, not because they are dull, which is the case, but because they are improper. And youth at once forms the idea that the improprieties and irregularities are forbidden because of their enchantment and their undying delight. Those who have been allowed most liberty in roving know better.' "

"That's true," Elizabeth said.

"I'd like to know why it is," observed Ridgeway, tugging at his brown beard, "that writers nearly always make their improper people so much more exciting and interesting than the proper ones."

Hugh gave a little laugh.

"My friends, we have the answer here." He tapped the little green book and picked it up again, but Elizabeth interposed.

"I shall not like it any more. Mark has spoilt it," she said petulantly. "It's just like some horrid old-fashioned novel now, where they tried to cram one's unsuspecting brain with knowledge imparted through judicious questions on the parts of the characters."

"Hugh, I want to hear it," Muriel said.

"The dutiful wife now interposes with a conveniently desirous thirst for knowledge," observed Elizabeth crossly.

Hugh read calmly :

"For one hundred authors who can draw, with a certain success, a person of either sex without prejudices, and hit you off a scoundrel or a courtesan, there is not one who can draw an ordinary human being who faces with fixed principles the usual temptations, and make him, or her, even endurable, far less alive.' "

"By Jove, that's ripping!" exclaimed Ridgeway.

"It's absolutely true," Muriel said thoughtfully. "I wonder why it is."

“Good folk need more delicate, subtle painting,” Ridgeway said.

Muriel, her face still a little shadowed, showed where her thoughts lingered.

“Mrs. Wingfield doesn’t look wicked,” she said.

“Have you seen her? What is she like?” queried Elizabeth.

“Oh, she’s just a nice-looking girl with pretty brown hair—rather pale—quite young and ordinary looking.”

“How does she dress?”

“She had on an ordinary coat and skirt—greyish green—and an ordinary floppity hat.”

“That’s nothing,” Elizabeth said. “I know a woman with a notoriously bad reputation, and she has an insignificant nose, that gets red when she dines.”

“Quick! We fly! Come den, mon petit André! Quick! Oh, hurry up, thou foolish one! Hurry your stoomps! It is dat imbecile—dat Leelian!” Shouting, the three boys fled from the room.

Hugh and Mark made a simultaneous movement after them. Then, as Walker threw open the door, announcing Mrs. Dormer-Jones, they drew back, trying to look innocent.

“Oh, my *dear* Mrs. Latimer, I *know* you won’t mind my bringing dear Lilian; you are so *fond* of children! Oh, Madame du Pierre, are you *better*? Not ill? Really? Oh, but you look so terribly thin and delicate! My husband declares there’s nothing *of* you. Of course, I told him it was *fashionable* nowadays. I’m sure if I wore corsets down to my knees I’d never get that fashionable narrow look. *Lilian* will be slim. She has a very graceful figure, hasn’t she? What *do* you think she said to me yesterday? ‘Mother, when may I begin to pull in my

waist ?' Isn't it *amusing* ? Oh, Mr. Ridgeway, I do want you to paint her portrait some day—just a little *sketch*, you know—for friendship's sake ! She has such *delicate* colouring. She'd be lovely to paint, wouldn't she ? And I wouldn't mind you sending it up to the Academy a bit. I do think your beard such a *great* improvement ; Mrs. Darlington said to me this afternoon, ' The man looks a cross now between an artist and a sportsman ! ' She always says such *clever* things, doesn't she ? It's so much more romantic, I think, for an artist to have a beard. Was that why you grew it ? "

" Not exactly."

" Then *why* ? Do tell me."

Ridgeway looked across reproachfully at Elizabeth, as he answered :

" It was because no one would believe I was an artist. No one took me seriously. You see, unfortunately I can't help knowing the difference between a horse's head and his tail, and it seems that's impermissible in a serious painter. So I hoped a beard might remedy matters a bit."

His eyes, very young and boyish above the brown beard, still gazed reproachfully at Elizabeth, who was yawning, and looking very bored.

" Oh, I *see* ! How *interesting*. But, do tell me—am I indiscreet ? Come closer, Mr. Ridgeway—I think I'd better *whisper*. Have you and Madame du Pierre had a *quarrel* ? Oh, I *hope* you don't mind, but Mrs. Darlington said she saw her *cut you dead* ! She said she *couldn't* be mistaken ! I told her she *must*, but she said she was in Jake's cottage, and she *saw* you come along, and Madame du Pierre was driving, and she drove past you, staring *straight ahead* ! "

" It's true, Mrs. Jones, too true."

Mrs. Dormer-Jones' red face grew purple with excitement.

"Was that why you wanted my razors?" queried Latimer.

"Of course."

"What for? Razors? Why? Oh, am I indiscreet?"

"Not at all. To cut my throat."

"It would be more to the purpose to cut your beard, wouldn't it?" suggested Elizabeth.

"Even for you I can't do that. I am thinking of wearing a soft collar, and speaking of a horse's ankles and waist and hips. Oh, I shall be acclaimed as artist yet!"

"Couldn't you fatten your legs a bit?" Latimer said.

Ridgeway looked down at his legs with a comical expression of genuine ruefulness.

"I don't think I *could* do that."

"Well, you *could* discard those exceedingly tight gaiters, couldn't you?" Muriel added unkindly.

He smoothed them lovingly. "Hunting to-morrow. I'll discard them then for boots," he smiled.

"They're quite out of keeping with that hideous beard," Elizabeth said.

"We will now change the subject," Ridgeway said cheerfully. "Mrs. Jones, you really look younger every time I see you!"

"Oh, Mr. Ridgeway! Well, I'm sure I *feel* young enough! If it's true a woman's only as old as she feels, I'm not a *day* more than *twenty*. And all of you make me feel younger still, you're so witty and amusing. All about beards and horses and things; and I don't believe there was a quarrel at all. Oh, I know! It's

just your fun and teasing. I found out long ago that the smart people are *never* serious! I soon picked it up. I'm very adaptable, though I don't mind every one knowing my father was a brewer—not a bit. He was thought very highly of too, and made a lot of money. And now I *must* be going—I really must, though it's so hard to tear oneself away from this *charming* room with its books and cushions and things, and it always has such a curious smell—so very sweet—that I've noticed in other old houses. Well, I *must* be off. Good-bye. Lilian, my love, come along. How *quiet* she has been! What have you been thinking of, my darling?"

"I've been looking at Mrs. Latimer and Madame du Pierre and their dresses. I can't make up my mind which I'm going to be like when I grow up. Madame du Pierre isn't half as pretty, but I like the way she sort of *flops*, and looks at you as if you're dirt."

"Oh, my darling, hush! There, come along. Good-bye. I'm *so* glad there is no real quarrel. Mrs. Darlington was quite *anxious*, because she says Frenchmen have *such* hot tempers, you know. I really *must* go—so difficult. Oh, *are* you going to call at Cherry Cross?"

There was a little silence.

"I never call there," Muriel said.

"Oh yes," Elizabeth said tranquilly.

"Oh!" Mrs. Dormer-Jones looked from one to the other agitatedly. "Of course, you've lived so much in *France*. I'm sure I don't want to be unkind, and she looks so *young* to have that little boy and all, but people are saying—well, of course, one can't be too careful when one has a daughter of one's own; and it's such a *queer* ménage, and a beautiful horse that no one ever uses, except that old groom who won't *speak*, and one

servant and a man ; and the stables have all been done up, and they've got the most *beautiful* harness and things, but nothing to drive, and every one is talking about her, and she won't see any one——”

When Mrs. Dormer-Jones had at last talked herself from the room, there was a pause.

“ I shall go and call to-morrow,” Elizabeth said.

“ Take me with you,” Ridgeway said suddenly. “ The old lady's account of the stables sounds interesting.”

“ I don't know if I care to—with that beard.”

“ Perhaps I'll shave it off.”

“ Why ? ”

“ It tickles.”

Elizabeth yawned again.

“ No, I won't,” Ridgeway said.

“ I wonder if Alphonse has fallen down the well,” she said.

“ Does he show a natural proclivity that way ? ”

“ Oh, there are some grubby sorts of animals who live near the top of it. Muriel, aren't you going to call on Cherry Cross ? Don't you think it unkind not to see if you can do anything for them as he's so ill ? ”

“ No. I think it unkind to bother them when they so obviously want to be left alone.”

Elizabeth laughed softly.

“ What an awful dear you are,” she said.

“ It's very kind of you to think so.”

“ Could one help it ? ”

Elizabeth rose, and she looked at Hugh with lazy, amused eyes.

“ Oh, but it is delicious ! ” she said.

“ Muriel, you lack the incentive that would take you to Cherry Cross,” Hugh said lightly.

Muriel's beautiful worried eyes brightened childishly. A gleam of mischief shone in them as she closed her lips on the question that rose to them.

Elizabeth said, after a pause :

"What is the incentive?"

"The longing to pry into things that seem a bit shady and doubtful," Hugh responded smiling.

"What childish nonsense!" Elizabeth said with impulsive bad temper; and she added drawlingly :

"How marriage has ruined your sense of humour, Hugh."

"Has it? Well, thank Heaven, marriage hasn't quenched your habit of asking the questions you're intended to ask!"

The corners of Elizabeth's drooping mouth curled up in the old irresistible way, and she laughed out.

"You're not a bit altered, Hugh! You're still a brute," she said.

CHAPTER V

“NOT much insight to be gained from this room,” Elizabeth said.

Mark Ridgeway looked round and pondered.

“Of course it was already furnished, and I should say nothing has been altered,” she added.

He pointed to a painted wooden horse lying on the ugly carpet. She nodded.

“It’s a delightful room. Oh, I could make it charming! I’m going to see if I can’t get her to change houses at the next quarter. That’s what I’ve called for, you know.”

The door was jerked open and the young scared face of the maid re-appeared.

“Mistress says she’s engaged.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I want very particularly to see her. Will you tell her it is on business? I won’t keep her more than a few minutes.”

The scared face disappeared, and in its place appeared the round little fair head of a boy.

“Hulloa!” Ridgeway said. “What’s your name?”

The child did not answer; he fixed his grey eyes on the toy horse lying on the carpet, and stood gazing at it.

“Let me come, Dickon.” And a girl came into the room.

“Sceptre,” Dickon said.

“Excuse me a moment,” she said to Elizabeth, and went across and picked up the horse. She gave it to

the boy, and closed the door on him. Then she turned and waited gravely.

“How do you do?” Elizabeth said. “It’s most awfully good of you to let us bother you like this.”

“Won’t you sit down?” the girl said, and Ridgeway experienced a curious feeling. It was as if she brushed aside all small talk—all except what should prove to be the cause of their coming. Elizabeth went on talking, and the feeling deepened. It was as if she waited, suffering the talk with a cold patience. Yet she was courteous enough. She listened; she did not allow her attention to stray. Ridgeway wished he had not come; he became—completely alien to his character—self-conscious, and in his discomfort he fancied her cool grey eyes questioned his purpose in coming. And yet he could not imagine her interested in the purpose. There was a curious aloofness about her; a subtle suggestion that rendered the thought—usual on such occasions—of further acquaintanceship, of possible future friendship, impossible. Ridgeway, feeling that she would be mildly, indifferently pleased when they rose to go, wished Elizabeth would get up. But Elizabeth had come to ascertain whether it might not be possible to exchange houses at the next quarter, and she would not go till she had broached the subject. Unlike herself, she found it unexpectedly difficult to begin; but, once begun, it proved to be a short and simple matter. The girl did not give the idea a second thought; she merely said she was sorry, but it was impossible, and then quietly waited for them to go. She did not by the tiniest flicker of expression in feature or voice evince surprise that the suggestion should have been made to her, but Ridgeway’s face grew red, and he wished miserably that he had stayed at Elm Hill.

Elizabeth said charmingly :

“ I do hope you don't think it an odd thing for me to suggest ; but, you see, when you took this place, Elm Hill—isn't it a horrid name to say ?—was not to let, and I thought you really might *prefer* it——”

“ Yes ? ” the girl said, and it was as if she had been minded to ask why Elizabeth should have thought so, but was not sufficiently interested to put the question into words.

But Elizabeth felt the question, and hastened to answer it.

“ You see, it's rather a tight fit for us ; there are such a lot of us—five, without the servants, and you——”

She paused.

“ There are three of us, and three servants,” she said at once, before Elizabeth's involuntary pause had time to grow uncomfortable.

“ Well, you see. And then we have such a nice large paddock, and we heard about horses, and I thought—you see.”

“ We have one horse.”

“ And you have a paddock—a small one—haven't you ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ It's so useful if you want to turn a horse out, and that sort of thing.”

Elizabeth, with a little more talk, and after having won a grave assurance that her suggestion had not been thought queer, took her departure. In the governess car that, together with the fat and amiable pony, had been hired for the boys' benefit, Elizabeth turned on Ridgeway.

“ I don't believe you opened your mouth once,” she said peevishly.

Ridgeway, limply holding the reins, remarked that he had felt a fool, that he still felt a fool, and always did in a governess car with a fat pony you tied up to gates. He added that he thought the present equipage ludicrously incongruous for Elizabeth's occupation, and suggested the purchase of the latest thing in automobiles.

Elizabeth merely replied by observing that Muriel had been quite right. She was a most ordinary looking girl.

After a pause she gave a little low laugh.

"Mark, that was painfully obvious feminine spite, wasn't it? But she's the sort of young person who would disapprove of the can of hot water I have in my morning cold tub."

"I dare say."

"She's colourless, isn't she?"

Ridgeway considered.

"Yes; but she's awfully paintable."

"Is she?" exclaimed Elizabeth in genuine surprise.

"How?"

"Oh, there's such subtle sort of stuff about her—and the *texture* of her skin is so wonderful!"

"Mark," Elizabeth now, feeling she had failed, confessed, as was her wont, "my chief reason in going was to see if I could help her! Truth! I feel rather a worm, only—well, they said she was so young, and I thought she might have genuine convictions on the subject of marriage—against it, you know——"

She paused.

"Do you think she has—now?"

Elizabeth wrinkled her brows.

"If she has, no one or anything would alter them," she said.

"Is there anything definite said about her, then?"

"Surely you know? They say that man Evelyn Wingfield is not her husband."

Ridgeway looked thoughtful.

"Then the child——"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "Poor mite."

CHAPTER VI

THEY stood, one on either side of the old weather-worn green gate, and stared at each other. There was a suggestion of grimaces in the stare, but on neither side did it get any further than quite a subtle suggestion. Mark Ridgeway, turning round from his canvas, watched amusedly. It interested him to see how alike boyhood was all the world over.

"Three to one on the Frenchman's breaking the ice," he muttered; and the next moment he had won his wager, for Renaud said politely:

"Hulloa."

There was a pause before his greeting received any response, and the fair-headed, grey-eyed little boy continued to stare with an extreme gravity, which was in no wise relaxed when at last he responded.

"Hulloa," he said.

"See, I paint!" now cried Renaud, excitement, pride and anxiety for a fresh opinion on his work urging him rapidly onward. "Now, look! Behold him! It is—qu'est-ce que c'est—— You tell me what it is, eh?"

The other studied the water-colour block held out to him.

"Tree—sky—grass," he said.

"Bien! Bien!" cried Renaud, capering with a joy that did credit to his evidently very modest expectations. "But you also are an artist," he added graciously. "N'est-ce pas?"

To this there was no answer, but slowly over the fair

little square-chinned face there spread a smile. It was an attractive smile, and the difference of the character of it in its slow, frank sweetness from the flashing adorable smile of Renaud interested Ridgeway, so that on an impulse he lifted his canvas from the easel and approached the gate with it in his hand.

"I wonder what you think of this?" he said.

The boy's eyes went to Ridgeway's face, and studied it earnestly.

"Voilà!" cried Renaud excitedly. "See! De picture! Mais que c'est beau! Look, foolish one!"

"Dickon!"

A curious silence fell on the little group at the gate. The girl came forward, walking with an easy long-limbed gait, and Ridegway thought she was taller than he had fancied. The sun shone on the brown head that, in its smallness, made her look taller than she really was; it showed the exquisite fairness of her white skin. To Ridgeway it also showed the coldness of the small, grave lips and indifferent eyes, in which he met no recognition.

"I expect you don't recognise me. I've shaved off my beard, you know," he said.

She inclined her head, and Mark at once felt savagely that there had been no need to tell her about his beastly beard—that she wouldn't have cared or noticed if he had had beards growing all over him!

"Mother," said Dickon seriously. "I want to be an artist-man."

"Bien!" cried Renaud. "Did I not say it? See, Madame, he say dat a tree—dat grass—dat de sky! And I know dat he an artist!"

She smiled, a grave, sweet smile like the boy's.

"Did you paint that?" she said.

“ Mais oui ! I wish to become de great paintere ! I wish to paint as de ole Mark paint. But as yet my trees are not as his, my sky also is different, and de grass. But in time dey will be as his. Ah, look, Madame ! Is it not beautiful—his picture ? ”

Her eyes were studying it, and Ridgeway held it up for her. When he would have put it down, she stayed him with a gesture of her hand. After awhile she spoke.

“ Yes,” was all she said, and she added, “ Thank you.” She turned to Dickon. “ Come, Dickon,” she said. “ It is cold here.”

“ Mother, may I be an artist-man ? ”

She shook her head.

“ But why mayn't I ? ”

“ Yesterday you wanted to be a sailor,” she reminded him.

“ *Now* I want to be an artist-man.”

“ Always changing, Dickon,” she said ; and suddenly, to Ridgeway's surprise, the colour sprang to her cheek. “ Come, Dickon, and you cannot be an artist ! ” she said sternly.

Dickon glanced back to the boy, the lucky boy, who stood on the other side of the gate, absorbed in the picture he had painted, and his wide brows came down in an obstinate frown.

“ I *won't* come in ! ” he said. “ I want to be an artist-man ! ”

“ Dickon ! ”

Ridgeway was surprised to see, during the little fight that followed, that she was upset. He saw it in the pallor of her face, the fear in her eyes ; in the look of earnest gratitude she gave him when he put in a word about an artist's having to learn first to be a man, and so deciding Dickon not to cry and to obey.

Ridgeway went back to his easel and picked up his palette and brushes. But his mind was not with his work, and his hands were so cold that he found it difficult to paint. He put down his palette again, and clapped his hands, ejaculating: "Damn the cold!" He turned and saw the girl coming towards him. She was close behind him, and he knew she must have heard his exclamation.

"I came to ask you if you would care to come in and warm your hands when they get too cold to hold your palette and brushes?" she said quietly.

He was conscious again of her unusual directness, and simplicity; it also struck him that this was the longest speech he had heard her make, and that the deep quality of her voice with a curious throaty note in it, was oddly attractive.

"It's awfully kind of you," he said, surprised.

She turned away.

"Are you coming?" she said.

"Rather! My hands are like lumps of ice."

She moved on towards the house.

"Has the little boy gone?" she asked.

"Yes, fetched away. Too cold for him."

She led the way up the path, and into the house. Ridgeway followed her into the charming white-panelled hall where a great fire glowed in the wide, old-fashioned grate. Ridgeway went towards it gratefully, and held out his frozen hands.

"This is ripping," he said heartily.

"Will you come in and warm yourself whenever you like?" she said, moving towards the stairs.

"Really? It's awfully kind of you——"

He watched her go up the little twisting staircase; she had slipped off her coat, and in her blue frock was

exquisite against the white wall. Mark felt that at all costs he must make her pause ; he watched the small brown head, the delicate profile mounting higher against the wall.

“ M—,” he began impulsively, and suddenly he stopped ; he pulled up with a sickening jerk. What was he to call her ? Miserably he watched her disappear ; she looked so young, so boyish in a way. Slowly he reddened all over his face ; he felt, here in her house, that he had been guilty of low-down sort of behaviour ; he felt that he should have addressed her as Mrs. Wingfield, as a matter of course. Why should he heed, or listen to, gossip ? He waited anxiously for her to reappear ; but there was no sound in the house ; even from the kitchen there came no cheerful voices or clatter of china. Ridgeway wondered where the child was. Then the silence was broken by sounds dear to his ears. A voice saying soothingly : “ Steady ! Steady, my little lass,” the faint jingle of bridle, hoofs on the gravel path. At once the place seemed alive and warmly human to him ; he crossed eagerly to a little low window that looked out to the west.

“ By Jove ! What a little beauty ! ” he ejaculated.

The brown thoroughbred mare waiting outside with a little jockey-like groom at her head, became aware of him at once. Her delicate nostril opened wider ; Ridgeway caught sight of the white rim round the pupil of her great eye ; she fidgetted away from the window, and stood pawing the ground impatiently.

A window was opened above the hall, and the mare lifted her head and whinnied.

“ I'm coming in a minute, my little beauty ! No time to lose, or we sha'n't be there when the 'osses' heads turn one way, th' ounds brisk up at the move, the coffee-

room breaks up, friends pair off to carry out jokes, while the foot people fly to the 'ills, and the bald-headed keeper stands 'at in 'and at the gate ! ' "

" 'To let the 'ounds into cover,' " finished Ridgeway involuntarily. " Jorrocks, by Jove ! "

The voice—a deep, pleasant, cultured voice—from above did not speak again ; the window was closed, and the groom led the mare away. Ridgeway watched with intense interest.

" What ripping quarters ! Oh, don't you pick your feet up pretty, then ? Where's the fool of a groom taking her ? Out into the road at the front ? "

Realising suddenly that he had not been asked to spend the morning there, he fled. He was greatly perturbed and puzzled in his mind. Where was the owner of the voice and the mare going to hunt ? The meet was over at Tillingford, more than twelve miles away, and it was now a quarter to eleven. Had the man a car ? And how was he going to get the horse over there ? Could it be that he knew they would draw in this direction later on, and was going to trot gently towards the spot ? It seemed unlikely, and Latimer had said they always drew in the opposite direction. Anyhow the groom was evidently going to bring the mare round to the front. Ridgeway guiltily moved his easel a yard or two so that his eye commanded the front of Cherry Cross, without his having to turn round, and then he waited. He waited till twelve, and nothing or nobody disturbed the peace of the road, except two farm girls, who passed along carrying milk.

" She doan't look so wicked neither." " You can't never tell ; I heerd tell t'other day as how——" the voices passed on, both heads turned over shoulders, studying the windows of Cherry Cross.

And then Ridgeway slung his easel back to its former position, knocked his canvas to the ground, trod on his palette, and began to paint furiously. He did not go back to the hall at Cherry Cross, though his hands were as cold as before. He was ashamed of the time he had wasted, ashamed of the intense, and quite unusual, feeling of interest that the place and the man and the voice had awakened in him.

"I might be Mrs. Darlington herself!" he said, with furious irritability, and deciding that he was merely ruining what he had done earlier, he packed up his painting gear in a tremendous hurry, and started off for his two mile walk to Elm Hill.

CHAPTER VII

“**I** WISH,” Elizabeth said, “I had never married.”
Alphonse, her husband, went on mending his fishing tackle.

Muriel laughed.

“Where I think husbands are such a mistake,” Elizabeth, bending low over the fire, continued, “is that they’re always there. One can’t have a cold in comfort, because he is there to see how red and puffy one’s nose gets; one can’t even thoroughly enjoy a good cry, because the thought that afterwards he will see how hideous one looks with little swollen-up eyes, spoils it all the time. Of course, it only applies to old-fashioned husbands and wives, but Alphonse *is* old-fashioned, he’s quite a hundred years behind the times.”

“And how glad you are that I am, Elizabeth,” remarked Alphonse, with the odd little quirk at the corner of his mouth that gave his utterances at times such a gentle humour.

“His complacency degenerates sometimes into colossal conceit,” Elizabeth told the fire. “Where is the use of my going into retreat—sick and weary of the world—if I have to take a husband with me? For the retreat to do me any good I ought to live in a teagown with my hair loosened——”

“You would look charming,” Alphonse said.

“No, I don’t; not with my hair really comfortably loosened. The loosening you think so charming is

achieved with many hairpins, and has to be treated with respect. I think I'm tired of being in retreat."

"In a month or two——" Muriel began soothingly.

"My dear, do you think I've never lived in England? It's now February. Well, perhaps in June, one may occasionally get sun-warmed——Someone send for André, please."

André was brought, protesting.

"But, Maman, I am de cook—tu comprends? I cook de plums and de chockys and de bit of red meat I found in de kitchen-place——"

"Dirty little monkey, come and hug me."

André trotted up to her chair, flung his fat arms round her neck in a perfunctory embrace, exclaiming at the same time:

"May I den go now?"

"No; you hard-hearted child; you are to sit on my lap."

André blinked tears away, and climbed into her lap, where he sat, stiffly erect and tense, his whole little body one protesting question.

"Mother and child," Elizabeth said. "Isn't it touching?"

"May I den go——"

"No!"

"Mais pourquoi; I do not understan'," he quavered.

"What for is it dat you wish me, ma mère?"

"I wish you to stay here: that is enough for you, André."

"For how long?" he asked patiently.

"For as long as I tell you to stay," Elizabeth said, and flung her arms suddenly about him. "Oh, you poor little martyr! How cruel I am——"

"May I den go now?" Eager hope sounded in the

question, eager hope was in the wriggles of his little body.

"Yes, go," Elizabeth said, and he slid to the floor, and trotted happily out of the room.

"Alphonse thinks it's most reprehensible of me to act like that," Elizabeth told Muriel.

"I think André is an angel," Muriel said.

"Don't you, Alphonse?" Elizabeth asked crossly.

"I think it is a pity," Alphonse said.

"Don't you despise me for it?"

He screwed up his eyes in a kindly smile.

"Quel drôle d'enfant!" he said.

"I've got neuralgia in my temper," Elizabeth exclaimed. "It's this eternal rain and wind, and the roof over my bedroom is leaking, and there are damp patches on the dining-room wall, and I want Cherry Cross. And I wish I could get up an interest in worms and things. Alphonse is interested in everything in the world, from elephants to fleas. If you mentioned the word flea he would probably be able to give you an interesting lecture on the subject."

Mark Ridgeway came in, wet and in a bad temper.

"I know that the big ones have little ones to tease 'em and to bite 'em, and the little fleas have lesser fleas and so *ad infinitum*," he said.

"Mark," cried Elizabeth, "I do believe you're in a bad temper, too!"

"Vile."

"Oh, come and sit by me! Bless you! Muriel and Alphonse are so irritating. You may swear."

"I can't, without being so hopelessly tautological; I'm used up."

"Perhaps," said Alphonse, "I could assist you—in French?"

"Another time—good idea—when Mrs. Latimer isn't present."

Muriel laughed softly.

"I'm much too sleepy to notice ; in fact, that's the explanation of my good temper."

He looked at her admiringly.

"Mark, you're not to do it !" cried Elizabeth sharply. "You're to look at me ! If you look at her, lying there like a beautiful sleepy princess in a fairy tale, you'll get good-tempered at once."

He turned his eyes to Elizabeth's little dark face, and laughed.

"What's up, Lizzie ?" he said.

Elizabeth was, for the moment, mute.

"Mark," she said then in a strangled sort of voice, "I'm *really* in a vile temper. I won't stand that."

"All right, Betsy."

Alphonse looked up from his fishing tackle.

"Alphonse," Elizabeth said, "call him out——"

"Pistols for two, coffee for one," Ridgeway put in. Alphonse approached him.

"I'd like to have a go—is it not ?—with the gloves with you."

"Right you are !"

Ridgeway rose, his thin, brown face eager, his bad temper forgotten.

"No !" Elizabeth cried. "Not now ! Tea is coming. Alphonse, you are *not* to leave me now."

"Afterwards, then," Alphonse said.

Ridgeway nodded.

"I don't believe you're a bit cross really, Mark," Elizabeth said reproachfully.

"I was. I've mucked that thing I was doing of the river."

"Oh, no!" Muriel cried, sitting up.

"Afraid I have. Anyhow, the light was all wrong, only I'm so sick of beginning things and never being able to get on with them."

"You've never gone on with that sketch you began down by Cherry Cross, have you?" Muriel asked.

"No; that was sunshine—misty sunshine."

"Oh, of course."

"Renaud wants to go out sketching with that little boy," Elizabeth said thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"You know, I'm not a prude, but—well, Muriel's dear little aunt—when she was staying with Muriel last week—was talking to me about those people—she hates gossip, and is such a dear—and she was saying that what makes it so peculiarly—well, disagreeable—is that Mr. Wingfield is quite an old man, and that apparently the attraction is his money, of which he has plenty."

Ridgeway was silent.

"I thought there was probably a tragic story—a passionate falling in love—a lunatic wife in an asylum—something of that sort; or, failing that, earnest prejudice against the debasing shackles of matrimony, but——" She shrugged her shoulders.

"How do you know you weren't right?"

"Oh, my dear boy—a fat old man of sixty and romance, passion, or serious convictions! It's inconceivable! It becomes ridiculous."

Ridgeway ate a sandwich thoughtfully.

"Have you seen him?"

"Seen whom? Oh, Mr. Wingfield. No. Muriel's aunt saw him in the garden one day as she drove past."

Ridgeway dwelt in imagination upon the picture of

the girl's face as she had asked him to come into her house to warm his hands. He said quietly: "That girl's not a rotter."

Elizabeth protested.

"I hope not. Still, it's absurd to pretend that one can tell. One can't."

"I can," Ridgeway said, with the quiet obstinacy some people liked and some found extremely irritating.

"Of course, your intimate and wonderful intuition regarding women——" began Elizabeth, then broke off laughing. "Bags I saying 'Rats!' first!"

They all laughed.

The door was gently opened a little way, and Renaud's dark head was inserted.

"Mille pardon, but I wish to know whedder you prefer a—a visitor to have tea in here, or in de schoolroom?"

The beautiful dark eyes, so saint-like and serious, peering round the door, were irresistible.

"Oh, darling, come in here!" Elizabeth cried. "Oh, Alphonse," she said aside to her husband, "wasn't I good to give him my eyes?"

"You were indeed, ma chère."

"Who is your vis——" Elizabeth went on. "Oh!" she said, half-rising. "Where is his mother?"

"He was ver wet—oh, of a wetness! And I say to him, 'Behold, dere is de house of my father and my mother, and de pony has galloped into de wood.'"

"What pony?" put in Ridgeway.

"It was a pony dat pass his gate, and he come out and follow it."

"Renaud, you are both wet through! Have you been out?" cried Elizabeth.

"I wish," said Renaud with tremendous dignity, "to see how de trees look with de rain on dem. I wish

to see how to paint de *shine* of de brranches." He turned eagerly to Ridgeway. "Ah, but *you* will understand, old Mark! We artists must go out to see, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur?"

"We are crushed," said Elizabeth, "and meanwhile you are both getting horrible colds. Someone ring a bell. It's over in that corner. You have to pull very hard. Renaud, were you out alone?"

"But yes, Maman; for are de oders de artists den?"

Louise appeared in a whirl of excited French and broken English—excuses, indignation, and imminent collapse mingled inextricably, and all ruthlessly cut short by Elizabeth. Louise, still ejaculating, retreated, and Renaud, followed by the serious-eyed Dickon, was led away to be rubbed and changed.

"Won't his mother be anxious?" Muriel suggested.

"She may be, as he is the only one, and not half French," Elizabeth acquiesced tranquilly. "I must send him back at once."

"Without his tea, the poor little boy?" Alphonse put in.

"If someone would lend me a horse, how I'd love a gallop! And I could take Cherry Cross in my stride," Ridgeway observed, looking sweetly at Muriel.

"Oh, do take Flourish," she said. "She's had such a slack time lately—no meet anywhere near."

He rose, smiling delightedly.

"I'll tell Mrs. Wingfield you'll send her son home after his tea, eh?" he said to Elizabeth.

"Yes. Would you like the governess car as far as the Hall?" she suggested.

He laughed.

"Shanks' mare will beat that fat thing you call Polly any day."

And he was gone.

Cantering along the soft wet roads in the dark, he whistled gaily, talking to his horse in between whiles, and filled suddenly with the conviction that he would yet do great things in the way of painting. He saw suddenly a new way of treating the river picture of which he had made a fiasco that afternoon; he saw why he had failed, and his whistle rose gay and sweet and light as a bird's. Oh, for to-morrow! for a grey, misty to-morrow with rain-filled skies above, and an uneasy, restless river below! *Then*—The rain swept against his face, the wind whistled past his ears.

"You shall have the biggest mangold I can find when we get home," he told the mare.

Along the road the gleam of a lighted window. That was Cherry Cross, with the window high up under the eaves. For the rest, the house was in darkness. Ridgeway pulled up outside, hesitating what to do next. Remembering the tale of sickness in the house, he did not like to shout. He turned the mare's head, and made his way to the stables. Here the illumination was comparatively brilliant; a lamp stood on the little flight of stone steps that led to the loft; there was another hanging on a nail outside one of the loose boxes, and the door of the harness room stood ajar, a brilliant light picking out gleams and glitters on the beautifully kept harness. But there was apparently no one about. Ridgeway, an appreciative eye on the alluring array of leather and steel, thought how easy it would be to walk off with a nice little bridle or a whip or two.

At that moment the door leading into the back of the house was opened, and the little groom came out. He looked with a scared expression at Ridgeway.

"If you'll wait a minute, sir, and—and—would you

mind drawing back a bit ? His lordship's coming out, and I'm afraid he might be upset."

Ridgeway led the mare away towards the road again ; but as he reached the gate he heard voices, and thought it better to stand still. From the house there walked feebly the figure of a man of middle height, so wrapped up that it was difficult to distinguish anything about him ; he was leaning on the arm of the girl, and Ridgeway could see that he leant heavily.

" Just one piece of sugar, Prue, and then I'll come in again. I always like to give her a piece of sugar. The poor little mare has a beastly time of it with me on the sick list like this. Where's Ferney ? Damn the fellow ! What d'you mean by going on in front like that ? I can find my way to my own stables. I'm not as far gone as that yet. Um, yes—looks all right." He had paused at the door of the harness room. " Where's the Pelham ? Eh ? Other side ? What d'you want to move it for ? I hate things to be moved. Damned impertinence to move things ! "

From the further loose box a horse whinnied.

" There she is, bless her ! "

The queer, dream-like figures, dark against the lights of the lamps, moved round the corner of the buildings, and Mark quietly opened the gate. Flourish lifted her voice and answered the other horse. The next moment the groom came running down to the gate.

" His lordship heard your horse, sir."

Ridgeway explained the reason of his presence.

" Yes, sir. Will you come up to the stables, sir ? " He took Flourish from Ridgeway and led her up the yard.

Ridgeway followed, feeling curiously as if he were acting in a dream, and was met outside the harness room

by the two dream figures which he had been watching from the gate. He made his explanations once more.

"Awfully kind, don't you know," murmured the man. "Young monkey! Followed a pony," he chuckled. "You hear that, Prudence? True son of his father, eh?"

"Evelyn, it is very cold and wet out here."

"Yes, yes! I'll come in now. Come in, won't you?" he said hospitably to Ridgeway. "Treat to see a good riding leg again! Ha! ha! The only legs I see nowadays are fat or flabby. Come in, and have a smoke."

"I'm afraid I must get back."

"Spare me a few minutes. Lord, if you knew how dull it is nowadays."

"Won't you come in?" came from the lips of Prudence; and Ridgeway fancied he heard a note of appeal.

"Oh, well, thanks," he said, and followed them in along a tiled passage, up the twisting staircase, down another passage and three little shallow stairs, into a cheerful room from which the light had shone on to the road.

"Sit down—will you?" Prudence said, and passed on with Evelyn Wingfield into another room that led out from the first.

"Going to be unswathed a bit," Wingfield called out genially.

Ridgeway, alone, looked round the room with the eager interest aroused by these people. It was a comfortable room with essentially a sporting atmosphere about it. The walls were hung with those quaint coaching and hunting prints of the early nineteenth century; beneath a fine fox's mask there was a rack full of racing-whips,

and hunting-crops ; a table in the corner was heaped with a medley of pipes, cigar-boxes, parts of a bridle, and a pair of racing irons. Ridgeway crossed the room to the bookstand by the fireplace, and read the titles of the books—"Badmington Hunting," "Hayes' Horse Breaking," "Handley Cross," "Soapy Sponge's Sporting Tour," "Riding Recollections," "Market Harboro," "Fitz-Wygrams' Horses and Stables."

As he read the last title Prudence re-entered the room.

"I always want to see the titles of books," Ridgeway said smiling.

"Yes ; I suppose they indicate the character of the owner more plainly than anything else. I came in to ask you if you will insist on going in ten minutes ? Mr. Wingfield is very tired, and I am afraid he will have a bad night."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry I came in."

"No ; I wanted you to. He would have worried if you had refused."

She went back into the other room. Ridgeway sought for the reason of a curious uncomfortable impression, and found it in the echo of her words, "Mr. Wingfield." Impulsively the thought formed : "Oh, poor child !" She came back with Wingfield, and helped to settle him into the large easy chair beside the fireplace, and close to the bookstand.

Ridgeway looked with interest at him, and was conscious of being irritatingly unable to make up his mind about him. The face showed signs of extreme good looks, but was now pale and flabby ; it was scored heavily with lines, the mouth was loose, the bleared blue eyes were set rather wide apart, and the flesh bagged beneath them. The whole face was ruined either by ill-

health or dissipation, or both. Ridgeway could not make up his mind. In the talk that followed, chiefly of old hunting runs, there was now and again a humorous or a kindly gleam, that seemed to lift the heavy face into a queer attractiveness. Ridgeway fought the prejudice he could not help feeling, the prejudice caused by the mere fact of the man's age as opposed to that of the girl who sat quietly sewing beside them. How could he judge? He knew nothing of the circumstances. And the man looked so beastly ill. Ridgeway exerted himself, and when he rose to go at the end of the ten minutes, he was begged cordially to come again.

"A sick man's a dull dog, and his friends desert him as the rats desert a sinking ship; but I can always give you a good cigar! Ha! ha! Can't you stay a bit longer? You haven't had anything to drink. Whiskey? I'm under doctor's orders myself—no alcohol. Under wife's orders too. Daren't let my man smuggle me a thimbleful. Ah well; I always was soft-hearted with the fair sex—always been under some feminine thumb since I was sixteen! By gad, it was before that! There was that little gel when I was at Eton——"

"Evelyn, you will tire yourself."

"And I must be off. They'll be sending out search parties for me," Ridgeway said.

"Jealous! They're all the same!" A chuckle followed him from the room. "Jealous of the little gel—what *was* her name—with the yellow curls." . . .

Down in the hall Prudence stood, tall and slim and anxious-eyed, questioning Ridgeway. "Was Dickon very wet? Did he seem tired? How had he been found? Was he miserable?"

Ridgeway answered patiently, realising with sudden clearness how she had been keeping back her anxiety;

realising the firmness of will that had kept even her exit from the sick room slow and calm. But now she was restless, uneasy. He saw it only in small signs—a pulse throbbing in the long throat, a strenuousness in the clasp of the hand on the back of a chair, a glowing sort of darkness in the grey eyes. For the rest, she was still and calm as she wondered why he had not yet been brought home. . . .

Ridgeway reassured her. Elizabeth was bound to keep him, once she knew his mother would not be anxious. Renaud had taken a great fancy to him. He was to be rubbed down and have a good tea.

He was pleased to see how soon his words soothed away those small signs of uneasiness.

“I must go back,” she said, turning towards the stairs. She hesitated; then: “Mr. Wingfield had a bad attack this afternoon. That is why Dickon’s absence was not discovered, and why—why there were no lights or anything, and why I had to give in to his wish to go round to the stables——”

“He’ll probably have all the better night for getting his wish,” Ridgeway said gently, suddenly conscious of how extremely young she seemed.

“Yes. You have been very kind. Will you thank Madame du Pierre?”

Her foot on the lowest stair, still she lingered, her head down—bent in thought.

“Yes?” Ridgeway said kindly.

“You—you can find your way to the stables,” she said, and he knew that it was not what she wanted to say. Then, as if words spoken made the other easier of utterance, she said:

“Did you think—Dickon—*very* naughty the other day?”

It was unexpected, yet obviously what she had been wishing to say.

"Dickon? When? Why? For wanting to be an artist, poor little chap? Good lord, no!"

A faint smile lightened her tired face at the boyish heartiness of his response.

"But he was naughty. He refused to come in when I told him to."

"D'you call that naughty? Well, I suppose it isn't exactly *good*; but it's only healthy, you know. You wouldn't have him a saint, would you?"

Her eyes, intent on his face, grew quickly worried again.

"Oh no, no!" she cried, in a low voice. "Not that! You don't think he is unnaturally good, do you?"

"I should say"—Ridgeway spoke deliberately, watching the effect of each word, and feeling his way to give her what she wanted—"from what I have seen of him, that he's neither unnaturally good nor unnaturally bad, but just a healthy little chap with a will of his own, which is a good thing."

He saw the worry die from her eyes, but she said:

"He is always changing his decision as to what he wants to be when he is a man—always vacillating."

"Oh, they always do," Ridgeway said cheerfully. "I was always veering from a soldier to a sailor, an artist and a horsebreaker. Sometimes I was going to be a jockey or a groom. Once it was a chimney sweep. I can't imagine the attraction now——"

"Prudence! Prudence! You've been away *hours*! I'm sick of being alone! *Prudence!*"

"Oh—good-bye," she said over her shoulder, as she sped up the stairs in answer to the peevish call.

Ridgeway went round thoughtfully to the stables.

He found Ferney taciturn and stolid ; there was a depressed look about the little man ; his red, creased face wore a queer expression as of a sort of crushed humour. Ridgeway thought that at any moment humour might dart into the sad little blue eyes, crinkle the thin, dreary mouth, set alive all the innumerable wrinkles that had been surely scored in the first place by laughter. Riding back to the Hall, Ridgeway passed the carriage conveying Dickon home. Dickon sat erect, his arms round a water-colour block, a paint-brush in one hand.

“So the artist is still in the ascendant,” Ridgeway mused, and his mind went back to the anxious face of the boy’s mother. The wind had dropped, and the rain died away into a faint, almost imperceptible mist. It was a still evening now, fragrant with the scent of wet mould and grass, mysterious with the drip, drip of rain from the boughs of the trees, looming soft and cloudy in the faint moonlight. Ridgeway, sitting still on Flourish, looked and listened, and in his mind, mixed curiously, vaguely, with the mist and the moonlight and the dream-like shadowy trees, was the image of Prudence Wingfield. It looked up at him from the mist—the pale face, with its delicately proud features, its small lips, its cool eyes. . . . Cold as the mist itself, and as aloof as the moonlight . . . the dignity—the gentle indifference. . . .

Ridgeway touched the horse with his heels and cantered on.

CHAPTER VIII

MURIEL came softly into the study.

"Hugh, I'm going to drive over to Cherry Cross this afternoon."

Latimer looked up surprised from his papers.

"Why?"

She hesitated.

"Shan't we leave it till later?" She glanced at the piles of papers and envelopes.

He smiled.

"You just come here, and tell me what's wrong."

She came and leant against his chair. "I feel sort of mingy," she said childishly, rubbing her cheek against his head. "You know, Hugh, they say sorrow is good for one. You don't think happiness is making me a prig, a Pharisee?"

"My dear one! But I thought you decided that it was kinder not to worry those people."

"Yes," she said ruefully. "But, I rather think that was a trifle Jesuitical. I *wanted* to think that, you see; at least, I *think* I did. Hugh"—she laid her cheek closer still, her voice sank lower—"I am so—happy. I've been thinking. She is quite young and alone—in a new place—and he is ill. How can we tell what tragic story there is there? When Mark Ridgeway said yesterday that she was not a rotter, that he could tell—it swept over me—our love, our joy, and that girl—I

felt that I *must* see if I could help her, however little. I felt—oh, Hugh, I can't put it into words ! ”

He drew her into his arms.

“ I think I know, my darling ! ” he said tenderly.

Muriel, in the hall, waited.

Above, a hoarse whisper : “ She says she woant keep 'ee no time, mum.”

And :

“ If I was to stay outside with my ear to the key-'ole now, I could call 'ee at oncet if he wanted 'ee, mum.”

Flap, flap—the maid with a loose shoe came down the stairs.

“ Missis says she caan't leave th' maister.”

Muriel hesitated. She had expected this, and had made up her mind to risk being intrusive, to risk a snub, just in case the refusal to see callers should arise from pride, and in case she might be able to help, if help were needed. But it was more difficult than she had expected.

“ Aren't 'ee going ? ” the maid inquired with interest.

“ Will you ask your mistress if she will let me know if there is any time of day she would be able to see me ? ”

The maid flapped up three stairs, then turned :

“ Will 'ee just say it agin, mum ? It's a bit long like, and I never had no memory since Lizzie dropped me on th' stone floor.”

Muriel said it again, and the maid flapped up the remaining stairs.

"She says—now I must get it roight—she says, sweet loike, ' You go and tell your missis I want to know *when* she'll see me, and I'll come,' she says."

When the next minute Prudence Wingfield came down the stairs, Muriel seemed to hear her bullying message echoing round her head.

"I'm so sorry to be a nuisance ; but really—I couldn't help hearing—I didn't send quite such an arrogant message."

Prudence looked into the lovely smiling face.

"I know—to allow for alterations," she said. "Will you come in here ? The hall is draughty."

Muriel, seated on one of the few chintz-covered chairs in the drawing-room, wondered a little how she was going to start with her help.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from Mr. Wingfield," she began. "I know callers are a horrible nuisance when one has sickness in the house ; but I have lived near here a good while now, and it struck me that of course everything is strange to you, and I might be able to help a little."

"It is very kind of you."

"For instance, never order your meat from Jarvis," Muriel, went on, with a little laugh. "He is a mile nearer you, but isn't to be relied on."

"He called for orders," Prudence said, and somehow the atmosphere seemed suddenly lighter, "and so I have been getting meat from him. It seemed all right, I thought ; but perhaps I'm not much of a judge. I want the best man, especially for the beef tea."

"Huddon at Deanwood is the best, I think. The other man has a way of dealing well with newcomers at first, and then falling off."

"Huddon—thank you. I have milk and cream and

butter and eggs from the Woodhouse farm : I think they are very good."

" Oh, yes ; and do you bake your own bread ? Yes ? *Standard* bread, I hope ? " They both laughed.

" Isn't there anything else you want to know ? "

" I wonder if you could tell me—Mr. Wingfield is taking those Willington capsules—do you know them ? —and they won't keep for long, so that it is impossible to order a large quantity at once, and the postage——"

Muriel, advising her, was thinking pitifully that Ridge-way had been right. She rose to go.

" I suppose you won't come and see me just yet ? " she said gently.

" No, thank you."

" I wonder if I may come again ? I should like to come, if I don't worry you."

The girl's eyes met hers clearly.

" You know——" she said coldly.

" Yes, I know."

There was a little pause.

" Please, mum, he's a-callin' for 'ee, and he says you've been away for two hours——"

Prudence turned hurriedly to the door. " I will let you know when I can see you again. I'm sorry I can't stay to give you tea."

The maid let her out.

" There's how 'tis all day long ! She caan't stir a fut, but what 'e's a-calling, jus' as if he was a sick baby——"

The muttered grumble accompanied Muriel to the step and, growing fainter, down the path.

CHAPTER IX

PRUDENCE came in from a walk in the wind and rain: there was a faint colour in her cheeks, her eyes were clear and bright. Dickon looked up from his drawing.

"Your hair is very untidy, mother," he said in a serious, disapproving little way.

Prudence paused, watching him with a curious expression.

"I wonder if you are rather a little prig, Dickon," she said.

Dickon, tongue in cheek, took no notice.

Prudence, remorseful, drew near and looked over his shoulder.

"Why, what a beautiful little house," she said.

"It's a redgment of soljers," Dickon responded.

She laughed.

"Papa wants you," Dickon observed casually. "He was yellin' for you ever so a little while ago."

She turned, and running swiftly up the stairs, quietly entered Wingfield's room. He was sitting, a pitiful huddled figure, in his chair.

"You've been away for hours," he complained, in a whining voice curiously different from the pleasant tones Ridgeway had heard. "I feel very bad—shockin' bad."

"Where is Davenport?" Prudence said, removing her hat and coat.

“ I sent the fool away ! He had the impertinence to think he had a grievance.”

“ What was it ? ”

“ Oh, I don't know. Usual sort of thing,” with a pitiful leer. “ Some little gel, don't you know. Not my fault. I swear it's not my fault——”

Prudence sat down beside his chair, and took up her work.

He sat mumbling and grumbling to himself. Presently he said shakily :

“ Prue, may I hold your hand ? ”

She put down her work and gave it to him silently.

“ I don't feel quite so frightened if I've got hold of your hand,” he whispered. “ They all hate me so, Prue, all of 'em, and they've all found out where I'm livin'. Two of 'em called this afternoon when you were out, my dear—it was—I forget names so—my memory's not what it was, but it was that tall, pale fellow with the dark eyes, don't you know—little Milly's sweetheart—never much of a fellow—it wasn't my fault—but oh, my God, how he hates me ! He—I'm afraid he'll come back, Prue—to murder me——” he clung to her hand, his voice dying away into a frightened whimper.

“ He won't come back, Evelyn : he has gone away.”

“ He's such an artful devil. They're all artful devils—that class—cads, all of 'em. Never know how to take a beatin'. He's so devilish angry with me—wasn't my fault—why can't he take it like a gentleman ? He'll come back—Prue, I'm afraid he'll come back—and I'm no match for him now——”

“ He won't come back, Evelyn——”

“ He will ! I know he will ! He hates me. You don't understand, my dear ! It's—er—rather difficult

to explain—er—rather a delicate matter. You see, he was in love with Milly—pretty neck and shoulders she had, by Jove, but not much else—they were to be married——”

“ I think I understand,” she said, quietly.

“ Oh, now you’re angry with me too ! ” he whimpered and began to cry.

“ Evelyn ! Oh, Evelyn, don’t do that ! I—I can’t bear it ! Evelyn ! ” frantically she pushed his handkerchief into his hand, and hid her eyes from the pitiful sight of his childish tears. “ I’m not angry,” she said in a stifled voice. “ Shall we have a game of chess ? Or would you like me to read to you ? Shall we have Jorrocks ? ”

“ Old Jorrocks,” he said in a pleased voice, “ let’s have old Jorrocks.”

She took *Handley Cross* from the book-stand, and opening it at random with trembling fingers, began to read : “ ‘ If Green’orn gets fairly up, the chances are he likes his mount. It is pleasant to find oneself carried instead of kicked off, and some ’osses never ride so well as——’ ”

“ You—you’re sure you’re not angry with me, Prue ? ”

“ No, no, of course not, Evelyn. Now listen ; you know this is his lecture on horse buying—you like that—‘ never ride so well as on trial, but then Spooney goes, and tries all his paces ; a self-satisfied smile——’ ”

“ I can’t bear you to be angry with me, Prue.”

“ No ; I’m not—‘ smile plays on his mug, as rein on neck he returns down the covered ride, and the dealer, with a hair of indifference, axes, “ Ow he likes him ? ’ ”

She paused, casting a quick glance at his face ; his wet bleared eyes met hers at once pathetically.

“Don't be angry with me, Prue,” he quavered.

She took his handkerchief, and gently wiped the tears from his cheek.

“Shall I read something else to you? I don't think you feel quite like Jorrocks this evening.”

His face brightened childishly.

“I don't believe you're angry with me any longer! It was always the same. Lord, women are soft-hearted, my dear, none of 'em could ever be angry with Evie Wingfield!” He began to chuckle, and cast sly glances at her. “Oh, you needn't be jealous, my dear! I'm on the shelf now—a wreck—a hulk—that's all. But once—eh, you weren't so very hard-hearted yourself, my cold Princess, were you? I remember one evening——”

“What would you like me to read to you, Evelyn? Shall I read some of those poems that came to-day? See, here is one—it looks promising——”

“Poems? What poems?”

“Paterson's—you remember? Shall I read them to you?”

He nodded.

“I'll read '*Old Pardon, the son of Reprieve*'!”

She plunged into it.

“You never heard tell of the story?
Well, now, I can hardly believe!
Never heard of the honour and glory
Of Pardon, the son of Reprieve?
But maybe you're only a Johnnie
And don't know a horse from a hoe?
Well, well, don't get angry, my sonny,
But really, a young un should know!”

“Thank you, that is enough,” he said, as she paused at the end of the verse. “I'd like a game of chess.”

She put the book down, and fetched the board and

men. They began to play. Presently he dropped the piece he was holding, and shrank back with a look of horror on his face.

"It moved, Prue! Moved in my fingers! I tell you it moved!"

"Your fingers slipped, Evelyn, that was all. I believe I shall beat you to-day. I'm playing better."

"Take them away," he moaned, shrunk back into his chair. "It moved! I tell you it moved. It is alive. A horrible soft, live thing. Take them away."

She cleared them away quietly.

"Read me some of *Market Harboro'*—that'll buck me up, Prue! He's the man for me—good old Whyte Melville—let me die in my saddle—that was his wish, and he did it too! That's a proper death for a man. That's the death for me. Not a miserable, damned milk and sops affair. I'll get better yet just to spite the doctors, and live to die in my saddle! On the little mare's back—that's where I'll die. Who says I won't? Eh?" his voice rose to a scream of fury, "who says I'll die in my bed? Who dares to say it? Eh?"

"Hush, Evelyn, I want to read *Market Harboro'* to you; we left off at the end of Chapter VI., didn't we?"

For five minutes he let her read, then he said he was tired of it; he'd like to play a game of cribbage. But when she had set the board out he turned from it in loathing.

"It will move like the other," he muttered. "I daren't take it up. I daren't. It will move in my fingers."

Her tired eyes searched the room, and arriving at the table littered with odds and ends, lightened a little.

"I do believe this rainy day has made your racing irons rusty," she said.

He straightened his limp figure ; the vague, dreary look left his face.

“ Eh ? What ? Give 'em to me, my dear, I'll give 'em a rub up. Where's the burnisher ? I'll have my little bridle too—the beauty. I'll make 'em sparkle in a minute. Who's that ? Oh, that fool of a Davenport with some filthy slop for me to drink——”

The man came noiselessly into the room, his long, smug face and fleshy nose expressing a Christian meekness that was determined to bear all trials as sent from heaven in token of special favour.

“ What is it, you fool ? What slop is it this time ? ”

“ Allenbury's food, sir.”

“ D'you think I'm a baby ? Why don't you bring a bottle too ? I won't touch it ! I tell you I won't touch the stuff. Take it away ! D'you think I'm a baby ? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ Damn your impertinence, why don't you take it away ? ”

“ Because it's for your good, sir.”

“ Evelyn, try to drink it ; it will make your hand stronger to burnish the irons.”

“ Will it, Prue ? You don't say so. Give it to me quickly then, and send that solemn-faced fool away. Confound it, I ain't ready for the undertaker yet ! ”

Davenport retired noiselessly.

Wingfield ate the food, eager to get back to his irons ; in his hurry he dropped some on his coat. Prudence averted her gaze as he fumbled shamefacedly at the stains with his handkerchief, casting anxious glances at her the while.

“ I've finished it, Prue. May I clean my irons now ? ”

She took away the tray, and gave him what he wanted.

“ You’ll stay here, Prue, won’t you ? Dick doesn’t want you, the young rascal. Now then, won’t we make you shine, eh ? ” Muttering over his work with childish pleasure he rubbed and patted and fingered it feebly, till at last he sank back into his chair, and slept, a racing iron still in his hand. Prudence rose and gently loosening the slack fingers, took the stirrup from him, and laid it down on the table. She arranged a cushion and a rug more comfortably, and quietly left the room. She went downstairs slowly and found a pot of cold tea, and some cold toasted scones awaiting her on a table.

“ They’ve been there for hours and hours,” Dickon told her.

“ Have you had your tea ? ”

“ Oh yes, I had it in the kitchen with jam out of a stone pot. I like jam like that.”

Prudence rang a bell.

“ Lydia,” she said to the maid who answered it, “ tell Davenport his master is asleep, and he will remain within hearing.”

“ There now, mum, if you haven’t touched yer tea, and me making you hot scones and all. But I can soon hot ’em up again——”

“ I don’t want any tea, Lydia,” Prudence said, sinking into a chair.

“ Oh, come now, a nice hot scone, and not a bit burnt this time ? ”

Prudence shook her head.

“ I couldn’t eat it, thank you, Lydia. Give Davenport my message, and take away the tea tray.”

Dickon was still busy with his drawing : presently he looked up.

“ Are you tired, mother ? ”

“ Very tired, Dickon.”

Dickon sighed.

"What a pity! I wanted you to be my gal'pin' horse."

"Oh, well, I dare say I can manage a gallop," Prudence said.

CHAPTER X

IT was a few days later, on another wet and stormy afternoon, that Renaud, kneeling on the high window-sill in the schoolroom at Elm Hill, declaiming :

“ De trrunks black—de boughs a more pale black—behind dem—ah, comment puis-je le dire ? It is of a too great beauty ! ” broke off to exclaim :

“ Dere is Madame Wingfield, she look ver tired.”

Armand, acting as faithful transcriber, flung down notebook and pencil, and clambered to the sill.

“ Let us bang, and see her jump ! ” was his idea.

So they banged with such a will that Prudence heard the clamour above the weary shrieking of the wind, and looked up.

Elizabeth came into the room then. “ Don't break the window, dears, it would be so cold this weather.”

“ It is Madame Wingfield, and she look ver tired. Shall I not den enter de rain and tell her to come in, Maman ? ”

Renaud was already at the door. Elizabeth went to the window and looked out ; she looked at the girl's back as Prudence walked on up the road.

“ She does look tired—” she said.

It was enough for Renaud ; he was out of the room and the house before Elizabeth had realised anything except the fact of a struggling Armand held firmly in her hands.

Renaud reappeared, wet, but triumphant, with Prudence at his heels.

Elizabeth went to her with outstretched hand. "How nice of you to come in," she said, smiling.

Prudence looked at her with tired, dull eyes.

"He said you wanted me?"

"I'm afraid for no very important reason," said Elizabeth charmingly. "Only that I'm so bored, and I wanted you to have tea with me, will you? It will be such a charity——"

Prudence hesitated.

"It's very kind of you, but I'm afraid I ought to go back——"

"You will have tea here—you and Maman also—n'est-ce pas? With us in dis room! Yes? See, you shall have dis chair—so—and a cushion—so——. Ah yes, and I will rub your head with de eau de cologne, as I do for Maman——"

Renaud's eager little hand was coaxing her towards the chair, his face upturned, beseeching.

Elizabeth saw suddenly a mist creep over the grey eyes before the heavy lids hid them. She looked away and talked in her charming, inconsequent way, while Prudence sat down in the chair indicated by Renaud, and submitted to be deprived of her hat and rain coat. She wore an absent, dreamy expression, as if she were hardly conscious of what was happening to her. A squabble arose over her gloves.

"Dey are mine to put aside!" Renaud declared. "She is mine! Was it not *I* who found her? Is it not *I* who will now doctor her? I ask you, foolish one, is it not so? Pig! Donkey! Bête-ane! Imbecile!"

Elizabeth intervened. Peace; and presently Prud-

ence felt a cold little fragrant dab on her brow, another, a cooing voice :

“Dere den, ma pauvre petite ! See now, it grow bettere. Hush den, chérie—hush. Do not move. Restez tranquille. Ne vous derangez pas, pauvre chérie. . .”

It was an hour later that Ridgeway came into the house, and made his way to the schoolroom. He found it dark and empty, lit only by a great red fire. He went across to the fireplace, and gave the coal a kick that brought forth a flickering flame. Turning his back to it he became aware of a figure lying back in the big old chair that was his favourite. It was Prudence Wingfield, asleep. He looked down on her quiet, pale face, and as he looked she moved her head restlessly, and flung out her hand as if warding something off.

“Not that !” she moaned. “Not that, Evelyn. I can’t—I can’t——”

Ridgeway turned away and moved quietly to the door, but before he reached it, she had sat up with a sudden movement, and her voice rang out fearfully.

“What has happened ? Evelyn——”

“Hush, you have been asleep. You are at Elm Hill.”

“Oh——,” he saw her hand go to her throat, then she spoke quietly.

“I remember. I was so tired, and they were so kind. Have I been asleep long ? I—I must hurry back.” She lifted her head and looked at him. “How long have you been here ?”

“Only a minute or so.”

She twisted her hands together silently. Ridgeway said deliberately :

“You were restless, you were muttering in your

sleep——” he saw the hands grow still. “Something about the rain and getting wet.” He gave a little laugh: “You seemed aggrieved that it was such wet rain,” he said.

The hands unlocked, she smiled.

“I was very wet,” she said, rising. “I can’t understand my falling asleep like that. What is the time?”

“Only just a quarter past four.”

“But I’m more than two miles from Cherry Cross. I—I must hurry. I don’t know where every one is ——”

“Here are some of them, anyway,” Ridgeway said.

Renaud, Armand and André—all on tip-toe, all wide-eyed, each carrying a bottle.

“Oh, Madame, you have awoken! By Jove, did that old Mark wake you, den? See now, we leave you to make de good medicine drinks. Behold, eau sucrée!”

“De orange water!”

“De lemon water!”

Three bottles were waved triumphantly before her eyes.

“How kind of you,” Prudence said.

“Here is tea. Voilà! A cup—why not? You must first drink de eau sucrée!” cried Renaud.

“Den de orange water!”

“Den de lemon water!”

Three beaming, capering little figures—Prudence drank all three drinks, and won their hearts for ever.

“Could she do less?” she asked, when Ridgeway admired her courage.

“Ah, but what an inbleed she would make!” cried Renaud longingly. “Pour moi—how I would like to be her doctor!”

“Madame,” André flung fat arms round her knees. May I den doctere you when you’s malade ? ”

She bent and kissed his dimples.

“I should love you to,” she said.

“Eh bien, mais moi aussi ! ” cried Renaud. “For was it not I dat make you to sleep ? ”

She stroked his head gently.

“It was indeed.”

Elizabeth coming in, made her stay to tea and promised she should be driven back to Cherry Cross.

Prudence apologised for falling asleep ; she thought Renaud must have mesmerised her ; she said she had had a bad night, that was all.

Ridgeway wondered silently what had made him tell that lie ; after all, what she had really said in her sleep did not amount to much. He and Elizabeth talked lightly, argued, disagreed, and Prudence sat very quiet, amused now and again, but Ridgeway felt that she was not with them really. A queer sensation came upon him with the sudden wonder as to what she would be if she were really with them ? With the thought of coldness, came marble, then Galatea—Pygmalion—Had she ever loved that man more than thirty years her elder ? Looking on her delicately featured, calm and reticent face, he could not fancy love had ever softened—warmed it. Was it capable of warming into tenderness, into passion ? He thought not. He could not imagine that quiet aloofness fired into a coming down, a coming near, a dear intimacy. Yet there was for him a great attraction about her ; beside her, in thought, other girls became noisy, uninteresting, shallow. He mused, deep and long.

“Mrs. Wingfield has no cake,” so Elizabeth aroused him.

Cakes were pressed upon her from four different pairs of hands. Ridgeway became extraordinarily conscious of his muteness, but could think of no words with which to break it.

"I met Miss Delford to-day," so he broke it, grateful to Miss Delford. "Nice girl."

Elizabeth demurred.

"She's such a butty person. I'd sooner have a person with a good, honest dislike of everything than a butty one."

Prudence said seriously she hardly knew what a butty person was.

"Oh, the sort who always qualifies a liking with a 'but.' There're heaps of them in the world. I always think God must hate them much worse than real bad people—they're so grudging and ungrateful—'Don't you love gathering primroses?' 'Oh, yes, but there are always such a lot of brambles to scratch one's hands.' 'Are you fond of horses?' 'Oh, yes, but they're such delicate creatures, aren't they? One never knows what will go wrong with them.' 'Do you like the country?' 'Oh yes, but isn't it shocking how muddy one gets one's boots and skirts,' and so on, from an earthquake to a periwinkle—it's just the same."

Prudence gave a little low laugh that arrested Ridgeway's attention again; she was nice when she laughed: how it altered the character of her mouth! It was a very characteristic mouth, with its queer little dip down in the centre of the upper lip. With a short upper lip like hers, that was rather attractive. Everything was characteristic about her—that was it—that was her distinctive charm: she could never be massed with a hundred other girls, as many pretty

girls could ; one would never dare decide beforehand how this girl would act . . .

And her hands were characteristic—long, thin hands with pointed finger tips—he would like to draw her hands. Her feet were characteristic—they were small feet, but not very short, rather, their extreme slimness gave an impression of narrow length . . .

She was going. He was sorry. Might he go with her ?

She said “ No,” with indifferent decision.

He suggested that Mr. Wingfield had asked him to come again ? And wondered had he imagined a faint expression of terror in her eyes, as she replied that he was not well enough to see any one that evening.

She went, and he wandered out into the rain, uneasy, restless. He was dining at the Hall that night ; they did not worry him at dinner, supposing some picture was occupying his thoughts. He sat silent for the most part, worrying. His nature was essentially protective towards weakness, and Prudence had for him, in some subtle way, lost her strength and become pitifully weak. The attraction she undoubtedly had for him, and which he recognised with healthy interest, lent this change in her, or in his thought of her, a poignancy that worried him acutely. Her aloneness grew for him terrific ; possibilities in Wingfield’s face rose up and tormented him. . . .

He left early ; in the doorway he paused and looked back at Muriel, laughing and bending over Sol, with Latimer watching her.

“ I wonder,” he said abruptly, “ what you’d have done if Latimer hadn’t been able to marry you ? ”

There was a startled rush of colour to her cheeks ;

she looked up at him gravely, her hand still on the dog's beautiful head.

"Don't suggest such gruesome horrors," Hugh interposed.

But Muriel said quietly :

"I do not know. I am afraid to probe."

Ridgeway went out into the misty night.

Hugh said passionately :

"God, child, how beautifully honest you are !"

Ridgeway did not cheat his mind as to his purpose ; he never did that sort of thing. He knew that he had left early because he was going to Cherry Cross, and he knew he had no reason for his going, beyond a totally uncalled-for feeling of uneasiness. He walked sharply through the night till he came within sight of the gleaming light high up under the eaves, then he slackened his step, walking slowly, listening, watching. He turned up the lane at the side of the house, and reaching the gate that led into the stable yard he stopped, and resting his arms upon it, stood there. The night was very quiet and moist and cold; now and then an owl's cry broke the stillness ; a cat walked across the yard, dark against the white walls ; he heard the stealthy rustle of a rat in the straw close by. The wet night was hay-sweet from the great stack that loomed through the moonlit mist in the paddock on his left ; to him the smell of stables came pleasingly, bringing with it a reassuring sense of homeliness ; there was the rattle of a chain, the lazy snort of a horse as it pushed about in the manger for stray oats, the stamp of a hoof . . .

No sharp edges—no detail—a marvellous merging into the background—a wonder of delicacy and mystery—colour?—in a way, but soft—greyish—gleams of

light picked out—so—in the leaded casements. The fields behind—what was it showed the boundaries? Lord, what a thing to paint! The meadows were there—separated—yet no defined outlines—and the mist over it all—veiling it—shadows—dark—but not black—a wonderful glooming dark—The misty gleam of the windows—

A few hours later, falling asleep, he muttered triumphantly:

“I could do it! I—see how you’d—get it!”

CHAPTER XI

“ **D**ICKON, would you be sorry if I had a headache ? ”

“ Have you got one, mother ? ”

“ No.”

Dickon stuck his tongue back into his cheek, and went on with his drawing.

Prudence eyed him wistfully ; was he selfish, callous ?

“ You wouldn’t bathe my forehead with eau-de-Cologne if I had a headache ? ” she said, with an unusual somewhat bitter touch of foolishness.

Dickon did not reply. She was obliged to push further.

“ Would you ? ”

“ I haven’t got any eau-de-Cologne,” Dickon responded.

It was so true that she hardly knew how to meet it.

“ Would you put me into a comfortable chair, with cushions ? ”

“ I couldn’t carry you, mother, you’re too heavy, and there’s only one cushion.”

Prudence said more impulsively than usual :

“ Would you like to go and spend the day at Elm Hill ? ”

“ Yes,” he said.

“ Very much ? ”

“ Yes.”

He had put down his pencil ; his grey eyes were glowing.

"How inarticulate you are," she mused.

She rose and came over to the table where he sat.

"Dickon," she said, then stopped abruptly and turned away.

"When may I go, mother?"

"In about half-an-hour Madame du Pierre will call for you on her way back from Barchester. I had a note from her this morning."

He took up his pencil again, and resumed his drawing.

Prudence stood and watched him in grave thought. She had spoken on impulse when she had asked him if he would like to go and spend the day at Elm Hill; till that moment she had not made up her mind whether to accept Elizabeth's invitation. In the past there had once been a cruel snub; she remembered Dickon's questions, his baby woe over the loss of his companions. . . .

"I hate to have to ask you such a question, Mrs. Wingfield, but I must do it for my children's sake——"

That was how it had been excused.

Was it an excuse? Could her baby harm any one?

And then the firm withdrawal——and tears——such passionate baby tears——Bobbie——Gwennie——Ronald——where were they?

The gap made in the small life——the accentuated loneliness——

She had sworn he should never suffer it again.

But Madame du Pierre——she had spoken so softly——
"A house of sickness——so bad for a child——only grown-ups——wasn't it like putting a wild flower into a greenhouse?"

Was it?

"Dickon, are you happy?"

"Yes, thank you."

Foolish question ! Would she never learn to control her tongue ?

“ Dickon, look at me ! ”

“ You do worry, mother.”

“ Go on with your drawing, you poor little martyr.”

Was he like other boys ? Quite ?

“ Dickon, shall we go round to the stables and see Mirth ? ”

An instant dropping of the pencil ; such an eager slipping to the floor.

Was she right to have suggested it ? A moment she hesitated ; then :

“ I’m sorry, dear, I forgot. I must go to your father.”

“ I—shall go alone,” Dickon said defiantly.

“ You know I have forbidden it.”

“ You shouldn’t say you’d come and then not come.”

“ Dickon, you are rude ! ”

“ You shouldn’t.”

He did not say it rudely : she knew it ; he merely told her a fact that went very deep, and meant much to him. She knew that he would never forget it. She said gently :

“ Come, then. Your father will not mind waiting when I tell him what it was for.”

They went round to the stables ; Ferney was in the harness-room listlessly rubbing up shining leather and steel. He touched his cap, and went on with his rubbing. The mare called from her loose-box, and Dickon whispered tremblingly :

“ I do believe she knows me. If only you’d let me come round here sometimes, mother, she’d soon call for me, same as she does for father.”

“ Mind her heels, Dickon.”

“ She won’t kick. How frightened you are of horses, mother ! ”

She watched him curiously as, quite fearless, he went up to the mare.

“ Well, my little beauty ! Steady then. Woa, my little girl——”

“ Dickon, where do you pick up that sort of talk ? ”

“ I don’t know. Doesn’t her coat shine, mother ? Do you think she loves me just a little bit ? ”

The mare was nozzling his fair little head with her soft nose ; Dickon stood, entranced, scarcely breathing.

Prudence watched broodingly. Was this the real Dickon ? In spite of her ? She said sharply :

“ Come. I must go to your father now.”

“ Oh, mother, mayn’t I stay just a minute ? ”

“ You won’t be ready when Madame du Pierre calls for you.”

“ Let me stay.”

A minute she was silent ; then slowly—“ Would you give up your day at Elm Hill to stay here a little while ? ” she asked, and scarcely breathed as she awaited his answer.

“ Yes,” he said without hesitation.

Her face was contorted with a sudden spasm of pain.

Yet his goodness ! Her mandate—meaningless to him—that he was not to go to the stables—never disobeyed——

Was it natural for a boy to be so good ? Wouldn’t other boys disobey again and again ? Fight a decision so cruel ?

She said :

“ Come, Dickon,” hoping, against reason, to be met with a flat refusal.

"Goodbye," Dickon whispered, and burrowed for a moment into the mare's chest.

"Dickon! She might hate it!" Prudence caught his shoulder and pulled him back; the mare startled, shied away. Ferney's head appeared at the door; he spoke soothingly:

"She ain't used to you, m'lady," he said, and went back to the harness-room.

Prudence returned to the house with Dickon; when she caught sight of his face, she exclaimed:

"Darling, you weren't frightened?" and knew at once how foolish the question was.

"You made her shy! You think I'm a baby! Ferney'll think so too, now."

There were tears in his eyes.

Prudence reassured him: Ferney had not seen; he would not think him a baby.

"He said she wasn't used to us. He'll think I don't know how to behave in a stable."

The funny, old-fashioned words were strenuous with deep feeling.

"It's I who don't know, not you, Dickon."

"Yes."

He picked up his pencil again, and climbed into his chair.

"Ferney doesn't like me," he said sadly.

Prudence, thinking of the mare, said: "Dickon, whom do you love best in the world?"

He replied without hesitation:

"Ferney."

She was amazed.

"But you never speak to him——"

A deep red had surged up into his cheek.

"You never see him——"

"I do. I can see him from the window on the stairs."

Enlightenment was coming to her. She recalled a small figure, cramped on the narrow sill, for an hour at a time. . . .

"I can spit just like him," he said, shy pride in his tone.

"Dickon! Only poor men do that."

He said nothing, only his face settled into quietness, and she knew she had stopped his tentative confidences. She tried to start him again.

"What else can you do like Ferney?"

"I don't know."

"Do you love him more than me?"

He bent low over his drawing and did not answer.

"Do you, Dickon?"

"That's silly," he said.

Prudence was silent. She stood a minute watching him, an infinite yearning tenderness transfiguring her, a wondering fear with the tenderness making her face curiously like that of the Sistine Madonna. . . .

Then she went quietly upstairs to Wingfield. He was sitting in his chair, chuckling. "That Davenport's an artful devil! With his smug face, and the air of an undertaker at a funeral! He told me a story just now—about the Marquis of Tonnaingford—Ha! ha!"

"What was it?" Prudence asked, kneeling to pick up some wood that had fallen from the fire.

"I can't tell you, my love! I really can't. Man's story, don't you know, but it was deuced good. Ha, ha, ha! The marquis too. Goes in for being pi, you know. Told me one day I'd live to regret the wasting of my life—told me I was ruining my constitution. Amusin' thing to tell a Wingfield, wasn't it? All got constitution of an ox—But that sly dog of a man of mine! He makes

a story devilish funny, by Jove, with his smug face, and his pulled down lips—devilish funny! Not been so amused for a long time!”

Prudence, kneeling by the fire, looked at him thoughtfully, then she said: “Dickon is going to spend the day with those children at Elm Hill.”

“Glad to hear it; perhaps they’ll knock some of the priggishness out of him.”

A little flush rose to her face; she was worried over the sanity of his answer. Could it be true that Davenport.

“You—seem better this morning?” she said, watching him.

“Better than I’ve felt for a long while, my dear. At this rate I’ll soon be in the saddle again, eh? Oh, not just yet, of course. I’m not a fool. You needn’t pull a long face like that,” he grew peevish. “Any one would think you don’t want me to get well. You’re so devilish chary of your encouragement!”

She moved about the room, putting things away, picking out the dead flowers in the vases.

“Prue, don’t be cross. I didn’t mean it. It was only that I’m pretty well sick of being cooped up indoors. You know, I was never in the house when I could be out of it—not in the old days.”

“I’m not cross, Evelyn,” she said gently. “I think you are wonderfully good. Would you like to walk along the corridor and look out into the yard?”

He shook his head, and gave a queer little laugh.

“I don’t think I could stand that to-day, Prue.”

“Shall I call Dickon to say good-bye?”

“It isn’t the boy I want,” he said wearily. “He stares so.”

“ I must go and help him to get ready, Evelyn, I won't be long.”

“ No, don't be long, Prue, I feel very lonely to-day.”

She gave him a pitiful glance, and quietly left the room.

About five minutes later she came back, and found him standing at the open window ; he looked round eagerly. “ Prue, ask her to come in ! She smiled at me most delightfully. Prue, it's so long since I've talked to a lady—except you—Would she excuse a sickroom, and all this, do you think ? ” he waved his delicate white hand around. “ I'm sure she would. Ask her to take pity on a poor brute shut off from all that makes life bearable. Ask her, Prudence ! ”

“ It will tire you, Evelyn——”

“ It will do me more good than all the doctor's rubbish you dose me with ! Ask her, Prue.”

“ Another day perhaps——”

“ No, now ! I'm quite well enough to see her. Gad, it's quite a treat to see those sorts of clothes again. There'll be a faint scent about 'em—I know. I'll ask her myself ! ”

She saw him put his head out of the window, heard him make his request in his most charming manner, heard Elizabeth's gay reply, was forced to go forward and add her request to his.

“ Quick, Prue ! Give me a hair brush—that's right. And a few drops of eau de cologne. D'you think this coat's all right ? All right—all right—I won't talk much. What a worrier you are ! Pull that curtain across a bit—there's no need to accentuate what a wreck I am. That's better. Now, if she sits there. How do I look ? What the deuce is up now ? Anybody would think it was a chorus girl I'd insisted on having in ! Lord, it's no wonder if I get a bit tired of that glum face, and

want to see another ! Aren't you going down to receive her and bring her up ? Madame du Pierre, you said—Um, nice French flavour about it. Wait a minute, give me the looking-glass. . . .”

Prudence, in the hall, asked Elizabeth not to stay with him long, and not to excite him.

Elizabeth, coming softly into the room, was received in the most courtly way ; she found him charming. She stayed about a quarter of an hour, talking in her most delightful way, listening to his stories, accepting his charming deference as her due. Prudence sat near him, quiet and grave ; she forgot to laugh several times when a laugh was expected of her ; she hurried Elizabeth away before there was the least suggestion of weariness or excitement about him.

Elizabeth, passing Ridgeway near the Hall, painting, opined to him that she was not so much surprised now.

“ Oh,” said Ridgeway, not asking to what she alluded, because he wanted her to leave him to his painting. Then he looked up and saw she had Dickon in the carriage.

“ Been to Cherry Cross ? ” he said, with a little more interest.

“ I had to drive into Barchester, so called for him. I've been sitting with his father.”

“ Oh. What do you think of him ? ”

“ A charming man ! I could fall in love with him myself. I always can with that type of man. He must have been a dear before he was so wrecked by sickness.”

Ridgeway squeezed more white out, and did not answer.

“ I suppose you want me to go ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Artists are rude beasts ! Give me a good old sporting gentleman ! It was very interesting anyway,

and I've discovered that the lady is exceedingly jealous ! Drive on, John ! ”

It was a few hours later when Prudence came along.

“ I heard Madame du Pierre mention that you were painting the old mill to-day,” she said in her direct way, “ so I came to find you. I wanted to know, whether if you had nothing else to do, you would just come in for a little while this evening, and sit with Evelyn.”

“ Of course—I shall be delighted.”

“ Thank you ; he is very depressed to-day.”

“ By Jove, I don't wonder ! ” Ridgeway ejaculated. “ To be shut up in a sick-room on a day like this ! ”

She looked about her thoughtfully ; at the mill with the stream running past it, the foam of its haste over rocks a-gleam in the pale sunshine ; at the tall elms behind, so delicately and wonderfully etched against the fresh-washed blue sky. . . .

Ridgeway said, stepping back to judge the effect of what he had just done : “ If I were a poet I would write endless poems on these days we get in February and March. There's that thing——”

“ I do not care for poetry,” she said, and turned away.

“ You mean in a wholesale sort of way ? Just because it is poetry ? Oh, neither do I——”

“ I mean any poetry.”

“ Don't you really ? ”

“ No.”

Ridgeway, on a rueful impulse, called after her :

“ Won't you look at my daub ? ”

She did not turn her head.

“ I mustn't wait,” she said. “ I must get back.”

He looked after the slim upright figure in its extremely well-cut, but shabby, coat and skirt.

“ Snubbed, by Jove ! And it’s rather a good daub too ! ”

Ferney greeted him that evening with a curious contraction of the muscles around his mouth, which made the tip of his funny little nose quiver, and which Ridgeway construed into a smile.

“ Heard you used to go out with the V.W.H., sir ? ”

Ridgeway assented.

“ Second whip with ’em two seasons, sir.”

He came closer.

“ I ’oudn’t mention ’em *too* intimate, if you don’t mind, sir, it was out with ’em his lordship—lost—Triumph II.—” his husky voice trailed off into silence.

“ Triumph II. ! The Grand National Triumph of six or seven years ago ? ” ejaculated Ridgeway.

“ Same, sir.”

The groom peered up at him wistfully. “ Ever see ’im, sir ? ”

“ Rather ! Why, man, I saw him win the National ! Why, good lord, it was you——”

“ Yes, sir, I was ridin’ ’im, sir.”

Ridgeway held out his hand, and they shook silently.

“ Always ’ot, sir—came to grief over a stone wall—broke ’is neck. His lordship don’t like to talk about ’im to no one but me, sir.”

“ I understand,” Ridgeway said, and went ruminating into the house.

“ Poor little chap ! ” he muttered. “ I begin to see the tragedy of his life here ! ”

He found his host in his most affable mood, and pathetically pleased to see him.

“ It’s most awfully decent of you, my dear boy, to look up a poor old cripple like this ! I’ve had quite an excit-

ing day—friend of yours—most charming creature—you forgive an old man?—I declare when she went away I went down—down—down——” he pointed to the floor with a gesture of his beautiful hand, and shrugged his shoulders. “The sight of so much beauty and youth—such vivacity and amiability. I felt ill and old and good for nothing! I am afraid,” turning to Prudence with a winning smile, “I was a sore trial to this patient child.”

“No, Evelyn, only I was sorry.”

“A gentle heart,” he murmured vaguely; then turned again to Ridgeway:

“But I am better to-day. I haven’t felt so strong for a long while. Next season—Ah, I have hopes. There’s a certain little coat put away in that cupboard there—a glorious colour, my boy, a good colour! What d’you think of that curtain there over the door, eh? Couldn’t get just the pink in anything but velvet, could we, Prue? Now, you’re an artist, isn’t it a good match, eh?”

“Ripping!” Ridgeway assented. “And the shadow in the folds—there—why, isn’t it a good old worn bit at the end of the season?”

“Good! Good! You hear that, Prudence? I’ve seen it just that colour, many a time. Fetch that little coat I was speaking of, my dear. No worn patch there *yet*. New coat—one of Poole’s—never went to any one else,” he stretched out trembling hands for the hunting coat, and sat smoothing and fondling it. “Fits me like a glove. I was made for the saddle—so I’ve been told by many soft tongues. Well, well—who knows? When I was a lad of fourteen—some few years back—so the story runs, I wrote in a fair lady’s album in answer to ‘What is your dearest ambition in life?’ ‘To die in the saddle!’ Not bad for a youngster, that, eh?”

Never changed—got a bit scared it'd be a bed, after all, once or twice lately, but I'm a lot better to-day——”

Prudence left the room quietly, and went along to Dickon's little bedroom.

“ Not asleep yet, Dickon ? ”

He sat up in his bed, the candle she carried flickering its light on his fair little head.

“ I want a pony to ride,” he said.

“ You are too young, Dickon.”

“ I'm more than six.”

“ Only a few weeks more.”

“ I'm more than six.”

“ Anyway I cannot afford to buy you one.”

“ Then I hope I will die to-night,” Dickon said, and lay down.

“ Dickon ! ” she put the candle on a chest of drawers, and sat down on his bed. “ Don't you know that I would let you have it if I could ? ”

No answer.

“ Dickon ! ”

No answer.

She bent over him.

“ Oh, my dear, don't be so naughty ! Why won't you answer me ? ”

“ Go 'way ! I'm tryin' to die.”

“ Would you die and leave me, Dickon ? ”

“ Would God give me a pony to ride ? ”

“ If He did, would you leave me for a pony ? ”

Dickon thought.

“ I 'spect I would,” he observed honestly.

“ Oh, Dickon.”

“ Well you see, mother, you can't gal'p on four legs with your tail streamin' behind, nor you can't jump

ditches and hedges. Renaud is goin' to have a pony. His mother gives him everythin' he asks for," he added reproachfully.

Prudence rose.

"If you care more for a pony than you do for me, you won't want me to kiss you good-night," she said.

She walked to the door.

"You see, I'd gal'p down from Heaven sometimes to see you, mother."

"Good-night, Dickon."

He did not call her back, and Prudence returned sadly to the other room. Ridgeway, eyeing her in her plain white shirt and grey skirt, wondered what she would look like in a pretty evening frock. He spoke on the thought :

"There's a furious discussion being waged in the *Hourly News*—have you seen it?—as to what form of clothing is most becoming to the average woman."

"Why, gay rags, of course," Wingfield laughed. "Unless it's a riding habit—I don't know—I've seen some deuced pretty women in habits. Prudence looks well on a horse, though she hasn't ridden much. But you should see her in her finery. Prue, why don't you ever wear anything but that ugly white shirt and a short skirt? Think I'm not worth taking any trouble over, now, eh?" he looked at her wistfully. "I'd like to see you in a pretty white frock again, little girl," he said gently.

Ridgeway looked at her expectantly; he was glad it was to be white; he thought she would look charming in white, or in light green—a greyish green—she'd be ripping in that—with her white skin—

"It is too late now, Evelyn. I want you to go to bed early," the quiet voice sounded somehow inexorable.

“Go to bed? My dear, don't be absurd! It's not half-past nine. You know I cannot sleep if I go before ten or eleven. Do you want me to have a good night? Then give me something sweet to dream about. A little girl in a pretty little frock, eh? Come, Prue, don't be unkind.”

“Not to-night, Evelyn,” she said.

“Yes, to-night, my dear! Run away and put it on—something soft and frilly, don't you know—that sort of thing. Come now, Mr. Ridgeway's an artist. I want him to see you in a decent frock. He wants to see you, don't you, my boy, eh?”

Ridgeway smiled, and said, just too late to call it back in answer to what he thought was a faint appeal in the eyes she turned to him:

“If it's not too much trouble.”

“It really doesn't affect the matter, one way or the other, Evelyn, what Mr. Ridgeway wishes. I am too tired to go and dress to-night.”

She left the room, and went down into the hall, where she sat down in a chair pulled close up to the fire. To her, Dickon came.

“I want you more'n a pony, mother, so you may's well come up and tuck me in.”

She followed him up the stairs and into his bedroom.

“It was very unkind of you to go away like that, mother.”

“Was it, Dickon?” her arms were round him, pressing him closer and closer.

“Yes, because you see I'd got to *think* about it, 'fore I could decide which I liked best.”

“Apparently you had. What made you decide you preferred me?”

“Well, I thought in Heaven there would be no ditches

and hedges to jump over—only clouds—and a pony can't tell me tales and— and——”

“ What, Dickon ? ”

“ I'd got to have you say good-night properly some way.”

She gave a little laugh, and her arms tightened about him.

“ You don't *very* often hug me like this, do you ? Renaud's mother kisses him ever so.”

Presently he said :

“ I do think you ought to tell me a tale *now*, as I've decided to have you instead of a pony. It's very sad not to have a pony to ride.”

Down in the hall when Ridgeway bade her good-night he paused.

“ I'm awfully sorry if I—er—worry'd you about that—er——”

“ No ; you didn't worry me. Good-night.

Still he lingered.

“ That man—Davenport—is he—er—satisfactory ? ”

She gave him a swift glance.

“ I think so.”

“ Oh : looks a mournful sort of fool, doesn't he ? ”

“ Yes ; but he does his work, and Evelyn doesn't dislike him.”

“ No ? ”

He moved towards the door.

“ You don't dislike him either ? ”

“ No.”

She hesitated, then, a slight colour in her cheeks, said quietly :

“ You know, of course, that Evelyn's mind is—affected. He—doesn't—I mean, he sometimes fancies

things—makes up stories, and—and that sort of thing.”

“Oh, does he? Yes. He is extraordinarily clear on some points.”

“Yes. He is, of course, worse some days than others. This has been a very good day. But if you are coming to sit with him sometimes, you ought to know.”

“Thank you,” he said gently. “Has he been like this for long?”

“Four years last November.”

“Good God!”

The exclamation was involuntary; he apologised absently.

“He had a stroke. Before that he had been ill—a terrible fall hunting—the horse was killed. Evelyn went about as usual before he was strong again. Then he had the stroke——” She spoke in short sentences; it was as if speaking were a relief, and yet had not been indulged in for so long that she found it difficult to give expression to the impulse.

Ridgeway went very thoughtfully away.

CHAPTER XII

SHE'S nursed him like that for more than four years." So Ridgeway told Muriel out on the terrace, where the subtle elusive suggestion of spring lay waiting in grass and tree, and swelling buds of narcissus and daffodil; where the sun gleamed on every drop of moisture and turned the wet boughs of the trees to a wonderful pale gold; and the scent was the will o' the wisp scent of the lurking spring, faint and poignantly sweet, and not to be labelled by mortal tongue.

Muriel wrote to her :

"Can't you come and have tea with me? I know visitors are a nuisance in a house of sickness, but could you not get away for an afternoon? Forgive my interfering, but it does one so much good to get away from a sick room sometimes."

Prudence replied in a stiff note of thanks, and regretted that she could not manage it.

Muriel, driven to it, upheld her to Mrs. Darlington by mention of the long nursing. Mrs. Darlington's face, as much as was visible beneath her hat, was sarcastically amused. She replied that to her the man's illness and the woman's hanging on, were the most disgusting parts of the whole business. She pointed out that Prudence was desperately holding on for what he might leave her when he died.

"She can't have any affection left for him, if she ever had any to start with, which one doubts, but he is

frightfully rich, and she daren't leave him for a day in case he should alter his will! At present he has left most of his money to her. Of course, one excuses her a little because of the child, but still it's very nauseating."

"Servants' gossip always is, don't you think?" Muriel suggested.

Mrs. Darlington's sharp chin beneath her hat-brim reddened a little.

"People are most frightfully amused at *your* casting your protective shadow over the place," she observed.

"Yes?"

"Madame du Pierre one hardly wonders at. She is, of course, exceedingly broad-minded and very French, but really, you! It is too funny to see you consorting with a naughty, bad woman!" She ended on a playful note, being ever mindful of the social importance of the mistress of the Hall.

"You see," said Muriel calmly, "I happen to think she is probably a very good woman." She rose. "I'm sorry, but I have an engagement——"

Mrs. Darlington got to her feet in a flutter of anger and conciliation.

"One hopes you may be right—one hates to be uncharitable—Where *is* my bag? I do hope I haven't kept you—Mr. Ridgeway thinks with you, doesn't he? Or does his interest in Cherry Cross mean that he thinks just the opposite? One knows men—I must hurry——"

Walking down the drive Mrs. Darlington was chiefly conscious of a fierce and vindictive wish for a carriage, or a car. Outside, Mrs. Dormer-Jones' car passed her, and was hailed angrily by Mrs. Darlington. She got in, unasked.

"I don't care where you are going," she said, sinking

back with a sigh into the padded seat. "I'm sick of my own legs!"

"I don't wonder! It's these new skirts—they're so *awfully* indecent! D'you know *I* couldn't wear them. George said to me the other day——"

"To think George means this—and your delightful house—and your little house in town—— Lord, what a fool I was to be romantic and marry a penniless young lieutenant!"

Mrs. Dormer-Jones' face behind its thick veil grew red.

"I'm sure, Dolly, you needn't talk as if I wasn't romantic, too! I'm sure, I fell in love with George *head over heels!* And——"

"Are you sure it was George, and not what was included with George, Mary?"

"You're very unkind to me! I don't know why you should be——"

"Oh, well, don't cry about it. Where are you going?"

"To Barchester."

"You'll have to take me along then. I refuse to walk a step at the present moment."

"You know I'm only too *glad* to give my friends a lift, Dolly. I remember too *well* the days when I had to walk wherever I wanted to go. I've never got over the delight of having a motor car of my own; I don't think I ever shall. George says that's why I keep so *young*, because I'm so *keen* about things——"

"You pass Cherry Cross, don't you?" interrupted Mrs. Darlington.

"Yes. I always feel so *glad* it isn't *nearer*, so that there need be no question of *calling*, you know, because I'd *hate* to be unkind, but people do say such *horrid* things about them——"

“ Well, the woman does seem pretty bad—so horribly, sordidly bad, you know—one can’t forgive that sort of thing. You may drop me there, Mary.”

“ What ? Drop you at Cherry Cross ? Why ? You’re *not* going to call, Dolly ? After what you’ve always said about her ! Why, you said——”

“ That’s just why I am going to call, my dear creature. I’m bored. I want to see what she’s like—the man too, if only I get the chance.”

“ Oh, Dolly ! George would never allow me to, even if I wanted to ! ”

“ Well, my George, whose name is Teddy, is in India, thank heaven, and can’t forbid my doing anything ! ”

“ But surely his wishes would be even *more* sacred to you——”

“ Oh, Heavens, how more than prehistoric you are, Mary ! Isn’t this the place ? ” She bade the chauffeur stop. “ Good-bye. When will you be passing back ? ”

“ In—about—I don’t know—an hour, perhaps. Oh, go on, Wilson ! Go on ! Dolly, hadn’t you better come with——”

The words were cut off with a swirl of dust and petrol.

Mrs. Darlington pursued her way up the path to the door and rang.

“ Oh, she was so sorry, her car was returning from Barchester at once—it was so cold—might she just come in and wait ? ” So she spoke upon receiving Prudence’s usual refusal to see visitors.

She was admitted into the hall, and informed she had better sit there, as there was no fire in the drawing-room ; she was supplied with papers and magazines, told that the mistress was sorry she could not leave the master, and left alone.

Mrs. Darlington smiled, remembered the shops in

Barchester, gave the car two hours at least, and settled down to wait. The house was very quiet; once the quiet was broken by the dreary voice of a man singing, out of tune, the verse of a hymn. It was stopped by the hoarse admonition in the little maid's tones, to remember that the maister was asleep.

Mrs. Darlington smiled again. He was asleep; it was evidently important that he should not be disturbed; her messages had been taken upstairs cheerfully enough; it meant that the woman was not with him, and her excuse for not coming down, a lie.

Mrs. Darlington rose and rang a bell.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, but—" she coughed, "I've such a tiresome throat—could you bring me a glass of water? If I have to go without my tea, I invariably start coughing."

The maid disappeared, and Mrs. Darlington heard her thudding up the back stairs.

"Good!" she muttered.

The maid poked her head round a door, and said consolingly:

"You may have some tea—Mistress says so."

Mrs. Darlington, eating cake and sipping tea in solitude, looked direfully at the stairs, and pondered the possibility of hearing a fancied call for help from upstairs; her mouth had settled into a thin line. Then Dickon came down the stairs.

"Mother told me not to come," he said, pausing half way down.

"I should like you to come and say how-de-do," responded Mrs. Darlington, who hated children.

"I'll go and ask mother if I may."

"Oh, you may. She only told you not to in case you would worry me. What is that you are carrying?"

“ A drawing. I copied one of Renaud’s. Renaud is an artist. I think I’d better ask mother,” he turned to go upstairs. Then Mrs. Darlington, from sheer bad-temper and no instinct of a boy’s susceptibility, hit him sharply with a :

“ What an excessively good little boy you are ! ”

He paused, his square little back to her ; Mrs. Darlington pushed with a spiteful : “ Well, why don’t you run back to your mother, like a good little baby ? ”

And Dickon came down into the hall.

“ Show me your picture. Why, how nice ! Did you really draw that yourself ? What a clever little boy. It’s beautiful.”

“ What is it ? ” Dickon asked.

She risked :

“ Oh, a house and a garden, of course.”

Dickon turned away without answering.

“ Isn’t it ? ” she asked sharply.

“ It’s a mount’in torrent gushin’ over rocks.”

“ Oh dear ! Of course ! How foolish of me.”

“ I knew,” said Dickon over his shoulder, “ you didn’t know what it was.”

“ Really ? And did you think it very foolish of me ? ”

“ Yes.”

Mrs. Darlington smothered a longing to rise and smack him, with a suave :

“ Your poor father is very ill, isn’t he ? ”

“ Sometimes.”

Mrs. Darlington, alert, begged him to have a piece of cake, but he refused.

“ Do you love your father very much ? ”

“ He’s goin’ to take me out ridin’ when he’s better ; he says he’ll buy me a pony.”

“ Oh ! will that be soon ? ”

“ He said next week.”

“ Oh ! ”

So his illness was a fabrication !

“ He’s goin’ to ride Mirth.”

“ I see. That will be very nice. Are you very fond of horses ? ”

“ I’m father’s son, you see.”

What a little prig !

“ Shall I draw you ? ” he asked.

“ Yes, do. Am I easy to draw ? ”

“ I think so ; you’re like a parrot, and I can draw parrots.”

“ Dickon, come here.”

Dickon’s fair little face grew very red.

“ Oh, it was my fault ! Do forgive me, but he’s so sweet ! ”

Mrs. Darlington rose, and hurried towards the figure coming down the stairs. “ I told him he might come to me. I did so want him. I have so enjoyed my tea, but I feel so conscience-stricken. A glass of water was all I needed. Do sit down and talk. How is your poor—how is Mr. Wingfield ? Is he better ? ”

“ He is about the same as usual, thank you.”

“ It’s very sad. I hope you didn’t mind my calling. I know you do not want callers, and of course I understand—quite—and the car had gone on, you see—so stupid of the man——”

“ I hope you will stay here till your car fetches you, but you must excuse me.—Come, Dickon.”

In Mrs. Darlington’s mind ran—

“ Ordinary—dull—no charm—pallid—too thin—no figure—no wonder she has to work hard to keep the man and his money ! ”

“ Oh, won't you stay just a minute? Mustn't I really keep you? It's so dull all alone——”

“ I am sorry: I must go back.”

“ Prudence!”

The man's voice! Such a pleasant voice too! Mrs. Darlington, a-fire with baffled curiosity, rage, spitefulness, watched for a second the girl's form disappearing round the bend of the staircase—called:

“ Is that you, Mr. Wingfield? I am so sorry you are too bad to receive visitors!”

Waiting breathlessly she heard him:

“ What's that, eh? Prue, was that a lady speaking to me?”

And Prudence, soothing him, endeavouring to get him back to his room. With one swift glance in the mirror, hanging on the wall, she cried, patting her hair:

“ It was only me! Do forgive me, but I hoped you were coming down to see me.”

“ Prudence, I really must insist! I am quite well enough to receive this lady——”

“ Oh, may I come up? Really? How kind of you!”

Mrs. Darlington was up the stairs on the last word, and advancing graciously to the little group in the corridor.

“ If you will forgive my receiving you in a sick room,” Wingfield said. “ Ah, it is most gracious of you, dear lady, to take pity on an uninteresting invalid——”

“ I'm not so sure he is uninteresting,” Mrs. Darlington archly said. “ Oh, one hears stories,” she shrugged her shoulders. “ One can't shut one's ears!”

“ Stories? Stories about me?” Wingfield chuckled. “ Sunday school stories, eh? Now this is a comfortable chair. You pardon an invalid's room? I can manage,

Prue, I can manage! The dear child is apt to forget how strong I grow lately. This morning I went for a nice little canter—very gentle, don't you know, and felt all the better for it—little mare as gentle with me as if I were a baby! Passed a perambulator without a glance. What do you think of that? Ordinarily we have a fight over 'em, don't you know—can't bear 'em—terrified of 'em. Oh, she knew, bless her. Fond of hunting, Mrs. — er——”

“Darlington. I adore it, but I get so few chances; we're as poor as church mice—disgustingly poor! My husband has only his pay, and a pittance that barely pays for my hats, and a few things like that, you know!”

He cast a glance between half-closed lids at her hat.

“That face surely should always have a beautiful frame,” he said.

“I think he should rest now,” Prudence said to Mrs. Darlington.

“Are you tired? Shall I go? You look so well and bright it is hard to believe you are an invalid.” Mrs. Darlington, smiling, seemed to accept his compliment.

“I am not in the least tired. If you will be so good as to stay a little longer. My wife's anxiety is, perhaps, a little excessive at times.”

“She likes to keep you all to herself perhaps!” Mrs. Darlington laughed as she spoke. “It's a way wiv——they have, I believe.”

“Ha! Ha! Jealous, perhaps? It's always been the same! Not my fault, I assure you. But always the same. Never any cause, of course—you understand?”

“Of course. The stories I have heard help me to understand that at once!”

“Good! Very good! Ha, ha, ha! Mrs. Darlington, you have a pretty wit, as well as a pretty face, and when

they go together—well——” he raised his delicate hands. “Be gentle with me,” he besought, “I am still weak.”

“Is that a new symptom—where women are concerned?” she asked.

He was again delighted. Prudence intervened presently once more, then sat silent while the interchange of innuendo, compliment and joke went on, till Mrs. Darlington, hearing the car outside, rose to go, and he said to her:

“Next autumn—ah, perhaps there’ll be a nice little mount waiting here for you then, eh? That so charming a lady should get no opportunity for displaying——”

“Th’ moter’s waiting and puffin’ as if it’s going to burst, mistress,” so Lydia’s voice came through the aperture of the door which Prudence had opened.

“It’s too kind of you! And will *you* take me, dear Mr. Wingfield? I’m rather a timid rider——” She caught herself up at the unmistakable frown of pending refusal upon his face. “Only to the meet, of course! I always refuse to hang on to some poor wretch of a man who probably wants to tear straight across country, over horrible ditches and hedges and things——”

“Well, well, that’s very sensible of you; nothing makes a woman so disliked as when, as you say, she insists upon hanging on to some unfortunate wretch—Ha! ha! Your description of a man’s hunting is very amusing, don’t you know. . . .”

In the hall she said to Prudence:

“Your—Mr. Wingfield is not nearly so ill as I expected.”

“No?”

“I have so enjoyed talking to him! I wish I lived nearer, so that I could run in more often than I’m afraid I shall be able to manage. Good-bye.”

“He is worse than he sometimes seems,” Prudence said. “He must not be excited. It is very kind of you, but I must ask you not to come again.”

Mrs. Darlington expressed extreme surprise. “Oh, but indeed you are quite wrong! Do believe me, my visit has done him a world of good. And it really is no hardship to sit with him, as it is with most invalids, he is so amusing, isn’t he? So charming——”

“It is very kind of you to say so, but you must allow me to know best.”

“Ah, but I do not allow you! Visitors are bad for him, you say? Yet I understand that Mr. Ridgeway is a favoured visitor?”

“Yes.”

“You make an exception in his favour?”

“Yes.”

Her cold calmness was incensing Mrs. Darlington to a bitterer spitefulness. She gave a little affected laugh.

“And Mr. Wingfield makes an exception in mine, you see.”

There was a slight pause.

“Mr. Wingfield is too ill to be capable of judging what is good for him.”

“I see. And you are to judge?”

“Yes. I am afraid I must go——”

“And your judgment is in favour of male visitors alone?”

“My judgment is in favour of what is good for him.”

“Mr. Ridgeway of course is good for him?”

“Yes; he has tastes in common, and does not excite him at all.” She turned to go up the stairs.

Mrs. Darlington laughed again.

“Jealousy, you know, we are taught is a very yellow sin!”

It was then, with the genuine look of incredulous surprise which Prudence involuntarily turned upon the sharp, powdered and rouged face, that Mrs. Darlington's rage rose to a point when at all costs, it had to be fed, and she said drawlingly :

" Really, Mrs.—Miss—er——"

Prudence waited.

" Miss—er—I really don't know your name——"

" Willoughby," Prudence said.

" Oh—thanks, well really, Miss Willoughby, Mr. Wingfield has entreated me to come and see him again, and I consider it only kind to do so. Good-bye."

Prudence went slowly up the stairs, her head high, and into Wingfield's room.

" That woman—most amusing creature—lord, I know her sort through and through, my dear ! A lady by birth, and by nothing else, don't you know ! All the instincts of a washerwoman, only it's rather hard on the washerwoman——"

" Then, Evelyn, you won't want to see her again, will you ? "

" Eh ? " he gave her a sharp obstinate glance. " Why not ? She amuses me ! She wants to come ; she's pretty keen on coming ! Ha, ha ! And she's not bad-looking—has been a deuced fine-woman in her time. Lord, don't she swallow flattery, my dear ? They're so easy to get on with—that kind—impossible to offend 'em. Not like you——"

" Evelyn, she insulted me."

" Did she, by Jove ? Ha, ha, ha ! Oh, you women ! So I'm not too old and done-for to have two women quarrelling over me yet ? Lord, how familiar it seems ! Makes me feel a dozen years younger. So she insulted you, my poor little snow-princess, did she ? Wish I'd

been there, by Jove ! Did she fire the ice at all, I wonder ? Very funny—very funny that,” he chuckled and muttered. “ Fire—ice——” he seemed to collapse suddenly in his chair. “ I’ve got no fingers, Prue,” he whispered with a frightened whimper. “ They—they’ve gone—I daren’t look—but I can feel they are gone—lumps of ice—heavy—dead stuff——”

She knelt beside his chair, and gently chafed his hands.

“ You are over-tired, Evelyn, and your hands are cold.”

“ You won’t tell me the truth—you are too kind—but I know ! Don’t let her see—that woman, Prue. Quick, fetch me a pair of gloves—hideous—hideous—stumps——”

She fetched the gloves, and worked them over his limp fingers.

“ That’s a cruel stroke,” he was muttering. “ A Wingfield’s hands always one of his chief beauties—how hold rein ?—Can’t hold rein with no fingers—poor devil ! Oh, poor old chap—Prue, I want my crop—one of ’em—that one—see if I can hold it with stump of hand—one in bedroom—not that——”

She went into his room to fetch it, and coming back, found him on all fours crawling aimlessly about the room.

“ What is it, Evelyn ? ”

“ Rings, my love ! Where are my rings, I want to know ? If my fingers have gone, the rings must be somewhere. Confound it, that’s the merest common sense ! There’s the one with the emerald—pretty little woman gave that to me—great dark eyes—Lady Hamilton sort of woman—forget her name. And the opal—beauty—‘ unlucky ’ she said, ‘ well, you don’t deserve anything else.’ Cruel, wasn’t she ? But such a beauty——”

She rang the bell sharply twice, and Davenport came into the room.

Wingfield peered up at him through the legs of a table.

“There’s that artful dog!” he said and began to chuckle. “Any more stories, eh? Oh, you needn’t look at me with that long monkey’s face now, my man! Want me to get up, do you? Well, it’s like your damned impertinence, confound you! Mayn’t I sit where I choose, eh? Get out, you fool, or I’ll fetch you one in the wind, and then you’ll feel pretty sick.”

“If you’ll just hallow me, sir——” imperturbably Davenport continued to raise him, till he had settled him into his chair. Wingfield drew a deep breath, and then fell to swearing horribly at the man. Prudence left the room.

CHAPTER XIII

TO them at the Hall having breakfast, came Renaud. A whirl of happiness, of excitement, an incoherent beseeching, and all the glad young meaning of the springlike day seemed to find its expression in him. "For indeed if I do not den live de day, in de out of door I die! I *bust*, by Jove!" He had finished.

He stood there, in the charming sunny room, fragrant with the scent of flowers, agleam with glints of sunshine on china, silver and damask, full, in a glowing, subtle way, of the happiness of the two who breakfasted there every morning with the joy of a new day, beginning. . . .

Muriel was smiling.

"I believe I too should bust, Renaud."

Ridgeway, who was breakfasting at the Hall, after an early gallop with Latimer, twisted his head over his shoulder and observed that he believed he was beginning to already, and called upon Renaud to examine his coat across the back.

Renaud, beaming, exclaimed:

"Eh bien, but you are de old buck, Mark!" and preparing for an exit called back: "Den I go to tell Maman dat we all come here, and spend de day out of de door,—c'est décidé!"

Latimer said sadly: "Don't you care that I'm not coming, Renaud?"

"You? En verité, Monsieur? Ah, mais pourquoi?"

I ask you, Monsieur, why stay in de house and bust ? ”
He was upon Hugh, beseeching.

“ I shan’t be in the house, old man, much. I’ve to ride about to see one or two farmers, and that sort of thing. Business, you know, Renaud.”

Renaud flung his hands wide in a gesture of ineffable weariness.

“ Ah, dis beesiness ! I go to Maman, and she say, ‘ Non, mon enfant, je suis occupée ! Je n’ai pas le temps.’ I go to Papa, he have to write a book about de worrms. ‘ I am busy, Renaud.’ I am glad dat I shall be an artist ! For dey have no business, n’est-ce pas ? ”

“ Oh, haven’t they ? ” exclaimed Ridgeway. “ Beastly hard business sometimes.”

But Renaud did not heed him, he was away out of the open window, with a last admonition :

“ Sol—he will come also ! ”

“ We must take rugs—the ground is wet——” Muriel mused.

Back came Renaud’s head :

“ Mark, you will paint, eh ? ”

“ Oh, yes, old chap.”

“ I also will paint. Au ’voir.”

Back once more.

“ I would ver much like to take with us le pauvre petit Dickon. I am giving him de lessons in painting, you see, and he has no pony to ride.”

“ We could picnic in the glen beyond Wootley,” Muriel said. “ And call for him.”

“ Bien ! ”

Renaud disappeared well-pleased.

Muriel said thoughtfully :

“ I wonder if we could get Mrs. Wingfield to come too ? ”

.

"Thank you very much, but I couldn't possibly come. If you will take Dickon I shall be very grateful."

"You are looking very white," Ridgeway said with a grave kindness. "I think you'd feel all the stronger afterwards."

"I am never ill. I believe Dickon is in the garden. Let us go and look."

In the garden—fresh, sweet, softly warm—three little voices entreating in French and English—André's fat arms encircling her knees—Prudence looked out helplessly to Muriel's face. Dickon said :

"I do wish you'd make up your mind, mother, the pony's tired of standin' "

Back to the grave little fair face came her eyes. Did he, of all of them, not care whether she came or stayed behind ?

She loosened clinging arms.

"I cannot come," she said quietly. "Dickon, come in, and I will get you ready."

Ridgeway said :

"I wonder if I might run up for a chat till the boy's ready ? "

"I wish you would."

Prudence, lacing shoes, buttoning gaiters, blinked queer, unaccustomed tears from her eyes. The sweet appeal of the garden and those boys had unnerved her more than was usual with her. It was as well that Dickon's staid voice had come to steady her. She looked up wistfully, and met brimming eyes. . . .

"My darling——"

"Well, I—I did—think—when you—w—wouldn't say—that you *wouldn't* come——"

"You want me, sweet ? "

"Yes."

“I must not leave your father; he wouldn't like it, dear. But you must enjoy yourself and tell me all about it when you come home. Now come and say good-bye to your father.”

“A picnic in March? Well, I'd join you myself if I could. Prudence, my dear, I don't see why you should stay at home, because I have to. It would do you good to go, my child. I fear I am very selfish. I keep you too much at my side. Run and put on your hat, and a warm coat—be careful to take a warm wrap of some sort. We can't have you catching cold.”

“Oh, but Evelyn——” Prudence looked at him astonished. “I would rather not leave you for so long——”

“There, there, my child! I insist! I feel particularly well to-day. I have a little idea I wish to work out—it's about horses for the army, my dear boy—and I shall be quite happy. Now, Prudence, I really must insist. Run away, my dear, at once! You are keeping your friends waiting.”

Gracious, kindly, he waved aside her objections, and Prudence gave in. Going down the path she said to Ridgeway:

“Did you ask permission for me to go?”

“Oh no,” Ridgeway said, but he looked guiltily away from her clear eyes. “It's only half a mile further on—the glen—do you know it? It's rather hidden away. If you'll get in, I'm going to walk on.”

Prudence, apologising for keeping Muriel waiting, settled down vaguely in a nest of boys, and waved her hand to the white face smiling benignly down at them from the window.

She was, at first, absent, distraite, her mind evidently not at ease, but Muriel, tactfully leaving her chiefly to

the boys, saw with pleasure that slowly she was beginning to enjoy herself. She noticed how her eyes followed Dickon, was surprised once or twice to detect an unexpected sternness towards him. Was her nature hard? Was that coldness in her features in her nature too? Yet she further surprised Muriel by detailing carefully to her two or three very ordinary sayings of the child's, asking tentatively if she thought them very unusual for a boy of six?

Maternal pride most certainly! And then followed a long list of his likes and dislikes; it appeared he would not eat potatoes, and he preferred sweet puddings to meat. Then a cold apology for such uninteresting talk.

And again a sternness over a childish naughtiness.

Was Elizabeth right, she thought, when Prudence sat unmoved through Mark's beautiful reading of "The Eve of St. Agnes," in thinking her bovine? Was she bovine—just a little?

Gently probing she met the blank wall of an indifferent "I do not care for poetry."

Not care! On a day like this! Muriel, childishly desperate, found herself pointing out this—that—the wonder of boughs and tiny branches against the blue sky; the brilliant blue of the pools in the ruts made by the carting away of trees, the glorious sun-swathed mist hovering lower down the glen. . . .

Prudence looked up, she looked down, she looked forward, coolly assenting. . . . Muriel fell silent.

Galatea? Was her soul asleep too? So Ridgeway mused, deeply interested. Was her devotion to Wingfield sheer stern duty, after all? Had he never aroused the slumbering depths of her nature? No slumbering depths to arouse? There was the fact of her alliance

with him. . . . Depths must have been roused, or there was no reason surely ?

What she missed ! This calm, cold, boy-like girl ! Her hard life—no beautiful interest to make it bearable. Did she read much ? He repeated it aloud.

“ A good deal,” he was told.

“ What ? ” this eagerly.

She studied languages chiefly and histories, and philosophical works. . . .

He rang out a few of his special favourites. . . . no—no—no—no, she preferred her histories and languages, her philosophical works.

How did she bear her life ? This only to himself. Had she no conception of what she missed ? Of the solace and comfort she passed so coldly by ? Yet he thought he surely read feeling of some sort in the quiet eyes as they rested again and again on that wonderful mist with sunbeams imprisoned in its blue and grey softness ? He spoke to her :

“ Shall I paint it ? ”

A quick upward glance, an impulsive “ Yes.”

He had stirred something ; he wanted to stir more ; he wanted to help her—this lonely, brave girl—he set himself deliberately to the task of helping her to find her soul ; he thought she would find it in books and beauty, in poems, pictures, the spring world. . . .

To Muriel later that day Prudence said :

“ I should like to tell you——”

In the long pause Muriel said gently, “ If it is anything that hurts, don't tell me.”

“ You know that I am not Evelyn's wife ? ” She said it coldly, very quietly. It was Muriel who flushed.

“ There—are—things said——”

“ It is true. We were married seven years ago. Two

years later he—found that his first wife was not dead. That is all."

All? Muriel thought deeply. Seven years ago? Two years later? What was it Mark had said—"She's nursed him like that for more than four years. . . ."

She put her hand on Prudence's, and found that it was trembling. Surprise drove the words back—

"You poor child," she whispered, and Prudence heard the catch in her breath.

Sol came and lay his long length down beside them. . . . the grass rustled as a tiny breeze flew through it—a little way off Ridgeway painted with furious energy. Behind him Renaud stood absorbed; near at hand Dickon sat on a rug laboriously painting a tree in front of him, while Armand, who had no artistic aspirations and resented the fact that he had not, mimicked Ridgeway's every frown and gesture. To them across the grass, beaming and sleepy, came André:

" 'Oh, Mr. Moon,
We's firty score;
Yellow beard, Piper,
Lie-a-bed, Toots,
Meadowbee, Moonboy,
Bully-in-b-boots——' "

A tremble—"I want Maman!"

Muriel's arms around him, a muffled plaintive refrain:
"I want Maman——" more alertly. "I want 'Lickle Fairy.'"

"What is it, sweet?"

The little bullet head was lifted, a drowsy blue eye gazed at her with sleepy reproach.

"It is my bed song. Maman, she sing it to me, and I hear all de lickle fairies in de wood sittin' on de f'owers—and de one lickle fairy comin' so near and near—and

her wings goin' swish—swish—so soft—I *always* hear dem when Maman sing it to me——”

“ I forget it, darling——”

“ I know the words,” Prudence said. “ I heard Madame du Pierre sing it to him when I had tea there.”

“ Oooh,” he chuckled, clambering from Muriel’s lap to hers. “ Sing, Madame ! ”

“ I will tell you the words, and you can sing it to him,” she said to Muriel, but André clung with soft obstinacy to her.

“ Mais chantez donc ! Madame, je vous en prie.”

Prudence began to sing in a low voice :

“ Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye,
Little fairy’s drawing nigh ;
Music from the fairy-band
Seranading in dreamland,
Soft—soft—fluttering wings,
Slumber—slumber songs she sings ;
Soft and low, hush-a-bye,
Little fairy’s drawing nigh ;
Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye.”

She sang in rather a deep voice, her eyes looking out into the blue mist, her arms around him, her body gently rocking him to sleep.

Muriel saw suddenly back into the years. So she had sat with her own baby—singing him to sleep—dreaming what of his future ? Then—before she knew that he had no right to the name he bore——

She bent forward suddenly, she laid her hand on Prudence’s arm.

Oh——” she murmured inarticulately.

Prudence turned upon her a face ice-cold with a tragedy borne so long that the flame of it had died. Then suddenly the hardness was broken ; the eyes flashed with a wild instinctive jealousy.

“Take him——” it was breathed out with a deep fierceness; she pushed André’s warm body from her with a gesture of unutterable pain. Then sat silent and still . . .

“Can’t you—talk—a little to me?” Muriel’s voice was at her ear, tender, very gentle.

A pause, a queer breath as of one making some longed-for endeavour, then cold silence; at last:

“No,” that was all.

Till Muriel broke the silence with a normal:

“Shall we get tea now? It’s only half-past two, but I dare not leave it later, it gets cold and damp. After all, we lunched at twelve.”

Like the sudden noisy quarrels that arise amongst birds a clamour between the boys!

Prudence rose hastily.

Dickon, flushed, obstinate, faced Renaud and Armand, who danced around him gesticulating, shouting.

“What is it?”

“Am I not den his professeur? Do I not teach him to paint? Je vous demande! Et lui, il——”

“Can’t you speak English?” this from Dickon, phlegmatic scorn stinging the excitable Renaud.

From the storm that ensued it was presently discovered that Renaud had given Dickon a painting to copy, and that now Dickon, urging as his only excuse, that he had painted something else, refused to show what he had done.

“I ask you, is it right? How den can I teach him to paint? He will not show me what he paint! Mais pourquoi——”

“English,” from the immovable Dickon.

“Dolt! Imbecile! I *am* speak de English!” Renaud stamping, almost choked with rage.

"Dickon, don't be so foolish," Prudence spoke sternly. "Show us what you have been doing."

Dickon, his painting held behind him, stood firm, and did not answer.

"Dickon!"

"No," he said, his under lip stuck out obstinately.

"Ah, but why? See, I wish to give you a lesson upon it! I am your professeur!"

"English."

"Oh—oh—*blow* your Engleese! I will fight you! Idiot! Imbecile——"

"Renaud!" Muriel interposed. "Dickon, why won't you let us see your picture?"

Dickon was silent, his face sullen.

Prudence approached him, but he backed, frowning heavily.

"I am his—I teach him! I *will* see his picture! He refuse *Que voulez-vous?*——"

"English."

"Comment donc? Je *parle* l'Anglais," screamed Renaud, and flung himself upon his irritating antagonist.

Another moment and a curious stillness seemed to fall upon the group. Renaud drew back, very red, his left hand in his pocket, while Dickon deliberately tore his picture into shreds.

Ridgeway awoke to the fact of other people's existence, and came strolling across the grass.

"Tea? Ripping. My effect's gone," he flung himself down on the rug, and began to take out cups and saucers, calling out to Muriel, who went across to his easel:

"It's a beastly daub—not worth looking at."

To Prudence when she drew near after looking at it he said:

"I'll do it—yet. I was a fool to start that; it doesn't compose, but that mist—with the sun caught in it—I've tried it before, and it's beat me each time."

"It would need fairy brushes," Muriel said.

"Then mine will have to become fairy."

"Your sketch is beautiful, all the same."

He laughed.

"It's very mortal—no—I'll do it some day."

Muriel eyed him thoughtfully.

"Why so cheerful? Usually, if you fail, you get down and downer——"

"I'll show you why after tea."

Prudence said unexpectedly:

"I would like to know now."

"Come then. I'm afraid you'll have to approach the canvas."

Before the easel—"There," he pointed. "You see that inch or so of mist before that tree—in the corner here? That's why."

Muriel laughed.

"You mean that for that little inch you have painted as you wish to paint?" Prudence asked earnestly.

"Well, not quite that, but getting on that way."

She stood gravely studying it.

Amongst the teacups they found Dickon sitting with tears running slowly down his cheeks; he would not eat; he would not explain the cause of his grief; he grew pallid and red-eyed, and Prudence appeared unsympathetic and cold.

It was not till he was in bed that night that he broke his obstinate silence.

"I bit Renaud's hand," he said.

"Oh, Dickon!"

“He’s swore an oath on the trunk of the oak tree never to tell any one.”

Prudence looked tired and pale.

“I was very disappointed with you, Dickon, to-day ; you were rude and naughty. I shall not let you go and see Renaud again very soon.”

“No,” he acquiesced.

He lay down and prepared to go to sleep.

“Why wouldn’t you let any one see your picture, Dickon ? ”

“It was very bad,” he said, reddening.

“But you ought to have let Renaud see it, and help you.”

“He would laugh.”

“Well, are you such a vain little boy that you can’t stand laughter at your picture ? ”

“Yes.”

She sighed.

“What was the picture ? ”

“Ferney.”

“Ferney ? Did you paint Ferney ? ”

“Yes.”

“What made you do that ? ”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s not very beautiful,” she said, with a little troubled laugh.

He did not answer.

Presently he said :

“It’s worse than murd’rin’ a person to bite them when you’re fightin’. Renaud said so.”

“Is that why you cried ? ”

“He hadn’t said so then.”

“Then why were you crying, Dickon ? ”

He struggled with it awhile, then said :

“ 'Cause I wanted to fight myself, and you can't fight yourself, can you ? ”

She put her arms round him and drew him to her.

“ Tell me, darling—don't keep it all back so ! ” she cried passionately. “ Tell me everything ! ”

“ I'm very sleepy, mother.”

Her arms slackened.

“ You want me to go ? ”

“ I'd like to lie down.”

She laid him down on his pillow, and rose.

“ When I'm a grown-up artist I shall paint Ferney's picture,” he said.

CHAPTER XIV

RIDGEWAY, with a clear boldness of purpose characteristic of him, set to work to make her life easier. He went often to Cherry Cross, and sat with Wingfield, and he almost invariably managed on these occasions that she should be sent away. At first she demurred coldly, but later she gave in, the only sign of anxiety being shown in the remark :

“ You will remember that he—he is not quite right in his mind ? ”

Ridgeway bore the tedium, sometimes worse than tedium, of these visits, with a certain satisfaction. For Prudence he bore it, and for her he felt a great friendship, a great and deep pity. Slowly, he noted, pleased, Galatea was coming to life. She accepted his presence at first with indifference, then with gratitude, and, in an aloof way, friendliness, and thus, too, she accepted his poetry, his love of beauty in any form.

Wingfield at this time grew so much better that he was able to come downstairs, and he expressed a constant desire for visitors. So it came about that when Mrs. Darlington made her second call, and Lydia, obeying instructions, refused her admittance, Evelyn in the drawing-room heard her high voice, and told Prudence to ask her to come in.

“ Evelyn, I told you she insulted me.”

“ Yes, yes, I know ! Ha, ha ! It will amuse me

to see you two scratch each other. Tell her to come in at once, Prudence ! ”

She stood by the door, tall and slim, her face white.

“ I will not,” she said.

“ Eh ? What ? Oh ho, disobedience, eh, my lady ? So you have a temper, after all ! It only needs a little jealousy to bring it out——”

“ You know that I am not jealous, Evelyn.”

“ Do I, by Jove ? What other reason have you ? ”

“ She is not a nice woman. She was rude to me. Evelyn, you’re not going——”

“ Ah, but I am. Confound it, do you think I’m going to be defied in my own house ! Let me come ! ”

For a minute she stood before the door barring his way, her erect figure confronted his bowed form—almost the same height—her dilated eyes almost on a level with his.

“ Evelyn, I ask you—not to have her in.”

The words dragged out on a desperate impulse.

“ Stand aside ! D’you hear ? ” he put out feeble hands to thrust her from before the door, and she shrank away with a little shiver. A minute she stood, her hand over her eyes, and then she was waiting, ready to greet Mrs. Darlington with a cool bow.

Throughout the visit she stayed there ; she heard her antagonistic attitude described and laughed at ; bowed silently to the degradation of hearing it ascribed to jealousy ; saw the skilful play that spitefully brought out all that was most ignoble, most vulgar in Evelyn Wingfield ; she submitted to the skating on thin ice that each practised with great skill and much laughter, and she kept her place there, at the tea-table, though Mrs. Darlington stayed a long while after tea was done.

She went at last, and Wingfield, sulkily on his dignity

now, demanded Davenport, and ignored Prudence. It was about half-an-hour after she had gone that Ridgeway came in. Prudence was sitting in the dark before a dying fire in the drawing-room.

"It's bitterly cold out," he said. "That's not much of a fire."

She stayed him as he would have put on more coal.

"There is a fire in the hall. We shall not need this any more."

She heard the tremble in her voice with an access of nervous surprise that sent her hurriedly to her feet.

"I—must go to Evelyn," she said, and hastening blindly, stumbled over a stool. Ridgeway caught her arm and found she was trembling; he pushed her back gently into her chair.

"You're not fit to go; you're not well," he said curtly.

In the firelight her face—its coldness gone—only a pitiably young worried alarm—

"I don't seem a-able to bear it somehow." . . .
The words were to him poignantly simple.

"It is because you're not well."

"But, you see, I've got to bear it."

She was asking him to help her to bear it; she was unconsciously appealing to him; her quivering lips could hardly frame the words.

He went into the hall and fetched a log or two of wood he had seen there. She watched him throw them on the fire, coax the flames with the bellows; she assented vaguely when he asked might he have fresh tea made, he was so thirsty? She let him pour it out, drank some with apathetic obedience, said at length:

"I think I won't listen to any more poetry, or read your books."

Asked why, she gave, for the first time, a suggestion of her deliberately thought-out reason for adhering to languages and histories and philosophy. She said barely :

“ It is better to keep hard and dull.”

He answered her : he picked up a *Henley* he had left there, and read to her :

“ ‘ Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

‘ In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

‘ Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

‘It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll;
I am the master of my fate :
I am the captain of my soul.’ ”

The logs had caught ; in the light of their flame he saw tears glisten on her pale cheek, and he forebore to speak, knowing intuitively that with her tears would be an aching pain and shame.

“ I am going upstairs,” he said presently, “ you will stay here.”

She made a movement to rise.

“ Please,” he said, and she sat down again.

In a little while she followed him upstairs.

“ Here’s my little offended queen, eh ? Am I forgiven yet ? Oh, these women, my boy, take my advice and remain a bachelor ! Not that that’s much good ;

rather, enter a monastery, and even then—one hears—eh? But we have a little Puritan here. You know she has Puritan blood in her veins? Oh yes. She's one of the Willoughbys—the Challis Willoughbys, you know—old grandmother, a severe old lady—tall as a lamp post—lamp post; a useful thing when you're not very sure of your legs, eh? Never found that out? Ah, you drink aerated waters nowadays, and—er—what was I saying? That illustration there—lamp-post—led me astray. Well, a few years ago I belonged to the 'good old days' coterie. Never heard of it? Why, it was famous, my boy! Fact! Used to get drunk at dinner, y'know—proper old style. Lord, what a head I had in those days! Jimmy Challoner ran me pretty close, but I could always watch 'em all go down, and keep my end up. Funny some of 'em were! There was little Boddington—chap with red hair—by the time he couldn't sit up he'd begin to weep and talk about his poor old mother. Jimmy'd stare at him solemnly: 'Funny shing—only sheem—to have a mother when you're sh—drunk!'—My mother was the beautiful Miss Golding? Heard of her? Pun about her—hair golden and name too—sort of thing—” he wandered off on to the subject of puns.

Prudence had sat down quietly and was darning a vest of Dickon's; her face looked pale and cold, and when Ridgeway went away she bade him good-night, from her chair, coldly. But always to him that day dated their friendship: he knew that at last she had accepted him as her friend. He knew that to her the unveiling of her thought to another was a thing impossible otherwise: that to her deep pride an appeal for help meant much: her quiet silent nature could only have turned to one it recognised as friend.

CHAPTER XV

“ I THINK something ought to be done,” Mrs. Darlington said.

Mrs. Dormer-Jones, red-faced, with hot buttered toast in her fingers forgot to eat it, so perturbed was she.

“ You—you don’t think *I* ought to do it ? ”

“ I think it is every one’s duty to try and think of some way in which to help the poor man.”

Elizabeth had once said : “ When Mrs. Darlington grows moral, beware ! ”

“ I’m sure I’m willing to help any one who *needs* it, and if the poor man is *really* shut up in one room and kept a prisoner against his will, when he isn’t really ill at *all*——”

“ I don’t say that. He has had an illness, but he is recovered sufficiently to ride, anyway. He told me of a lovely gallop he had had the very morning of the day I saw him——”

“ You speak of him as if he is a child. Can’t he look after himself ? ” said Eleanor Browne, who was so used to running down men on principle that she found it difficult to adjust her point of view to regard one in the light of a martyr.

“ Well, he’s one of those charming, soft-hearted men ! A woman can twist him round her little finger. You know the sort—one meets them seldom nowadays—chivalrous, gallant——”

“Why not twist him round your little finger then, and drag him out of the den?” put in little Mrs. Gordon frivolously.

“I don’t choose to fight over a man with a woman of that sort.”

“What sort is she, by the way?” asked Eleanor Browne. “Mrs. Latimer and Madame du Pierre apparently approve of her.”

Mrs. Darlington shrugged her shoulders.

“You know perfectly well what she is. So do they. That they choose to pose as wide-minded philanthropists doesn’t affect the question.”

“There’s Mr. Ridgeway too,” Mrs. Gordon said plaintively. She thought Ridgeway had such delightful legs.

“Oh, him!” Mrs. Darlington managed to get a great deal of a peculiarly nasty expression into her face.

Again, Elizabeth had said:

“It gives food for thought that some exceedingly moral women are able to convey such a tale of immorality by mere expression. It rather suggests that they are moral only through force of circumstance.”

Mrs. Gordon opened wide blue eyes.

“Oh, but he’s such a dear! Bobbie says he is.”

Bobbie was her husband.

“Men,” observed Eleanor Browne sententiously, “have such a different standard from women.”

Mrs. Gordon would have liked, in a vague way, to stand up for her husband, but the mention of standard set her mind off on another much more interesting track.

“Do you know Betty won’t *touch* Standard bread! I don’t know what to do, because apparently she will grow up with no teeth or bone or anything if she eats white bread——”

“Here comes Elizabeth,” Mrs. Darlington said.

She was one of those women who rush to the use of Christian names.

Mrs. Gordon rose to greet her.

“ Well, have you been doing any more visiting amongst the poor ? ”

Elizabeth sank into a chair, annoying Eleanor Browne exceedingly by the curious fact that immediately upon her entrance she became the centre of attraction in the room. She never made the slightest effort to obtain notice, but it was always the same, and it always annoyed Eleanor Browne, who, sententious, loud as she was, never succeeded in securing the audience she desired.

“ I’ve put a piece of cotton round a wart,” Elizabeth said in a tired voice. “ She wasn’t a bit grateful ; she said she hadn’t no faith in a cure that didn’t hurt a good bit. She wanted—but no—” she shuddered. “ I will not tell you that.”

“ I do think it’s very good of you to worry about the people like you do,” said Mrs. Dormer-Jones. “ It’s not *many* would do it, only staying in a place as you are.”

“ I think one ought to try,” Elizabeth said gently, and the room buzzed round her with approbation and admiration.

Eleanor Browne asked loudly if tying a cotton round a wart was the extent of her boundless charity ?

Elizabeth lifted lazy eyes and studied her face amusedly.

“ You would do more ? Then will you go and cut poor old Jane Harbie’s toe nails ? ”

“ Certainly not ! ”

“ Oh, why ? She has a fancy to have them cut by one of the soft-fingered gentry, and I really cannot ! But no, not that ! ”

“ Oh, Madame du Pierre, perhaps you can help us ! ”
There was a glint of mischief in Mrs. Gordon's innocent blue eyes. “ Mrs. Darlington has been telling us a moving tale about that poor Mr. Wingfield——”

“ Yes ? ”

“ It appears he is not really ill—well, not *very* ill, you know, and—she—keeps him shut up, and won't let him see people, and all that sort of thing.”

Elizabeth sipped her tea.

“ How interesting. What for ? ”

“ Oh—well—I don't really know. Why did you say she did it, Mrs. Darlington ? ”

“ I really hardly care to discuss her reasons in public ; they're not very nice.”

“ That's so good of you,” Elizabeth murmured, “ but if you state a fact in public ? ”

“ That's different.”

“ Oh, yes, of course, so much easier. Reasons are always tiresome and difficult to evolve.”

“ I don't know what you mean. You seem to have an infatuation for the woman ! ”

Mrs. Darlington was forgetting her usual caution.

“ Well, hardly that,” Elizabeth mused. “ Say a sincere liking, rather.”

“ Oh, have you really ? ” interposed Mrs. Dormer-Jones anxiously. “ Oh, Dolly, perhaps you are wrong, after all ! Isn't it *true* then that—that—you know—that——”

“ That what ? I am rather dense, you know.”

“ That she isn't his wife,” Mrs. Dormer-Jones stretched her neck and whispered.

“ Oh, yes, that is true.”

“ Then, how—why—she *can't* be anything but wicked ! Oh, Madame du Pierre, it's living in France, I suppose,

and all that, but what a pity! I always do say——”

“He married her quite correctly,” Elizabeth said, choosing a chocolate cake. “A few years ago you and Mrs. Darlington would have been overwhelming her with polite attentions. Now!” she shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s unkind to mystify us,” Mrs. Gordon protested.

“What is it you all want to know? Prudence Wingfield’s history? I don’t know it. I merely know that two years after her marriage it turned out that the first wife was not dead as had been believed—that is all.”

“Then why didn’t she leave him at *once*?” cried Mrs. Dormer-Jones, drowning the scoffing sort of snort produced by Mrs. Darlington.

“I believe because the poor man was so ill,” Elizabeth replied. “Aren’t we growing very gossipy?”

“We are indeed,” responded Eleanor Browne. “What do you think of the latest suffragette movement?”

Elizabeth raised deprecating eyebrows.

“Oh, don’t! C’est impossible! I would sooner discuss black beetles!”

“Why?”

“Oh, because they’re so modest and retiring,” Elizabeth said sweetly.

Eleanor Browne grew red.

“You’re insulting!” she said.

“Whom to? The beetles?” Elizabeth looked at her inquiringly.

“I suppose *you* sympathise with the women who shiver at the sight of a black beetle!”

“Doesn’t one always sympathise with the congenial spirits who share one’s own weaknesses? If I see a black beetle a mile off, I shiver!”

“ You must at least confess that the suffragettes have courage ? ”

“ It depends on the point of view, doesn't it ? I think the bravest deed I ever heard of was performed by a woman who was terrified of black beetles.”

“ What was it ? ” Eleanor Browne's tone was aggressive.

Elizabeth took a sandwich.

“ Why,” she said gravely, “ she went down into a basement, beetle-haunted kitchen in the middle of the night to fetch some milk for her sick child ! ”

“ And I suppose woke the whole household with her screams ! ”

“ No ; she filled her arms with boots and boxes, and hurled them before her into the kitchen,” Elizabeth said serenely.

“ If *we* had votes,” Mrs. Gordon said, “ would we have to share the babies with the men ? ”

“ Oh, please spare us that ‘ hand that rocks the cradle,’ etc.,” exclaimed Eleanor. “ We've been told so often that the nursery and the kitchen are women's proper places ! ”

“ I don't think I mean that exactly,” said Mrs. Gordon, wrinkling her pretty brows. “ I mean that Bobbie is jealous of Betty and the boy, and, you see, if I shared *his* work, would he want to bath baby ? I do love doing it so, and even now I have to *insist* because nurse wants to do it, so if Bobbie had a right to do it too——”

“ I don't wonder men refuse us votes when there are still such fools in the world ! ” Mrs. Darlington said rather more loudly than was quite polite.

“ They refuse us votes because they want to try and keep us fools,” said Eleanor. “ Men love fools.”

"It's a curious thing how exceedingly conservative suffragettes are," Elizabeth said thoughtfully. "It's so anomalous, isn't it? Their ideas of men remain so early Victorian."

"Don't you think men like fools?"

"No; I'm sure they don't."

"Madame du Pierre should speak from experience," put in Mrs. Darlington.

"I do," said Elizabeth placidly.

Eleanor glanced expressively at Mrs. Gordon.

Elizabeth said smiling:

"Some women are not such fools as they sometimes choose to appear." And Nancy Trevor, coming into the room, laughed out.

"Oh, well," she cried in her fresh young voice. "I'm a suffragist anyway, and although I'm afraid I'm an awful shirker, at least they have my admiration and my sympathy."

"Which they would value more if they were of the other sex, my dear," observed Elizabeth.

Eleanor pounced.

"There! Aren't you making out now that at any rate men are fools?"

"Why, no, I think that would be most sensible of them."

"You're hopeless! I suppose you've never formed a real, genuine opinion of men."

"Oh, long ago."

"What is it?"

"Good gracious, isn't that rather colossal?"

"I should like to know your opinion of men."

"It demands an epigram—men are like chairs, they have legs and arms and backs—no, chairs have no heads—that won't do. Well, in ordinary real live conversation, I think men are good, bad and indifferent,

just as women are ; and I think a good man's—well—rather nice, you know, and on the whole more interesting—to me—than a good woman. And I'm always thankful man was made before woman, because if the woman had been made first she'd have managed somehow to have a finger in the pie of his making, and would have spoilt it. A shilling—and was it sixpence or sevenpence ? ” she added at a startling tangent. “ You see,” she explained gently, “ I'm practising the strictest economy, and so I'm keeping accounts. I never have before. And I've just remembered a fish man who came round, and I had some fish. That's why they *wouldn't* come right this morning.”

“ Were you one and sevenpence short ? ” asked Mrs. Dormer-Jones, interested.

“ Yes, only more than that. It was seventeen shillings and something——”

“ In how long ? ”

“ Two days.”

Mrs. Dormer-Jones was scandalised ; she began to unfold an infallible method of keeping accounts, while Elizabeth listened earnestly.

Eleanor Browne, balked of her longing to continue the discussion of man, eyed Mrs. Dormer-Jones with disfavour. She said, in a pause, to Elizabeth :

“ I'm afraid women's minds are small.”

Elizabeth replied with frivolity that she thought hers must be gigantic, since she found it so difficult to take little things like pennies and threepenny pieces and farthings into consideration. To this Eleanor responded with a somewhat crushing little lecture on the modern tendency to frivolity.

Alphonse came in then to fetch Elizabeth. In the brougham Elizabeth said to him :

" You mustn't kiss me, Alphonse, because my hat is so beautifully firm just now, but look at me, and tell me that I'm too darling to need to be good or clever or anything, but just selfish me."

Alphonse looked at her, his earnest dark face very tender.

" You are beautiful all through, Elizabeth ; you could not be selfish if you try."

" Tried," she corrected, with a soft little laugh.

He took her hand in his, and unbuttoning her glove took it off, and kissed her palm.

" That I may do : it wears no hat," he said with satisfaction.

" No ; but it tickles " Elizabeth said.

CHAPTER XVI

RENAUD was spending the day at Cherry Cross. Told that there was illness in the house he vowed "to creep, to become as a little mouse" and consequently he was upon his best behaviour.

Prudence, having accepted Ridgeway's silent offer of friendship, had, with characteristic simplicity, proceeded to ask his advice about Dickon. She began by asking if he could remember what sort of little boy he was when he was six years old.

"Pretty well," he told her.

Was he like Dickon? Not a bit? She was disappointed. Asked why, she replied:

"I think you are the sort of man I should like Dickon to become."

Ridgeway was rather ludicrously distressed; he was at pains to assure her of his unworthiness, his badness, the while she listened gravely, with clear eyes upon his face. At the finish:

"No men are perfect. I think you are the sort of man I should like Dickon to become," she said, with the quaint touch of primness he had grown to know in her. And she proceeded to question him. Had he done this? Had he liked that? The stumbling-block appeared to be his love of horses.

"You always loved horses? You wanted to be in the stable with them?"

"Yes."

He broke her troubled pause.

"Don't you like horses?"

"Oh, yes! I've had very little to do with them, but I love Mirth."

"Yet Ferney tells me you don't go round to the stables."

"No."

She added:

"I wanted to keep Dickon away."

"Why?"

"I do not wish him to be fond of horses."

"He will miss a great deal."

"He will perhaps gain more than he misses."

"I don't think so."

She did not answer. She was inarticulate through much living alone. Not yet could she put into words what must be silently acknowledged between them, silently accepted, since he sat now so often with Evelyn Wingfield. Not yet could she voice her nervous dread of the influence of horses in Dickon's life. To her they had become one of the few tangible things that had helped to ruin Wingfield, one of the things from which his son, with his inherited tastes, must be guarded. Musing on this inherited taste, she said:

"His greatest joy is to go round to the stables."

"Then don't teach him to hide it as if it is a sin," he said quickly.

She recoiled aghast.

"I! Am I teaching him to be a hypocrite?"

"He looked guilty when he confessed his liking for Mirth to me."

"I! To make him a hypocrite!"

He felt as if he had dealt her a wound.

"No. But don't stifle a good, wholesome impulse in

the boy. It's a splendid thing—that love of horses and dogs and animals."

She turned from him silent and pale; storm-tossed with the surging sea of words at her throat, which could not yet find an outlet.

He watched her go.

"If only she would make Muriel Latimer her friend!"

It was as an outcome of this that Renaud was invited to Cherry Cross.

And to Dickon Prudence said sombrely:

"You may take him round to the stables. Ferney will take you into the horse-box."

She added, the thought and laboured decision of years not to be easily changed:

"You mustn't stay long."

She left them alone together, striving painstakingly to work out the line that should be most beneficial to Dickon; but when once or twice she came upon them she thought the visit was not proving very successful. Dickon's face was heavy, almost sullen, while Renaud appeared to be bored.

She watched them, a world of pain in her eyes.

"Have you been painting?" she said, though the question, in the light of green smudges on Renaud's nose, red on his hands, and blue on his painting coat, was surely superfluous.

"Pour moi—yes! But he," with a weary gesture, "does not wish to paint!"

Prudence drew Dickon to her with a sudden fierce movement of protection.

"Don't you, dear?" she said.

"No."

"What would you like to do?"

"I don't know."

“ Ah, Madame, I ask you, is he not queer ? For me, I have always de one—two—five *t'ousand* t'ings I wish to do. But he—he does not know what he want to do.”

“ Are you tired, Dickon ? ”

“ But why, Madame ? Why should he be tired ? He is not ill——”

“ I asked him, not you, Renaud.”

The coldness of her tone stopped his agile tongue very effectually. A slight flickering smile of pleasure disturbed the heaviness of Dickon's face for a moment.

“ Someone comes ! ” Renaud cried, as in the pause the hall bell rumbled in its usual heavy way.

They were in a room on the first corridor where Dickon usually played. Renaud ran to the window.

“ It is Mrs. Darlington. I call her Mrs. Horrid-ton.” Prudence paled.

“ Oh—she must not come in,” involuntarily it escaped her, as she hurried from the room.

“ Your mother does not wish her to come. I also do not wish it.”

Dickon came to the window.

“ Mother cried last time when she had been.”

“ Den, she will not allow her to enter, n'est-ce pas ? ”

“ She can't stop her.”

“ Mais pourquoi ? ” Why ? Why ? ”

“ She will not go away. Lydia tried to make her, but she just pushes in, and then father hears her and tells her she may come in. He's asleep now, I think.”

Renaud softly pushed up the window, and hung out.

“ My good girl, allow me to pass ! Mr. Wingfield has asked me to come and see him——”

A chuckle of glee from Renaud as the door slammed in her face. Immediately the bell rumbled noisily.

“ That’s what she’ll go on doing till father wakes and tells her she may come up, and then mother will cry,” observed Dickon pessimistically.

“ Will she, by Jove ? ” Renaud flashed from the room, seemed gone an instant, and was back carefully carrying a garden syringe. Dickon’s eyes widened.

The next moment the ringing of the bell ceased abruptly ; there was an angry exclamation, and Renaud darted from the room, re-appearing with a jug of water.

“ Now we will wait ! ”

They clambered on to the window seat and crouched breathless.

“ Do not let her see you ! Wait ! Ah, but this is jolly good fun, eh ? ”

Dickon nodded, his face one wide smile of wondering joy.

A faint preliminary jerk of the bell—the syringe spurted out and down gaily, and the bell was not rung. Mrs. Darlington’s voice, shrill with rage, rang out :

“ This is disgraceful ! Mr. Wingfield ! Mr. Wingfield your son is behaving disgracefully ! Mr. Wingfield ! ”

“ She thinks it’s *me* ! ” whispered Dickon in a tone of sublime satisfaction.

“ She must have anudder, to stay her voice ! ”

The door was pushed quietly open and Prudence looked in ; she watched, with wide eyes, as Renaud, dodging behind the curtain, skilfully squirted down a syringe full of water, and then she quietly withdrew.

Silence.

“ She has gone ! ” ejaculated Renaud, peeping out. “ Quick, dere is den some oder door, n’est-ce pas ? ”

Dickon nodded, and slipping to the floor ran to the door. Renaud hastily filled the syringe and followed him. Dickon led him to the window on the stairs, where

he so often sat himself, and Renaud clambering up, was just in time to greet Mrs. Darlington with his syringe.

“Run down den and lock de door!” he whispered to Dickon.

Ferney was down there, carrying a bundle of straw; he saw the spray of water descend, saw Mrs. Darlington jump back.

“Did you see that?” she gasped, turning on him furiously.

“Beg pardon, mum?”

“Didn’t you see that water? Didn’t you *feel* it? Some of it must have gone on you!”

“Water, mum? I thought it looked like rain.”

“It’s not raining! It hasn’t rained all day! Please go in at once, and tell your master Mrs. Darlington is here.”

“If you’d go round to the front, mum, the maid will let you in.”

“She won’t do anything of the sort! I—I cannot ring the bell, because that naughty boy—Master Dick—is playing tricks on me. He is throwing water down on me!”

Mrs. Darlington felt extremely foolish as well as angry, and was acutely aware that she must appear quite as foolish as she felt. She tried to recover a scrap or so of dignity by professing to treat the matter with amused tolerance.

“Dick,” she called up to the walls, “You’re a monkey! But I’ll forgive you this time. Shall we call quits now?”

She essayed to ring the bell, but was obliged to draw back.

Ferney, sweeping up stray bits of straw, observed

nonchalantly that that gutter had got stopped up, and leaked badly.

"My good man, it's not the gutter. Will you kindly ring the bell for me?"

"If you'll just go round to the front, mum, the maid'll let you in," said Ferney, picking up his straw, and disappearing into the loose box with it.

Mrs. Darlington was a bad walker; the Dormer-Jones' car overtook her within a few yards of her home. She had been an hour walking the two miles.

Prudence had tea with Renaud and Dickon; there was a faint colour in her cheeks, her eyes wore almost an amused expression. She did not ask how Renaud came to be so wet, or what was the cause of the pool in Dickon's room. After tea she played a game of Blind Man's Buff with them, and she seemed to thoroughly enjoy the game.

"He is a dear little boy," she said to Alphonse, who came to fetch him home.

"He has been good?"

"Oh, perfectly," said Prudence.

To Dickon up in bed she said:

"Have you enjoyed your day?"

"I liked the last part."

She did not ask for details.

"Why didn't you like the first part?"

"I didn't."

He added:

"I don't want Renaud again, thank you."

"Oh Dickon, I thought you liked him so much."

"I don't."

Her face was troubled.

“Don't you like to be with other boys ? To have boys here ? ”

“No.”

She put her hands up over her face and sat in silence. She saw him growing older—a man—lonely—pedantic ? A prig ? Alien amongst his kind ? Would he be that ? Different—ah, and she had fought so hard that there should be no difference——

“Then don't teach him to hide it as if it is a sin ! ”

It echoed in her ears, hurt and wounded her——

Was she doing that ? She, who of all things loved truth the most ? Held truth more precious than all else.

A hypocrite ! A dissembler—her boy—— No—no ! Yet was he like other boys, with his silences, his reserves ? What was he holding back now ? Was she to fail with him ? She—and he had no one else. . . .

She took her hands from before her face and looked down on him.

“Did you have a quarrel, Dickon ? ” she said gently.

“No.”

Monosyllabic ! Had she made him so ? She slipped her arm about him.

“How did Renaud like Mirth ? ”

She had been right ; she saw the slight quiver of the small lips ; it was there the trouble lay.

“Prudence ! ”

She called back clearly :

“I will come soon, Evelyn ! I cannot come just yet ! ”

Dickon opened surprised eyes.

“Won't he be very cross, mother ? ”

“I hope not, dear. I want to stay with you a little. Did Renaud like Mirth ? ”

“Yes.”

“And Ferney ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Prudence ! You have been away for hours ! I want you.”

She rose.

“ I will be back in a minute, Dickon.” She left the room, and met Wingfield in the corridor.

“ What do you want, Evelyn ? ”

“ I want you to read ‘ Jorrocks ’ to me,” he said peevishly. “ I can’t think what you find to do all day ! You never come near me ! I’m sick of being alone. It’s all very well for you—you were brought up like a girl in a convent—you like solitude—you are content to have only me and the boy—but I can’t stand it. What’s more, I won’t ! I want you to write to Billy Severne. I’ll have him down for a bit—and George Arbuthnot, too—and Teddington—my pride’s knocked under. I know they’ve deserted me—like the swine they are !—but I can offer ’em plenty of champagne—confound it, I can still offer ’em a good game at bridge, and Ferney had better look out for a couple more nags—They’re not going to ride Mirth—not one of em, damn ’em. Eh ? what ? where are you going ? Can’t you stay a minute with me ? I want you to write those letters——”

“ I will be back in a few minutes, Evelyn, Dickon wants me——”

“ Damn the boy ! It was always the same ! From the moment the squealing brat was born you had eyes and ears for no one else ! You’re spoiling him ! You’ll make him a little milksop. He’s afraid of horses now, I believe ! He tells me he never goes round to the stables alone. Ferney hardly knows him. Why, at his age I *lived* in the stables ! I knew all the men by heart—shared their beer as often as not—whiskey, too, sometimes ! I was drunk before I was six ! Dead drunk.

Old—what's-his-name—friend of the governor's—plied me with champagne—took to it to the manner born——”

“Dickon loves horses ; he doesn't know what fear is where they are concerned.” For once she tried to convince him of error, unable to keep silent. But, as she had learnt long since, it was of no use.

“Of course you shield him ! You always did. Queer thing—a good woman will always lie for her child ! The boy's a little fool—what ? Going ? Confound it, isn't the child mine as well as yours ? Mustn't I say a word about him ? Am I to have no say in his up-bringing ? D'you think I'm going to sit humbly by always, and see a Wingfield grow up a fool ? A milksop ? An effeminate ass ? Good God, I'd see him dead sooner ! D'you hear ? D'you understand—— ? ”

“Oh, hush, Evelyn, you will make yourself ill ! ”

He shouted her down ; he had worked himself into an unreasoning rage ; his face was suffused, the veins in his forehead swelled, his eyes streaked with blood.

Prudence rang for Davenport, and together they managed at last to calm him. He sat huddled in his chair, white and feeble and shaking.

“Don't be angry with me, Prue. I lost my temper——”

“You may go,” she said to Davenport.

“Wingfields—all have devils of tempers—don't be angry, Prue. I didn't mean any harm——”

“I'm not angry, Evelyn. Try to rest now.”

“About the boy, wasn't it ? Always was jealous of the boy, you know—devilish jealous once—remember—what was it ? Memory's so bad nowadays—what was it ?—know I was in a hell of a fury—you looked at the boy—not at me—that was it—didn't care a hang when I came home, did you ? Despised me—awfully

proud of the brat—yes—that was it. You're not angry now, are you, Prue? My head's swelling, I'm afraid—feel it—heavy as lead——”

“ It's only because you've made it ache so, Evelyn; I am going to read to you. You sit still and rest.”

“ ‘Jorrocks’ then——”

“ Yes; ‘Jorrocks.’ ”

She opened at random and read :

“ ‘ And here let me observe, that to 'unt pleasantly two things are necessary—to know your 'oss and to know your own mind——’ ”

“ That's true, Prue, you know. Little Barclay never knew his own mind—go on—about coming to a leap——”

“ ‘ —have a good understandin' with yourself afore ever you come to a leap, whether you mean to go over it or not, for nothing looks so pusillanimous as to see a chap ride bang at a fence as though he would eat it, and then swerve off for a gate or a gap. Better far to charge wiggorously——’ ”

“ Prue, my head's getting so large. Does it look very beastly? ”

“ It's just the same size as usual, Evelyn.”

“ I—I can't find out, because I can't lift my hands to feel it. Prue,” his voice sank to a scared whisper, “ I've felt it before. D'you know what will happen one day? My head will swell and swell—till I'm all head—s-sh—don't you tell anyone. But that's what it may come to. It's—it's swelling horribly now—I—I'm frightened, Prue—it's getting larger and larger—heavy—like a ton of lead——”

“ Evelyn, do listen to this. This is one of your favourite bits. Do you remember Jorrocks' advice how to take a leap? ”

“ Eh? What? My head, Prue——”

“Do you remember Jorrocks’ advice how to take a leap? You know—‘Better far to charge wiggorously——’ Try to remember, Evelyn.”

“‘And be chucked over by the ’oss stoppin’ short; for the rider may chance to light on his legs, and can look about unconsarnedly, as though nothing particklar had ’appened.’” Oh, I remember—never forget old Jorrocks. Go on, my dear.”

She went on reading, and presently he fell asleep in his chair.

When she went back to Dickon’s room, Dickon was asleep. She stood, shading the light of the candle from his eyes, and looked down on him. Thought whirled and strove in her tired brain, pushed her hither and thither, till at last came calm in the decision:

“I will follow his advice.”

She referred to Ridgeway.

Presently she stooped and touched Dickon’s cheek with a gentle finger. It was, as she had thought, wet.

“I left him to go to sleep, unconsolated,” was her sad thought as she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

RIDGEWAY, striding back to Elm Hill, glum and tragic because the rain had come down and stopped his painting, overtook Prudence, walking slowly.

“Coming to Elm Hill? Elizabeth will be so glad.”

She shook her head. “I’m just walking.”

“Beastly day for that. Won’t you come? It’s only about half a mile—well, not much more.”

“No, thank you.”

The tone was cold. They walked in silence awhile. He glanced at her face, saw it white, tired—wondered how he could help her.

“Please don’t dawdle for me.”

“I’m in no hurry. Let me stay and grumble; it’s collected inside till it’s a huge great black mass.”

She did not assent or dissent; she maintained an indifferent silence while he talked. He felt that they had gone back; their friendship was slipping from their grasp. He groped against the high wall she had erected between them; he fumbled and gently pushed, till he came against something that yielded a little. She said merely:

“I’m tired of poetry,” in answer to a slight quotation made by him.

He forebore to lean hard against the wall. He said gently:

“One feels that way sometimes.”

She was not satisfied; she was conscious of a curious

wish to hurt him ; she held him accountable for her suffering just in that way. Had it not been for the difficulty she found in giving expression to her feelings, she would have turned on him with a storm of indignation and protest. She said only :

“ You are very sure you are always right.”

He drew a breath of relief. He had felt her antagonism, hardly understanding what it was ; he was glad to have it put into words. He answered :

“ Am I ? What an insufferable sort of fool I must seem to you ! ”

She did not reply. A few steps farther on she stopped.

“ I want to be alone,” she said.

“ I’m sorry.” He raised his cap. “ Are you going to walk much farther ? ”

“ I don’t know.”

He hesitated.

“ You’re about two miles from Cherry Cross now,” he said tentatively. “ You’re tired. Hadn’t you better go back ? ”

“ If I go back, I have to go to Evelyn,” she said. “ I came out to rest.”

“ Can’t you lie down ? ”

“ No.”

He risked rebuff with an involuntary, impatient :

“ Why not ? ”

“ Unless he knows I am not in the house, he worries for me.”

She said it calmly, simply ; as if unconscious of all that it held ; but, as he walked on alone, he saw the long years stretching behind her, and he wondered at her strength. She called after him, and he turned and came back to her.

“ When you were a little boy, did your mother make

a great fuss if you were not very well?" she asked quietly.

He laughed.

"No; I don't think so. It's a pity to fuss over a boy too much. Anything wrong with Dick?"

"It makes him, of course, inclined to be hypochondriacal," she said thoughtfully. "Thank you."

"Dick's all right, I hope?"

"I suppose, according to your standard, he is in robust health."

There was an unusual note of bitterness in her voice. Ridgeway looked after her puzzled, as she turned and began to retrace her steps towards Cherry Cross. The slim figure, erect, in the drifting rain, the grey landscape, seemed symbolical to him. The long wet road, slightly uphill, stretched empty before her. She was alone. No other sign of life appeared—only the one figure going on slowly, erect, up the long hill, in the mist and the rain.

Ridgeway looked up to the skies. He wanted a break in the greyness—a ray of light for her. Something—anything. Anything to break the dead, drear loneliness of it for her. A dog! A cow or a horse! But there was no sign of life. Then she disappeared round the curve of the road. And it seemed to him that so she would disappear one day out of his life. Just as quietly, as indifferently, going straight on her way.

Wingfield grew tired of places. They had left Devonshire because he suddenly declared that the hills were cruel for the little mare's legs. And he worried. She had told him that.

He would miss her if she went away like that. She would leave a blank in his life perhaps. But more than that. He would have failed in his purpose to help her.

To him, with his strong, perhaps obstinate, will, to fail was unbearable. Ordinarily he took life easily—some thought too easily. He did not worry, he did not fret. He was strong and healthy, and he found life of an absorbing and wholesome interest. But were he roused from his ease, he was tenacious—never fitful. In the bigger interests of his life his energy was untiring, his grip strong. He made no noise, but pursued an unwavering course.

Before even his sense of friendship for Prudence Wingfield, he put his purpose to help her, and that seemed likely to fail. She seemed not to want his help; after her apparent acceptance of him as a friend, she had drawn back; he realised dimly the depth of her reserve, the fostering of it during these last years of her life, and he knew it was a difficult task he had set himself. The one tangible way he had as yet found was to take Evelyn Wingfield off her hands. He did it often, revealing the patience and determination that he always brought to bear on any sufficiently strong interest in his life.

Suddenly he went after her; he pursued her up the long hill. He did it because he wanted to say something to her, not for any more subtle or fanciful reason, although afterwards it struck him with a certain sense of satisfaction that by his action he had driven away that loneliness, had supplied the life he had been wanting for her. . . .

He found that he caught her up with surprising ease, and it struck him suddenly how tired she must be, since her pace as a rule was swift, covering the ground with a rather long, graceful and very easy stride. His own pace slackened a little as he drew near; he felt a sudden shrinking from the look of surprised patience he expected to receive. It came upon him with disconcerting

strength that after all he had no right to worry this girl ; no right, through whatever perhaps mistaken notion of helping her, to add by so much as a hairsbreadth to the burden of her life. . . . He felt suddenly that he was an intruder merely, not a friend. . . .

He turned, perhaps for the first time in his life relinquishing his purpose, and began to go quickly down the hill again. But some feeling made Prudence look round ; she obeyed an involuntary surprised impulse and called to him. When he came he seemed to have nothing to say.

“ You came after me ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ You were going away again.”

He nodded.

“ Why ? ”

“ I changed my mind.”

She was silent ; then she said quietly ;

“ I am sorry if I was rude to you this afternoon.”

“ Don't——” he said quickly and added lightly :

“ You weren't, but you may be. Please do—any time. It's good to get it off sometimes.”

“ Is it ? ”

She did not say it idly, but thoughtfully, wonderingly.

“ Rather ! And I—we know each other well enough for that, don't we ? ”

She did not answer, but said presently,

“ Why did you come after me ? ”

“ I had something to say.”

“ What made you change your mind ? ”

He hesitated, then told her truthfully :

“ It struck me I had no right to worry you. That you wanted to be alone. That I must often worry you to death.”

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have always been kind," she said haltingly, and added: "I'm grateful——" and broke off.

He spoke very directly.

"I should like to be your friend. But if you wish, I will go away—out of your life, I mean. I shan't think you unkind or ungrateful for any little thing I may have done. There isn't anything really, only the wish to do things."

She stood, her eyes downcast, considering; and it was borne in on him chillingly how little he counted in her life, since he saw that she was considering, that she was making up her mind. He was disappointed deeply, but not hurt; there was no vanity, no petty pride in his nature, and his friendship was not yet deep enough for a more serious hurt. He realised that if she decided to go back to her solitary life, he and Muriel Latimer—Elizabeth—the boys—would have to bow to her decision; he realised more clearly every moment her perfect right to decide for herself. She was not a child; she was a woman who had suffered deeply, who had been capable of great self-sacrifice; it was for her only to arrange the smaller ways of her life, as she only had arranged the larger. If she thought it better to go her way lonely, unhelped, they must let her go, though they might know she was wrong. . . .

Prudence was very tired. An old friend of Wingfield's had come down the day before unexpectedly to see him. She had felt that she had not the right to forbid it, but she had given in shrinkingly, knowing the man and knowing Evelyn. It had fallen out as she had foreseen. There had been champagne. . . . The excitement had made Wingfield very bad—had set him feebly weeping. . . .

The friend had drunk too much, to drown the tiresome pathos of seeing his old chum like that—had made Wingfield drink too much. . . . From weeping and maudlin sentiment they had grown uproarious. . . . Prudence had had to fight it alone. Davenport professed himself too upset and shocked to be of any use. She had stood alone, till Ferney had come in. Ferney had put the friend to bed. . . . he had gone by the early train to London this morning.

She had almost broken down, almost, in her nausea, shrunk away from trying to help Evelyn. . . . Before that night, in the past, there had been other scenes which she had faced more firmly. Why was it she had almost failed this time? Why had it been almost unbearably painful, so nearly unbearable that once she had gone to the door. . . .

She pulled herself up sharply. She must think. But her tired brain refused to move clearly in direct thought; ideas thronged and strove. Dickon—Evelyn—her mind swung dizzily from one name to the other. She had to consider them—no one else. Evelyn and Dickon. This man who wanted to be their friend—that was it—would it be well for those two, for Evelyn and Dickon? They liked him. Evelyn looked forward to his visits; dare she take the smallest healthy enjoyment out of that terrible life? . . .

But last night she had almost failed him. . . .

If this friendship meant that, would it not be worse for Evelyn, than if he slipped out of his life?

Was it fussing to make Dickon stay in bed? She wanted to know that—Dickon—Evelyn—

Was Ferney a good companion for Dickon?

But if he went—she could not know, and there were other things . . .

She needed him for Dickon . . .

And Evelyn——

But last night she had almost failed him. If she failed, he had no one. . . .

This man and his friends—their doing, kindness, sympathy, friendship—were they for her? To her undoing? Their creed—that beautiful things helped—wasn't it wrong? . . .

Evelyn and Dickon——

She did not put herself aside, because it never entered her mind to take herself into consideration at all. It was Dickon and Evelyn . . .

She lifted her head at last and looked at him, her pale face strained with over-much thought was raised to his in a last effort, and then suddenly it drooped, her whole figure slackened. She said suddenly, with a childish tired appeal:

“You decide.”

It was so unlike her that he was for a moment taken aback, but he had no hesitation; he said gently:

“I can't do that. You go home now, and leave it. We'll talk of it another day.”

She tried haltingly to break through her reserve.

“You are good—Evelyn and Dickon both need you——”

He did not help her: he did not thoroughly understand.

“I—must keep—strong,” she murmured distressfully, and the effort of even so much self-betrayal brought the faint colour to her cheek. He understood now.

“It's a false strength,” he said firmly.

Her eyes questioned him earnestly.

“An unnatural strength. A strength like that saps

all your resisting powers ; it may fail you at any moment when you need it most."

" Oh—no——"

" It's against nature. One must relax sometimes. You don't. You live all day long—night too, probably, at a fearfully high tension. One day it will snap. You push away all outside interests ; you build up a stone wall round yourself and live behind it—no sun or good strengthening air can get to you ; you are undermining your strength. Don't you see ? You are calling upon it all the time—it answers bravely so far—but it can't go on. You're human. You'll break down—badly—horribly—you *can't* go on living like this. I know it. I'm sure of it."

She was trembling.

" It seems—easier—so. The—the other—weakens—"

" Because you're fighting it all the time. Don't fight. When you're alone give way a little——"

" No——"

" Well——"

But she turned away.

" I—must go."

She hurried from him, upset by the admittance of him into her confidence ; quivering sensitively as if she had bared her soul. To her utterance of those few words loomed as large as if she had indeed bared heart and soul to him.

But she wished to keep him as a friend . . .

Evelyn and Dickon . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

RENAUD, Armand and André looked in upon Muriel and Hugh, and scattered the beautiful quiet of the dusky room.

“Voilà! He is ill, le pauvre enfant, and Madame, she has send Ferney for de doctor——”

“Ill? Dickon?”

“Who else? La pauvre Madame—she look white, of an illness!”

“Of a fear!” from Armand.

“Will de doctor give me a medicine bottle wiv a *label* on it?” this from André, with great anxiety. “I do want a med’cin bottle wiv a label on it.”

“Renaud, tell me what you know,” Muriel said, looking anxious.

“De little Dickon! He lie ill—we go to de house to ask if he may come to-morrow——”

“We ddrive with Louise. William, he drive us in de carriage dat Maman have hired from Barchester,” put in Armand.

“Ver soon *I* will drive you, foolish one! Papa, he say dat ver soon——”

“Bah, not for days and days and many days!”

“Tais-toi, imbecile! Do I not tell you dat papa——”

“I do want a med’cin bottle wiv a label on it.”

“Renaud! What is the matter with Dickon?”

“Pour moi—I do not know——”

“He eat too many green apples,” cut in Armand,

who was rapidly outgrowing his echo-ship to Renaud, and sought to vie with him.

"Green apples! Ah bah, que tu es enfant! Green apples in March!"

"I did not say green *tummucky* apples—mais non—are dere den not green *sweet* apples? Je tu demande—are dere not——"

"Oh! Méchant! Méchant! You did mean——"

"I do want a med'cin bottle wiv a label on it."

"Hugh," Muriel appealed to him.

But he shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Little devils, I never get you to myself nowadays! Here, boys, clear out!" he added in a louder voice. "Is Louise waiting outside? Run along, then. Hurry up!"

A storm of explanation, expostulation, through which ran André's plaintive refrain:

"I do want a med'cin bottle wiv a label on it."

Latimer, wily through desperation, remarked that it was pretty rough on the horses, standing out there in the rain, on a beastly afternoon. . . .

Alone with Muriel again, he said:

"Now—come and sit here, where you were."

She came slowly back to the fireplace, and stood looking down into the flames.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"That child—and she is all alone."

"Oh, only some childish sickness. Muriel, you were going to tell me——"

She stopped him.

"Hugh, I can't go back—not now."

He stood looking at her.

"That sick boy?"

She nodded.

He gave a little laugh.

"It seems every one—even strangers—are to be put before me now."

She lifted astonished eyes ; it was so unlike him.

"It's just because you're put so very, very far before every one that I—I have to make myself—oh, you know what I mean !"

He was contrite.

"Last night we were out ; the night before the Favershams and those other people dined here ; to-day I've been out till just now. We're never alone, are we, Muriel ?"

"And now I'm going again, Hugh."

He nodded.

"I knew that was what you were up to."

He drew her closer.

"Must you go, darling ?" he whispered.

"Hugh, she is all alone. And that man is so bad sometimes—what will she do—between the two ? I must go and see if I can help anyway."

She added, ashamed :

"Isn't it awful—that it should seem quite a big thing to have to do ? Is love selfish, after all ?"

"You're going, just the same. It's not selfish—it gives you an added power of selflessness."

"Let me go, dear. . . ."

She went alone ; she would not have Hugh waiting for her ; she did not know how long she might stay. She had unconsciously formed a picture of Prudence distraught, distracted, but she found her looking as usual, perhaps a little colder in manner, although she expressed gratitude.

"I do not expect there is much wrong. A cold, that is all. But it is very good of you to come."

Muriel was at a loss ; the thought of Hugh, before the fire, in the study at the Hall, grew poignant.

“ May I see him ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; he is asleep now.”

Dickon asleep was unexpectedly cherubic and baby-like ; his cheeks were flushed, his short hair tumbled ; he moved restlessly ; muttered in his sleep : “ Ferney likes him—Renaud knows about horses—he laughed 'cause I called her pastern her hock—I'd like to shoot him——”

Prudence pulled Muriel away with almost a rough movement, and led her from the room.

“ You have sent for Dr. Fielding ? ”

“ Mother ! ”

She turned back. Dickon was sitting up in bed.

“ Is my head on fire ? ” he asked.

“ No, darling. Is it very hot ? ”

“ Yes, and my neck hurts. Am I very ill, mother ? ”

“ No ; you have a bad cold, Dickon, that is all.”

“ I think I am very ill,” he said reproachfully. “ I shouldn't be a bit surprised if I die.”

“ Oh, darling, you mustn't speak like that.”

He was silent for a while, then he said :

“ The man in that story you read to me wrote a farewell letter when he was dyin'. I want to write a farewell letter, mother.”

“ You are not dying, Dickon.”

“ How do you know ? ”

“ You are not really ill.”

“ Then why am I in bed ? ”

“ You have a cold, dearest. Lie down again, and keep the bedclothes over you.”

“ I want to write a farewell letter, mother. Very

likely in the mornin' when I wake up I'll be dead, and then you will be sorry."

She smoothed his head gently.

"It's foolish to talk like that, Dickon."

He began to cry.

"Ferney wouldn't care if I died ever so. I want to write a farewell letter. I've g-got to tell him th—that I forgive him——"

"Forgive whom, dear?"

"Renaud. I've got to t-tell him. You have to when you're dyin'. I want to wr-write a f-farewell letter——"

"Very well, dear, only don't cry. I will fetch paper and pencil."

She tucked the bedclothes round him, and gave him a book to rest his paper on; he took the pencil and began to scribble with an exceedingly grown-up air, forming the letter "d" over and over again, that being his favourite. Then he handed the paper to her.

"Read it, while I read it to you, mother."

She read assiduously, while he said:

"Dear Renaud,

"I hope you are quite well as this leaves me dying, and so I forgive you for knowin' more about Mirth than me and talkin' to Ferney and makin' him laugh and laughin' at me for callin' a pastern a hock and chewin' a bit of straw and hittin' your leg with a crop, and Ferney sayin', 'You'd never startle a hoss you knew what you were about. When this reaches you I shall be dead——'."

Prudence stopped him with a little cry.

"That's what the man in the story wrote, mother."

"You're not the man in the story. Now lie down, Dickon, and try to be quiet."

Muriel, in the doorway, marvelled at her sternness.

"Oh, take him up in your arms—hug him up tight—poor baby!" she almost cried it aloud.

Dickon lay down, a sullen expression on his flushed face. He turned and lay flat on his back, and ostentatiously folded his hands on his chest and closed his eyes. So the stone warrior in that big church had lain when he was dead.

"I'd like my sword beside me, mother."

"You are to try to sleep, Dickon."

"You'll be awful sorry to-morrow when I'm quite dead."

Her face quivered, and she put out her hand impulsively.

"Dear, try not to be so foolish," she drew her hand back, and merely smoothed the bedclothes.

Then she turned away and joined Muriel in the doorway.

Out in the corridor a word burst from her:

"Morbid . . ."

"Dickon? I don't think so. All imaginative children have those sorts of tragic ideas at times——"

Prudence hung on her words.

"Overstrung—unnatural," she muttered.

Muriel said: "I remember when I was quite tiny making a wreath of white pansies and daisies, and taking it to bed with me, in the hope that I would die of a broken heart during the night. That was because I considered my mother had been unkind to me, and I wanted to make her suffer. Didn't you ever do that sort of thing?"

"No; there wasn't any one to make suffer."

"Prudence! Quick—that chap with the white face has come back! He won't go away for any one but you——"

Muriel was left alone in the corridor. She stood a moment, the frightened, whimpering tones ringing in her ears, no other sound in the house, except a distant mournful voice moaning a hymn out of tune. She shivered and went downstairs and into the drawing-room. She hesitated whether to leave, but the thought of Dickon, alone, stayed her: he might need some one . . .

"There wasn't any one to make suffer." It seemed to stand out on the walls—the patient, ordinary tone of voice vibrated still on Muriel's heart. If it had been bitter—tragic—But this was worse, this acceptance of a fact not thought of particular importance now—lived with for ever so that it had no special poignancy.

Oh, to help her! Mark Ridgeway had begged her help—had she been slack? Had she allowed self-conscious fear of a hurt to her pride to stay her too easily? Or had it been the great happiness of her life. . . .

She went upstairs again and to Dickon's door; she waited outside listening. All was silent for a while, then Dickon spoke crossly:

"I know quite well that you're listenin' out there."

She entered with a little laugh.

Dickon stared at her sombrely.

"Do I look awful pale?"

"No, not at all, my dear."

He resented her cheerful tone.

"I'm most likely dyin' anyway."

"Not you! You'll be as well as ever you were to-morrow."

"I think you'd better go now, please; you're excitin' me," was his chilly response.

She sat down beside his bed, and laid her cool hand on his hot brow.

"Poor little hot head. Don't be cross with me, darling. I'm very fond of you, you know, Dickon."

"Are you? What for?"

"Well, perhaps because I think you're rather a nice little boy."

"Ferney doesn't like me."

"Who is Ferney?"

He eyed her in surprise too deep for verbal expression. Not know who *Ferney* was!

"Oh, I remember. The groom. What makes you think he doesn't like you?"

But Dickon's confidences had ceased.

"He doesn't."

She did not question him further.

She began to talk gently about his mother.

"Your father is very ill to-day, and she is so worried, Dickon, and now there's you, too."

"She doesn't care if I die ever so."

"Oh, Dickon, that's a wicked, mean sort of thing to say!"

"Wouldn't Renaud say it?"

"Oh, no."

He wriggled beneath the bedclothes.

"I'm thirsty, and my neck hurts."

She gave him some lemonade.

"What'd he do if he was ill like me?"

"Well, he'd just make up his mind to get well as fast as ever he could, so that he would be ready to help his mother like a man."

"Wouldn't he die in the night?"

"No; because of his mother, and he wouldn't talk about it, because of worrying her."

Dickon lay so still she thought he was falling asleep, and she quietly left the room. But as she moved from the door she thought she heard a sound within the room, and went back.

Dickon was sitting on the bed pulling his stockings on.

"Dickon, what are you doing?"

"Getting up."

"But you must not, dear! Your cold is too bad, you must stay in bed till Dr. Fielding comes."

He went on pulling up a stocking.

"Dickon, don't be tiresome. Get back into bed like a good boy."

He picked up the second stocking.

"I'm gettin' well as fast as I can so I'll be ready to help mother like a man," he quoted, and Muriel realised that she had achieved more than she had intended.

"Dickon, you'll make her so sad if she comes in and finds you out of bed," she coaxed. "That will worry her dreadfully. And if you go back now like a good boy, perhaps you'll be quite all right to-morrow——"

He sat limply on the edge of the bed, his burst of energy gone, the stocking dangling in his hand. He felt so heavy and sleepy that he allowed her to coax him back into bed, and he fell asleep almost at once.

Muriel, leaving the room, met Prudence outside.

"He is asleep."

"Have you been sitting with him? It's kind of you."

"Have you had tea?" Muriel, eyeing the exhausted face, suspected lack of food.

"No, I didn't want any."

"I wonder if it's too late for me to have a cup before I go?"

"Come downstairs, will you?"

She led the way into the drawing-room. "There's a fire still, I think. Dickon fancied playing in here this morning."

She rang the bell and gave the order for tea. But when it came she barely sipped it with hospitable pretence. Muriel felt that she was strung up to a dangerous pitch, that she was exerting, as it were, more than the full strength of her will, to keep herself calm. She tried to break it a little with a remark as to what a long while Dr. Fielding was in coming. To this Prudence merely assented.

She tried again with the suggestion that Dickon seemed sleeping very peacefully.

This time Prudence did not answer: she turned on Muriel brooding eyes deep with some painful thought. "He will probably be quite well in the morning," Muriel said, her heart beating faster in a curious fear of the thought in the other's face.

Prudence spoke then; she spoke through still lips, hardly opening her mouth; it was as if her thought uttered itself perforce, and she had nothing to do with it.

"I hope he won't get well." Muriel spilt a little tea into her saucer; she set the cup down carefully, then looked into Prudence's face. It had not altered much; there was a suggestion of surprise in it, as if she were wondering at herself for having spoken, but the brooding pain was still there.

"Oh, hush!" Muriel breathed. "You are ill—worn out——"

"I mean I am trying to hope it," she corrected truthfully.

"No, no! Don't say it! It's morbid—wicked. He is strong—healthy—your child. He is not different

from other boys—don't think that! He is such a fine little fellow——”

Her tongue faltered beneath the other's glance.

Prudence rose suddenly.

“Be quiet!” she said, almost whispering. She put up her hand to her throat and stood looking down wildly into Muriel's frightened face.

“He has no chance—born—months of disillusion and bitter learning—living beneath a shadow—no name! ——”

She moved across the room, and swaying, caught at the back of a high chair, and stood there, turning wild, fierce eyes to Muriel. “If you have a daughter you would not let her marry my son,” she said, her quiet voice in tragic contrast with her eyes.

Muriel, caught unprepared, uttered a cry, and was silent, the colour flaming in her face.

“I should be the same,” Prudence went on. “A nameless nobody! Ah, God, and you talk glibly of his being like other boys! Other boys—a Willoughby and a Wingfield—and no name! What chance has he? And I—had such high hopes—I—when he—he was coming——”

Muriel had her arms round her; she cried too. . . .

“I should like to tell you—a little—about myself,” Prudence said.

“As much as you can——”

“I lived till I was married—I was eighteen then—in an old grey house at Sodgewick—in Essex. It's a watering-place. It has risen. They had always had the house there, you see. My mother died when I was born and my father was killed in an accident—driving—when I was a few months old. I lived with my grandmother. She disliked me because I was a girl. She was old

and bitter. My father, her son—had disappointed her. She lived only for one thing: to re-establish the importance of the Willoughbys. They had sunk—had sold their lands, and when her son was born she saved every farthing—she worked early and late—always with that end in view—he should justify his existence, he should do great deeds, and bring back the name into good repute. She was a Willoughby too, you see, she had married a cousin. My father turned out a dreamer—unpractical—not very strong. I think it nearly killed her, but when he married one of the beautiful Miss Compton-Moores, her ambition was rekindled, stronger than before. She waited. I heard it said that she nearly went out of her mind when I was born, and my mother died. She would not look at me. She left me to nurses till I was a year old. . . . Afterwards she was not cruel to me; she just left me alone. I had a governess to educate me—she was old and prim, and terrified of my grandmother. I found out that she told lies, and I despised her——”

“Relations?” Muriel said in her pause.

“We had none. My mother’s only sister had gone out to India, her parents were dead. We were the last of the Willoughbys. That was why my grandmother was in despair. I was not allowed to make friends with any one, either as a child or later. You see, Sodgewick had become a poor sort of watering-place, and the people were, well, my grandmother would not allow me to have anything to do with either the residents, who mostly let apartments, or the visitors. She loathed the place, but she would not leave it. Then she died. She died quite suddenly in her sleep. . . .”

“Yes?”

“Her old maid was distraught—she ran shrieking out into the street. Evelyn was riding through Sodge-wick—he came in to help——”

Muriel did not break this longer pause. She saw it all—the terrified, inexperienced girl—the man——

“He was very good. We were married the next week.”

That was all. “He was very good. We were married the next week.”

The next week!

Muriel drew her closer.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said in a low voice.

“You have been so kind. You trusted me,” Prudence said.

“Kind! I think it an honour to have your friendship!” burst from Muriel.

Prudence was roused into acute wonder.

“Honour? *My* friendship? I don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do! That’s part of you! Oh, you must do the rest. You will. You’re too great to fail——”

“Do what?” she broke in on Muriel’s incoherence.

“Dickon. Don’t you see? Make him great in spite of it! Don’t you see? Oh, you can do it! No one else—but you can!”

“I have tried—ever since I knew—to make him like other boys. I have failed. I can see he is different.”

“No, no! A little older for his age—that is all. You will——”

“That’s Dr. Fielding,” Prudence said, and rose.

“A cold—a little fever—quite right to put him to bed—highly strung child? Yes, yes. All right in a day or two. Plenty of nourishing food.” . . . “I suppose it *was* fussing,” Prudence murmured thoughtfully,

when he went away. Asked what she had said she answered, "Nothing worth repeating," avoiding Muriel's eyes. She was shy of her now, but the strain had been eased ; she looked tired, and as if she would sleep heavily that night. When Muriel's victoria was brought round to the door she bade her good-bye in a low voice. She added : " I'd like to—but——"

" You do it more by not doing it," Muriel said gently, and bending forward kissed her.

Prudence, going back upstairs, thought curiously :

" That's the first time a woman has kissed me, since I was a child."

CHAPTER XIX

RIDGEWAY broke in upon Elizabeth and the boys deep in accounts.

“ I don't suppose you want me, but——”

“ No,” Elizabeth said with languid bad temper, “ but I'd like you to stay in spite of me.”

“ Too deep for me. Why ? ”

“ I can feel injured then, and pose as a social martyr, whose hospitable instincts inherited without will of hers, prevent her turning a guest out, and going on with her accounts. What have you to tell me ? ”

“ That nobody wants me.”

“ Why not return to Wyverley then ? Cecily Woodburn wants you.”

“ As a brother, Eliza.”

“ You're just like a rude little school-boy, Mark. That's your one form of wit—it's school-boy wit.”

“ How nice. I adore school-boys, Lizzie.”

“ ‘ Beef—yes—mutton—yes—six laces for de boot—yes—’ came murmuringly from Renaud frowning over paper and pencil. “ Ah, cette pauvre Maman, I cannot help, mais non c'est inutile.”

“ We eat also de bread and de butter,” came as a suggestion from Armand.

And from André, startlingly, in an ingratiating whisper :

“ Dod, I wonder where you are now ? ”

“ Ah bah, de bread de cook make, and de butter

Maman does not pay for—it is wrote in de book with de milk and de cream ! ”

“ Accounts worrying you ? ” Ridgeway asked.

Elizabeth, sighing, nodded despairingly. “ It’s horrible—being poor. I don’t like it even as an experiment ; and to live with ! I’m practising the most rigid economy. Alphonse says there is no need for it, as his book will soon be finished now, but honestly, do you think many people care about those ancient old naturalists to the extent of buying a thirty-shilling book ? ”

“ Yes ; with those delightful little pen and ink sketches of his. I never saw more delicate work. The way he can get the minutest wing of a butterfly—it’s wonderful, I think. Do the boys keep accounts too ? ”

“ We help Maman,” Armand explained, sucking his stump of pencil.

“ Ah, cette pauvre petite Maman,” cooed André, trotting to Elizabeth, and leaning against her knee. “ Is Dod up de chimney, Maman ? ”

“ Oh, no, sweet.”

“ De chimney’s not a booful place,” he acquiesced thoughtfully.

Renaud flung his arms wide with a gesture of weary despair, and appealed to Ridgeway.

“ Mark, I ask you ! What is one to do ? Maman—she become pale—tired—it is not right dat she unhappy and ill ! But I—I tink and tink, and no way can I remember dat she spend a ten shilling half sovereign. What is one den to do ? ”

“ I can’t answer you, offhand, Renaud, it requires thought. Is it half a sovereign that you come short, Elizabeth ? ”

“ Yes. Anyway the money flies. I think it’s much

better not to keep accounts, the money doesn't fly half so quickly then."

"You mean you don't notice its flight."

"Well, it comes to the same thing."

"You know," Ridgeway said, "you came down here to recuperate health, not money."

"Well, I can't possibly be healthy if I have to starve, and that's what it seems coming to."

Ridgeway looked round the room, which had been entirely refurnished. Elizabeth said:

"Don't say anything superior, or you'll repent it. I've bought all those things on a sound business basis—I'm going to have an auction sale when we go. Won't it be thrilling? One always pays such enormous prices at sales, so I shall make quite a little fortune."

Ridgeway's lean face creased into humorous lines, but he forebore to utter his thought.

"How about Du Pierre's chateau? Have you let it yet? He expected that to bring him in a clean thousand a year, didn't he?"

Elizabeth closed her eyes wearily.

"Oh, there are some poor cousins or something staying there at present," she said. "I wonder when tea is coming?"

Whereat Ridgeway looked more amused still, for he had heard a story of those poor cousins, one of whom was a very delicate child, and of Elizabeth's impulsive decision that they should be offered the shelter of that beautiful old chateau in the south of France. . . .

Suddenly Renaud broke into a shrill stream of such exceedingly rapid French that Ridgeway could make very little of it.

"A man who took his boot off to you," he said

mystified to Elizabeth, "and sat amongst the cabbages!"

"My accounts are right! Oh, Renaud, what a blessing you are! Oh, yes, and you too, Armand, and you, you sweet."

"Do they tally to a farthing?" Ridgeway asked.

"Oh, yes, that is, I'm apparently a shilling or so short, but that's nothing."

"I see. And the ten shillings is accounted for by the old gentleman who took his cabbage off to you, and sat amongst the boots?"

Shrieks of appreciative glee from the boys.

"It was old Gibbs—Thomas Gibbs—do you know him?"

"Rather. Ripping head. I'm going to have him for a model."

"I think he's hideous, and he has a great pink thing on his nose——"

"Oh, a carbuncle. I'll paint him the other side, sitting amongst his boots, taking off his cabbage."

"I took him some tobacco yesterday. I don't think he's at all a nice old man, but—*que voulez-vous?* His first remark to me was to the effect that I needn't have left my carriage round the corner for fear of hurting his feelings; for his part he liked 'kerridge folk' to come visiting him. He seemed rather to despise me because I had walked a hundred yards or so. I consider it positively indecent of a poor old man to uncover my delicate thought for the lower classes, like that."

"What else did he uncover when he took off his cabbage?" Ridgeway asked: he added *sotto voce*, "I declare I feel a positive wit when I'm with those boys of yours: never at any other time!"

Renaud, rocking with laughter, exclaimed:

“ Ah, que vous êtes drole ! ”

Elizabeth, smiling, said :

“ He wanted to uncover his foot. He was in his garden amongst the cabbages, and it appears he has a growth on his left foot which he is fondly nourishing in the hope that it will become in time a full-grown sixth toe. When I wanted to know for what purpose he wished for a sixth toe he was deeply offended. But unfortunately he forgave me sufficiently to decide to honour me with a glimpse of the embryonic sixth toe. I could only escape with a hastily given half-sovereign for a new pair of boots, as those he was wearing were not quite what he wanted. ‘ It don’t pinch exactly like, but it sort of — *keeps it back!* ’ he informed me. Ah, comme ces gens-la sont droles ! ”

The boys, sent away to tea in the school-room, Ridgeway, knowing well the reason, asked :

“ Why do you always speak to them in French ? ”

Elizabeth responded :

“ Why do you always speak to them in English ? ”

“ Because it’s their native tongue. ”

She raised her eyebrows.

“ Is it ? More than French ? ”

“ Oh, well, because I’m not good at French ! ”

“ Well, you see, I am. ” She smiled upon him sweetly, as he took his cup from her.

“ And it would be such a pity to correct their broken English, by talking unbroken English to them, wouldn’t it ? ” Ridgeway said unkindly.

“ Didn’t you come in to tell me something ? ” Elizabeth asked languidly.

“ Yes. I’ve got to tell some one, or burst ! ”

“ Well, I suppose I’m a degree better than bursting. What is it ? ”

“ You know that sketch I did last week—sun and mist—down by the stream——”

“ Yes ; a lovely thing.”

“ Well, I sent it to Coles—used to live here—I thought he'd like it, and he wants a regular old picture—commission—a six footer ! My luck's turned. I've had a rotten time lately. I've wired to Dickson—chap who owns that studio up the hill in the meadow, you know. If I can have his studio for a bit I'm all right. I begin to think there will be a bit of corn for my old horse when his shoulder's all right, after all ! I've been concocting polite speeches of regret, for his benefit—sort of thing—‘ I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid that that shoulder must be rested a bit longer. I do not think it would be wise or kind to risk using it just at present. Pray make what use you like of my grass and my hay.’ But now—— ! ”

“ Your grass is only about half an acre, isn't it ? ”

“ But it's paid for up till next Christmas, you see.”

“ How you dare lecture me about my thriftlessness, I don't know ! ”

“ I lecture you ! Elizabeth ! ”

“ Your face does.”

“ I spurn it then ! I cast it away ! It's no longer a friend of mine ! ”

“ Was it ever ? And you an artist ! ”

He looked at her sadly, and rubbed his hand gently over his face.

“ It's the best I've got,” he said. “ But I'd like to understand the innuendo that *I* am thriftless. Are there many struggling artists who manage to keep a horse, and to hunt ? I ask you, as Renaud says.”

“ Well, isn't that in itself an extravagance ? ”

He shook his head.

"No. My horse I refuse to give up. I've gone short of butter on my bread at times, but one good gallop across country is worth all the butter ever churned. No; he's not an extravagance—he's a necessity."

Elizabeth laughed gently.

"I don't think you can call him that."

"It depends on the point of view, doesn't it?" he rejoined. "Now, I shouldn't call yards of lace on my tea-gown a necessity."

"Well, I do," Elizabeth replied looking down, and smoothing the lace lovingly. "I adore lace."

"It looks as if it adores you," he said. "I've never met any one who goes into such wonderful folds as you do."

"It sounds like a hammock chair. More tea? You know, I'm most awfully glad about that commission." She added slowly: "Do you tell Mrs. Wingfield that sort of thing?"

He looked surprised.

"I think so; I hardly know—I've never thought about it. Why?"

"She interests me. I was wondering if you found her sympathetic."

He frowned in thought.

"In a way—yes. It's a curious way; it's more a sort of detached interest. She's most awfully interested in things."

"Give me a cigarette—thanks. I should have thought she was too cold—too reserved——"

He was silent, thinking.

"Perhaps, when she has given her friendship, she is different," Elizabeth said, settling herself back amongst her cushions.

"No; she gives her friendship too, with that sort of detachment. She is very simple in a way, yet—oh, one can't put it into words. Do you like those cigarettes? They're a new kind I'm trying——"

"They are very nice. Mark," Elizabeth spoke languidly, looking at him from between half-closed lids, "don't fall in love with her."

"With Mrs. Wingfield? Fall in love with her? I—wish you hadn't said that, Elizabeth."

"Why?"

He rose and walked once or twice up and down the room.

"Oh, one sounds such a fool—only—to me she is married——"

Elizabeth reddened a little.

"You thought I was thinking of—that? I thought you knew me better than that. I merely meant it as one would mean it of any woman—married or single—who was—well, not convenient, as it were."

"You don't quite understand. She's—*more* than married—I'd as soon think of falling in love with—the Sistine Madonna!" It burst from him in a despairing effort to put into words the absolute impossibility of such a thing happening.

"You hold her so sacred?" Elizabeth flicked the ash from her cigarette with absorbed interest.

"No, not that exactly either! Oh, let's leave it. I can't explain, if you can't see it. I said the Sistine Madonna because I've seen her look like her. Anyway, I don't like it, Elizabeth, one's got to be—priggish, if you like—about her; the situation . . ."

"Demands it," she finished in his long pause. "Perhaps you're right, Mark, but remember I've known you since the party at Fawley Hall, where you won my heart

by persisting in calling it Fol de rol—do you remember ? I thought it the most exquisite wit.”

“ You gave me three kisses under the mistletoe, because I took your dare, and went up to our hostess and asked her if she liked living at Fol de rol. Yes, I remember. Does Alphonse win kisses so easily nowadays ? ”

“ Oh, he has to work much harder than that for them. He has walked into Barchester to-day to see about hiring a neat little victoria for me.”

She tried to ignore the quizzical suggestion of his eyebrows, but always true to herself, was presently impelled to say :

“ It’s economy ; it was my idea. It’s stupid to waste money, isn’t it ? ”

“ Most reprehensible.”

“ Well, one of the horses has run a nail into his foot—No, wait a minute, I know you’re longing to fly round to the stables—So it is impossible to use the landau, n’est-ce pas ? To feed two great horses—pay for their hire and the hire of the landau—for no purpose at all ! C’est imbecile ! So we are going to hire a one-horse vehicle also. Now, isn’t that economy ? Since waste of money is so reprehensible ? ”

Ridgeway, returning later from the Hall, mused.

“ Women—how queer they are ! Even the best of them. . . . Fall in love—— Yet Elizabeth can’t see. . . . It’s nauseating in a way. . . . I wish she hadn’t said it. . . . ”

He stopped by a gate, as he was fond of doing, and resting his arms on the top bar, looked out at the ploughed field stretching darkly away to where a paler gleam showed the sky. He began to try and think out the

sort of girl he could imagine himself falling in love with. He found it a difficult task ; it was a subject to which he had not given much thought ; somehow, there had not been much time. A poem occasionally—a beautiful book—with a love theme—had fired him for the moment with a vague longing to feel this thing they wrote about so exquisitely, and at such times there had seemed to hover near a suggestion of what it must be to love and be loved. But the suggestion had never grown clear, or stayed with him for more than a few minutes ; there were so many other things—there wasn't time. . . .

Now, after strenuous thought, he decided :

“ Brown eyes—no, hazel—yes—and gold hair—no, deep warm brown that's almost black, only there is too much warmth in it . . . little and dainty—no, perhaps drapery went into better lines on a taller figure. . . . Character ? Warm-hearted—very—must adore him. Sporting. But not only sporting. Must be clever too. . . . ”

In the end he turned away with a little laugh.

“ If it meant selling old Jim Crow I'd remain a bachelor for ever ! ”

His thoughts turning to his horse, his painting, the many interests of his life, he had decided before he reached Elm Hill that he was cut out for a bachelor, that he would, on the whole, prefer not to marry.

A fugitive picture flashing across his mind as he entered the house made him pause, but, in the end, adhere to his preference.

The picture was of a small Mark Ridgeway. . . .

“ There're old John's kids to go on with the name, ” was the thought with which he dismissed the subject from his mind.

CHAPTER XX

RIDGEWAY made his way thoughtfully to the stables at Cherry Cross ; last night, going round for his horse, he had found Ferney drunk. Now he wanted to do something, but it was difficult.

Ferney was in the harness-room listlessly rubbing over a saddle.

“ Mornin’, sir.”

Ridgeway leant against the doorpost and talked carelessly about an airship accident. He saw presently that Ferney was casting him furtive glances from his little bloodshot eyes ; he waited for an opening. It came with the words :

“ I don’t know as I can stick this place any longer.”

Ridgeway nodded.

“ S’pose I ought to try and get a job as a blooming choffure ! They seem all the go nowadays. S’pose they’ll be going out with hounds in ’em pretty soon. That’ll be a fine sight ! The ’untsman in a motor car ! ”

Ridgeway let him talk his soreness and bitterness out, then he said :

“ You won’t go, will you, Ferney ? ”

Ferney replied with an oath.

“ Beg parding, sir,” he added immediately. “ It gets on your nerves like. What sort of a job d’you think it is to groom a horse that no one ever rides except me to exercise her ? To clean harness that’s never used ! It’s like working for a ghost or somethink, and no credit for it. You can’t put any ’eart into it

after a bit! One horse in the stables! And us that never had less than six! Look now, sir, you think a moment what it used to be——”

He went off into a long excited description of the good old times, and Ridgeway, watching him, knew that it was good for him to get it all out.

Quite suddenly the groom dropped back into his usual taciturn manner, and seizing a bridle began to polish it energetically.

“Fine day, sir,” he said.

“Why don’t you try for another place?” Ridgeway asked curiously.

“Oh, I shall stop here, sir, along o’ the little mare and his lordship.”

He added gloomily :

“Maybe I’ll get kicked out some time.”

“You mean last night?”

“I know I took a drop too much, sir,” he bent over the bridle and mumbled his words. “It may happen again, I s’pose.”

“It mustn’t, you know,” Ridgeway said. “It isn’t only the mare and the harness you’re needed for, Ferney, you know.”

The groom shot him a quick glance.

“There’s that long-nosed Davenport, sir.”

“I’d sooner have you here than him,” Ridgeway said slowly.

“That so, sir? We don’t speak—him and me.”

“There’s Master Dick, too, Ferney, he likes to come round here—it wouldn’t do——”

“He’s been round once or twice lately, sir, but ’e ain’t of much account where horses is concerned; he ain’t no chip of the old block, more’s the pity. I’d never ’ave thought his lordship would have a son who didn’t

care about hosses. Lord, if you could have knowed him in his prime days, sir! Ride! 'E could ride a kangaroo, so to speak. And I never see a better whip neither. Knowed all over London and Brighton he was, for his pretty driving. Single—pair—tandem—four-in-'and—'twas all the same to 'is lordship. To see 'im in London—with a pair of reg'lar hot 'uns—winding in and out with never an inch to spare, saluting all the 'bus drivers, sir—there wasn't a driver didn't know 'im—and now they've got *motor 'buses!*”

His voice fell on a note of intense and bitter contempt.

“His lordship and me liked those 'bus drivers, sir,” he said sadly.

“So did I, Ferney.”

“Master Dick, he'll never know one. P'raps it don't matter if he ain't very keen on hosses, sir, by the time he's growed up they'll be absolute!”

Ridgeway, opining he meant obsolete, refuted him, and led the talk back to Dickon, for whom he felt he owed some sort of explanation. It was a task of considerable delicacy, and he cast about for a way to make it clear that Dickon loved horses, without having to go into details.

“Master Dick is more a chip of the old block than you think, Ferney.”

“Yes, sir?” obviously not believing it.

“He's a quiet little chap—er—doesn't kick up much fuss to get his own way—your mistress——”

“Don't like him round 'ere, sir? No, I see that.”

Ridgeway decided that Dickon must fight his own way, since he could not talk over Prudence's ideas with the groom.

But to Ferney, his sharp little blue eyes on Mark's face, had come, in a sense, enlightenment.

“P'raps the mistress thinks hosses ain't good for boy or man, sir,” he said quietly. “There's some built that way, I know. I've met 'em. That long-nosed feller—Davenport—is one of 'em—he and me come to words over it, and I kicked him out of this 'ere room.” A sudden dry smile twitched the corners of his mouth. “He told 'is lordship.”

Ridgeway laughed.

“And you were given a week's wages in lieu of notice.”

Ferney gave vent to a sharp little high cackle of laughter.

“Yes, sir, in course, sir. But what I says is it ain't the hosses do the 'arm, it's the other things, and those as are given to the other things 'ud be *worser* if they wasn't fond of the hosses, than what they are now. You read the papers, sir—when do you find any of these filthy low-down sort o' crimes committed by a good old 'ard-riding man, yes, and a racing man, too! Never, so 'elp me—excuse me, sir. And you take one o' these dissipated gentlemen, sir; what happens when the 'unting season comes on? They live as straight and clean as a hoss itself for half the year—they know they can't enjoy a good run 'tother way! Well, if they *ain't* hunting men—wot then? Why, they go on drinking and gambling and what not for the whole year, instead of half! Ain't that God's truth, sir?”

“There's a lot of truth in what you say, Ferney.”

“Yes, ain't there, sir? But no, they don't take no notice of them sort of things. They pick out those as has much to do with hosses, and sort 'em out, and find one 'ere and there as might be better than wot he is, and then shriek out as hosses are the devil. They ain't. They're good all round—hosses are, sir—they give them as love 'em as good a time again as they'd 'ave without

'em, and they help 'tothers who love 'em—the bad 'uns who love 'em—to live a bit straighter than if they was bad 'uns who didn't care about hosses. That's how I looks at it, sir."

"A good way, too, Ferney."

Ferney rubbed his bridle in silence a while.

"His lordship, now, sir, see how the little mare helps 'im! Time and again there he is feeling half dead like, and 'e gets thinking of the little mare, and getting better and better till 'e feels so well 'e wants to ride 'er. Then comes the order to saddle 'er up—of course, I knows wot it means now, though time was when my 'eart used to fairly jump, in the 'ope it might mean 'is lordship was really well enough to ride 'er—Now I takes 'er round to the side door, and 'e looks out at 'er, and she ups with 'er head, as pretty as a picture——" he paused and scratched his head. "It's 'eart-breaking work, sir," he said, huskily.

Ridgeway was silent for a while, then he said :

"If he doesn't ride her, the sight of her—shining like silk—saddle and bridle kept like that—gives him a pleasure to think of, and think of again."

Ferney merely said :

"'Taint nothing to do—that," but Ridgeway knew that he was pleased.

"It's my belief it's only the little mare as keeps him alive, sir! I believe 'e'd 'ave been dead before this if it wasn't for his 'orror of dying in a bed."

"Well, will you fetch the mare out now, Ferney? Here's the sun."

"Yessir."

During the following hour while Ridgeway worked at the portrait of the mare he was painting for Wingfield, Ferney was, strictly, the machine-like groom; he stood

at the mare's head, walked her up and down, and it was only at the last when Ridgeway was going that he said, in a business-like way :

"I don't think it'll 'appen again, sir, thank you, sir."

Ridgeway answered :

"I don't think it will, Ferney," and went away musing on the groom's devotion to his master.

CHAPTER XXI

SHE was standing there very quietly, looking out before her. . . .

He drew in his breath sharply, stood and gazed at her. . . .

She was in greyish green—soft and indefinite—a slim dim figure against a background of purples and greys—misty purples and misty greys—dotted with clumps of brown and gold haze, which were—wonderfully—trees, their fragile boughs and twigs showing darker in the soft mist; here and there a roof, an elusive drift of vivid blue smoke, and nearer, close behind her, the long slender ash trees with their delicate upstanding trunks and dainty branches painted softly, darkly against the mist. . . .

Some involuntary exclamation, and she turned, her face looking upon him palely from out the mist. He did not greet her, he gazed on her: she was the spirit of it, the inner meaning. . . . He saw it at last, he had found it, had caught that elusive suggestion about her, the suggestion that had hitherto escaped him when he had striven to think it out. He had gone vainly, in his thought, to the sea; to rose-gardens, sunny meadows—this was it. This soft gentle mist of colour, its tender poetry, its wistfulness, and yet its serenity, its sadness—coolness—its quiet fragrance and truth—the misty freshness—purity. . . .

“If I could paint you like that!” he said abruptly.

She looked at him inquiringly, seriously. "You—come so well against all that," he said lamely.

"Do I?" she asked simply. She turned her head again, and looked out to the downs.

"If I could paint," she said, "I think I should try to paint that, and—break my heart!"

"I'm going to," he said, pondering as he spoke on her last words, realising how she had altered.

"To paint it?" she turned to him with the interest she showed so keenly in things now that she had, as it were, let herself go. Having heard her bald story from Muriel, he understood her better than he had done. He could picture the lonely, unnatural life of the child and girl, always thrown back upon herself, utterly ignorant of the world; her marriage, and her subsequent life spent in a sick room. He understood that her coldness arose partly from a sort of shyness, or what would have been shyness had not the immense shadow of trouble turned it into a cold reserve, an indifference wherein no one seemed quite real or of much consequence. Her life had fostered the aloofness he was conscious of in her, induced a sense of detachment that even yet his friendship had not overcome. But she welcomed him gravely as a friend now. She had thought over earnestly what he had said to her, had pondered Muriel's kindness, and had grown afraid of the wall he had said she had built up around her; afraid that one day it would fall and leave her defenceless—unprepared—exposed—to fail Evelyn and Dickon. That was the great dread of her life. . . . She turned to Muriel's friendship, to Ridgeway's, as to a tonic, gravely deciding it was her duty to take the medicine; so dulled by her life, so strenuous in her one idea—Dickon—Evelyn—that she gave no thought to the personal ease such friendship

might bring. Indeed, as far as she herself was concerned, she shrank somewhat from further friendship, and what it entailed, unconsciously hankering shyly after her old, unbroken reserve. But she never consciously considered herself in the matter at all. . . .

"Yes, to paint it," he said, "and break my heart, which nowadays means my temper and digestion."

She brushed it aside as she always brushed aside all but the main interest.

"To paint that!"

"To try to paint it," he amended.

"Even to *try*! How glorious!"

He watched her, wondering at the power of self-repression she must have had, as evidenced now by her delight in the beauty of the mist and the trees.

"Show me. What would you take in?"

"You," he said,

She looked at him surprised.

"Oh, do you want a figure in it?" she said with a disappointment so entirely impersonal as to give him that faint sense of chill he so often experienced when with her.

"No; I want *you*!" he said impatiently, fighting against the elusiveness of her.

She considered it gravely.

"I'll stand for you, only I'm sorry; I want it without a figure."

"Will you let me paint you? Really? It's most awfully good of you——"

She interrupted:

"It would be the afternoon—about this time? I cannot get away any other time. Where should I stand?"

"Where you were when I came up."

She moved back.

"Here?"

"That's it. Turn a little more to the left—no, that's too much—a little—that's it! Just look out as you were—*that's it!* Stay like that."

She had fallen naturally into her former pose. She remained quite still, and he stood studying her; she did not move as the minutes passed, and slowly his artist's joy was chilled into a man's disappointment; he felt suddenly cold and dreary. He looked at her with different eyes, and saw her again elusive, indifferent, icy cold. . . .

"I should make a horrible mess of it," he burst out. "I don't think I'll bother you."

She did not reply.

"You disapprove, don't you?"

"I think it's a pity."

He gave a short laugh.

"I'm going to try for a place as groom. I'm no good as a painter. I do nothing but childish daubs lately."

"Was that painting of the ploughed field a daub?" she enquired gravely.

"Er—why do you ask?"

"Because I thought it so beautiful."

He reddened a little.

"Oh, well—that—well, perhaps that wasn't quite so bad. I say, I've finished Mirth's portrait and framed it now. Shall I bring it along this evening?"

She hesitated.

"Could you send it?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Evelyn will be—I'm afraid he may be so glad that—that he'll be upset, you see——"

"I understand. You heard that I've got Dickson's

studio? Bit of luck. I'm sleeping there too, you know, couldn't inflict myself——"

"Is there a bedroom?"

"Oh, yes, most palatial. He had it built to live in at times."

"Is he nice?"

"Dickson? Decent sort. Why?"

"I don't know. I always feel interested in artists. If—I knew people—I think I should like to know artists."

"Would you?"

"Yes. I should like to sit quiet and listen to their talk of pictures, of painting and drawing."

"It's ripping," he said. "A lot of fellows—jawing art—criticizing—oh, I've had evenings I shall never forget. Of course one comes across the other kind sometimes—the kind you can't have any interesting talk with, because if you venture a criticism on one of their friends' work they take it as a personal insult. But they're never much good anyway—that sort—sort of small all round somehow."

"The bigger artists—they are interested in so many things—nearly all beautiful things, aren't they?"

He nodded.

"Come in here—just a minute. Have you been up the slope there, on your left?"

"No."

"It's beautiful—covered with wood—just a wild, young forest growing up. It's sad too—look at the stumps of oaks and beeches; but the younger generation is luxuriant enough. Here's a path—more or less—it's pretty well covered with moss and dead fern, isn't it? Shall we sit here?"

They sat down on an old oak that had fallen that winter during a storm, and lay as it fell. Neither spoke

for a while ; they sat watching the quivering shafts of sunshine that filtered through the close-woven roof of branches over their heads, and turned the slender young larches, so lightly, freshly green, into a wonderful fairy mist of colour.

“ Please talk painting talk, will you ? ” she said.
“ Do you mind if I don’t understand ? ”

“ You do understand.”

“ Do I ? ” She sat a minute looking down at the moss, gray and golden brown and brightest green, and the dead leaves rustling round her feet.

“ Tell me,” she said, lifting her eyes and resting them on a glory of dead, wet bracken, glowing vivid, red, gold, wonderful in the sunshine. “ When you see something beautiful that you want to paint, do you see it done—painted—a picture ? ” She was very much in earnest, very greatly interested. Ridgeway found himself answering deeply, showing her what he had hitherto kept for himself.

“ Well, it’s rather like what the Poet said—do you remember ?—‘ Then comes a creeping as of centipedes running down the spine—then a gasp and a great jump of the heart—then a sudden flush and a beating in the vessels of the head—then a long sigh—and the poem is written.’ ”

She was listening intently, and when he paused she sat looking at a tiny clump of primroses she had found amongst the coils of some beech roots, thinking upon what he had said, as was her way.

“ Your picture is painted—like that—in your mind ? ”
He nodded.

“ He goes on, you know, to say that every poem has a soul, and a body, and it is the body of it, or the copy, that men read and publishers pay for. The soul of it is

born in an instant in the poet's soul. That's pretty well how it is with me, in a way. I see a thing painted—Lord, *how* it is painted! The wonder of it takes your breath away. But the thing itself when it is actually done—the body that men buy, or rather, don't buy—what a disappointment! A dull thing—a thing full of technical faults—lacking just that glory and wonder—a thing that mocks its own soul—the soul that was born, in an instant just from love of God's living picture——”

She was silent, pondering. She sat, her delicate characteristic hands loosely folded on her knee, her slim body slightly leaning forward, yet erect, expressive somehow of intentness.

The sun slipped out further from behind the clouds, and the wood became alive with trembling, quivering shafts of sunshine; only the long aisle of beeches remained dim, twilight, sacred. A lattice work of woven light and shade played over her head and shoulders as she sat there, gravely thinking. Ridgeway looking up saw that if she were to move forward the shade would vanish, leaving only the trembling sunshine; he was vaguely conscious of trying to make her move forward, conscious of a wish that she should move, and of a curious throb of—was it dismay?—when, turning to speak to him, she moved back a little and into deeper shade. The next moment he had forgotten it, startled at the softening of her face: her lips were parted, half smiling, half grave.

“Well?” he said gently, with a sudden sharp vision of that young girl to whose help Wingfield had come on a day in Sodgewick. . . .

“What a glorious place an artist's mind must be,” she said, “Stored with all those beautiful pictures—the souls——”

“How you understand!” he said.

She fell back into thought then, sitting there; the sun-flecks left her, and slowly the shafts of sunshine grew fainter, till their gold was almost turned to silver, and the wood sank into a sweet dim quietude. Ridgeway's mind was still occupied with thought of that young girl in Sodgewick—the girl who had married Wingfield in a week. . . . He tried to get away from it—it was a thought he did not like—a thought that should have been unthinkable in a wood like this. He watched the soft blue mist come creeping up from the river at the foot of the slope, watched it slowly encircling the young trees, blotting out the aisle of beeches. It was a thing he had striven often to paint—that blue and grey mist that made of the wood such a beautiful ghostly thing, but now he gave only half his mind to it. The other half—worrying, teasing—was with that young girl in Sodgewick. . . .

He snapped the thought impulsively.

“What are you thinking about?” he said, and wished he could have caught it back, since he never questioned her intimately like that, fearing the hurt, utterance of her thought, or refusal to utter it, might give her.

But she answered at once.

“I am trying to picture an artist's mind.”

“It shouldn't be difficult for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are an artist.”

“I? Oh, no, I——”

He brushed it aside impatiently.

“You've never held a paint brush! I know all that. All the same, you're a real, genuine, downright artist, for your good or ill, that's what you are.”

“I never *have* held a paint brush,” she said, a touch of wistfulness in her voice.

“That’s soon remedied.”

He stretched out his arm and dragged his paint box nearer ; he picked out several brushes and held them out to her.

“Choose.”

She studied them quite seriously, and selecting a large one, said :

“One holds it so ? And dabs—so——”

Laughing he gave her a little lesson.

“I must go back now,” she said then.

“Will you come and have tea in my studio one afternoon ? Muriel Latimer is coming. I haven’t much to show you——”

“Thank you. I should like to come.”

She seemed to hesitate, pondered, then : “I wonder—do you think it is a good thing to tell Evelyn all these things ? They interest him, but I’m not sure if they don’t sadden him too—the contrast——”

“Cheer him all you can, I think, with outside gossip,” he said, the while he saw suddenly the telling of his talk about pictures to Wingfield. . . .

Would she do it ? He thought so, if it could help him over a bad hour. . . .

He became silent, shrank back into himself, and after a while saw that she did not apparently notice it. He went down to the dreary level, where questions as to the use of this, that and the other lurk ; in his case the questions took the form chiefly of asking the use of his painting ? The reason for his ambition to paint a fine picture ? With nagging variations on these themes dulling his outlook he went back to his studio, and packed up the portrait of Mirth.

Prudence, entering Cherry Cross, was met by Dickon, who was evidently waiting for her, although all he said was:

“Hulloa, mother.”

She questioned him, knowing that that was what he wanted.

“What have you been doing, Dickon?”

“I did a drawing and I wrote my copy and I did my sum.”

“What else?”

“Oh, I went round to the stables.”

“Yes?”

Then at last it came, his face alight.

“I helped Ferney clean out the loose box; I carried the dung pan!”

The pride! Prudence stooped suddenly and kissed him. To bend, not to break—that must be it. To guide, not to stem this thing so strong in his young blood. She saw it at last, saw it in the added brightness of the little face, the new frankness with which she was taken into his confidence. Well, to keep her place—she must do that—and surely, so long as she did that, she could bend and guide? So must she profess pride in his carrying of the stable pan!

She went upstairs and found Wingfield morose and dejected.

“I tried to make that fiddle-faced fool join in the chorus of ‘John Peel.’ He said he didn’t approve of hunting. Infernal cheek! And I had to have that chair—the low one—taken away. Prue, it made grimaces at me, and it’s so horribly like poor old Fielding who broke his neck that day, you know, out with the V.W.H.—ghastly thing—that—only death worth dying—in the saddle—mean to do it myself, but he died with a squeal like a trapped hare. Never had any nerve, you know, Fielding, and he saw it coming. Lord, how he squealed! I can hear it now. I was close behind

him, and his face—just kept the mare from jumping on top of him—he was lying there, and his face——”

“Evelyn, there’s something nice coming for you to-night. Can you guess what it is?”

“I wish you wouldn’t interrupt me like that, Prudence. And I’m not in my second childhood yet; there’s no occasion to speak to me in baby-language. What was I saying? Oh, yes, little Bob Carter’s breeches—never saw anything like ’em in my life—there he was—Prudence, isn’t the leg of that table just like Emery? Remember him? Poor chap who went out of his mind. He’s in that asylum—Surrey, you know—forget exactly where—thinks he’s a jockey don’t you know—they give him a rocking-horse to ride. God, what a thing to come to! If ever I came as low as that I’d put a bullet through my brain——”

“Are you ready for your tea, Evelyn?”

“No, I’m not! Never shall be. Woman’s slop. A whiskey and soda—that’s what would do me good. These fools of doctors all have the same parrot cry “No alcohol!” How’s a man who lives in Harley Street, and never puts his leg across a horse to know what’s good for a man like me? When’s he coming again? That damned fool from Harley Street?”

“Next Thursday; Evelyn, I met Mr. Ridgeway this afternoon——”

“Did you? Wouldn’t mind betting you were more agreeable to him than you are to me! I don’t blame you for a moment. Women hate a sickly man—it’s out of all nature—brute strength, that’s what they like, and the more brutal you are to them the better they like you! Perhaps on Thursday that fool from Harley Street will condescend to tell me when I shall be better. I don’t ask much, Lord knows! Strength to

ride a horse—that isn't much, eh? Just to get my leg across the little mare again—Curious thing, that tobacco jar's just like poor old Fielding, too. Can't you see it? Funny thing—first the chair, and now that jar. Just his expression—when he died——”

“Evelyn, would you like Mr. Ridgeway to come and see you to-night? Would you, Evelyn?” She placed herself before the jar. “You could have a game of chess, and you want to show him that new crop, you know——”

“Prudence, get out of the light! There's something behind you—oh, yes, the tobacco jar. Take it away, Prue—take the beastly thing away. Fielding's face—God, the terror of it—and a sort of horror—he never had any nerve—as if he'd already met something he didn't know how to deal with, the other side. That jar's just like him. . . .” He watched her furtively as she took it from the table, and carried it to the door. Suddenly he rose to his feet in a frenzy of terror.

“Put it down, Prue! Put it down! My God, don't you see what it is you've got in your hands? It's his head——” he made a feeble step or two after her. ‘Prue, it's Fielding's head—his awful head——”

She was just in time to steady him as he tottered; she helped him back to his chair, where he sank down feebly, and began to cry.

“I don't like to see you holding his head, Prue! It—it's not right—where's his man? *You* shouldn't carry his head. He always spoilt his servants . . . I don't like it at all—and there was blood on it—it's not right, Prue! My wife ought not to have to do that sort of thing, only I'm so helpless now. . . . But you ought not to carry poor Fielding's head—it's not right. . . .”

She was kneeling beside him, her face white and distraught, agonised as she was always by his pitiful tears. . . . Anything else—but that. . . . She turned her face aside, gave him his handkerchief.

“Evelyn, Mr. Ridgeway has finished the portrait of Mirth—” She repeated it helplessly till it caught his wandering attention, as she prayed it would.

“You shouldn’t carry it—it’s not right. . . . Mirth’s portrait?”

She drew a long breath of relief, and rose.

“Yes; he promised to send it along to-night. I do so want to see it now it’s framed, don’t you? I wonder where you would like it hung, Evelyn?” She cast an anxious glance at him, saw that, with the tears still wet on his cheeks, he was smiling eagerly, and went on lightly: “That wall? Now, is that a good light? There’s room for it there——”

“This wall, my dear! Surely this is the best light? We could have that print down. Would there be room then? What size is it, did he say?”

“Twenty-four by twenty. I will get my measure, and see how much room there would be if we take the print down.”

“Yes, yes! Be quick. I’m glad I didn’t insist on seeing it before it was quite finished. He wanted me to wait, you know, till he had had it in his studio—proper light, wasn’t it, eh? And framed. Well, will there be room, Prue, will there?”

“Plenty,” she said, looking down at him over her shoulder, as she stood on a chair.

“Gad, you’re a pretty figure of a woman, my dear! A bit thin, but there’s such a grace about you. Now why do you want to jump down in such a hurry? Sort

of thing you always do ! If a man mayn't tell his own wife that she has a pretty figure——”

“ Evelyn, do you think you'd like it better on this wall ? ”

“ Don't care. Can't make you out. Why did you jump off that chair like that ? ” his tone was sulky.

“ I—I felt rather sick,” she said, and hung her head, hating the untruth.

“ Oh, I see. Why couldn't you say so before ? Remember that time you turned sick before the boy was born, eh, Prue ? D'you remember ? Ha, ha, ha ! What ! There's a fine blush—eh, what ? What ? Prue, my dear——”

“ Evelyn, wouldn't it be awful if the portrait of Mirth is a bad one ? What would you do ? Would you keep it ? Or would you tell Mr. Ridgeway you didn't like it ? You see, it's a present—it was his idea. It's rather difficult, isn't it ? What would you do ? ”

“ Oh, I'd hang it in one of the rooms we don't use——”

“ Isn't that what you did with that portrait of your mother—the one Simmons painted——”

He went off, chuckling, into a long old story, and Prudence sat down quietly, and took up her knitting.

CHAPTER XXII

"I MUST go now," she said.

"Just a minute—only a minute—if you could give me five minutes more! It's just my effect—oh, damn!" this last to himself, as Prudence, ignoring his entreaty, moved quietly away.

He looked after her with a whimsical dismay.

"Don't you even want to see what I've done?"

"I cannot spare the time to look; I gave it to you," she called back over her shoulder, and in a minute had disappeared down the slope.

Ridgeway squeezed out more white on to his palette.

"Lord, what an inexorable person!" He went on painting, although he grumbled:

"It was perfect! What I've been waiting for. It only comes for a minute or two. I believe if a bull had got me dangling on his horns at the time she thought it her duty to go back, she'd remark that she hadn't time to inquire if the position was painful, and would walk off. . . . That tone's all wrong—somehow . . . that's better . . ." he became absorbed in his work.

Prudence went on down the hill, looking, every other minute, at the watch on her wrist. If she were late Evelyn was so upset; he had been so much better lately, she was painfully anxious to avoid the possibility of an outbreak. She broke into a run and arrived breathless at Cherry Cross. With an instinctive touch at her hat—Evelyn hated the smallest untidiness—she opened the door and went in. The dead silence of the

house struck at her with a little chill. The old tormenting question rose to her mind: "Was it right to condemn a child to that?" and the old answer: "What else could she do?" She pushed it aside—Dickon was having a better time lately. Wasn't he at Elm Hill now?—She ran up the stairs, and along the corridor to Wingfield's room. Deciding, as was her habit, on what she should say on entering, she went in, beginning to say it:

"I believe we are going to have a storm, Evelyn, it's so——"

The words caught in a little startled breath: Wingfield was not there. A vague terror held her for a moment where she stood, her eyes on the open door that led into the inner room. Then she moved swiftly towards it: of course he was in there, asleep perhaps. . . .

She felt no surprise when she saw that he was not there. She went to the bell and sent peal after peal ringing through the silent house, then left the room and ran quickly down the stairs, horror growing upon her at the silence. . . . Why did no one answer the bell? She went into the kitchen, and found it empty; she called:

"Davenport! Lydia!" ran into the little room given over to Davenport's use . . . it was empty. . . .

She called again, her voice seeming to pound back on her heart in the silence.

Then out to the stables, a throb of relief at the thought of Ferney. . . . But he was not there; she searched the harness-room, the loose boxes . . . the mare was not there either. . . . She stood a moment, her hands pressed to her eyes, stilling herself, regaining

her control over mind and nerves. She had done it often enough before. . . .

Dickon was at Elm Hill; she had told Lydia she might go out; Ferney was exercising Mirth. She got it all clear and straight. There was only Davenport.

Was he with Evelyn? Or had he discovered his absence and had gone to look for him? No matter. She must decide what to do. The Rising Sun . . . must she go there?

Suddenly there came to her the thought of Ridgeway, and with it a strengthening rush of warmth round her frightened heart. She had never before had any one to lean on, had always fought alone. . . .

Now she turned and ran back towards the hill where she had left him painting. Helpfully the thought remained in her mind: "He will know what to do." It was a thought alien to her, but she had no time to waste on the strangeness of its being there; she accepted it with the simplicity that formed such a large part of her nature. She struggled breathlessly up the hill, tried to call to gain his attention before she should reach the top, but was unable to make sufficient sound.

Ridgeway stood before his easel absorbed; again and again his eye seemed to pass over her as she struggled up the hill. She waved her handkerchief, called again from her dry throat, but did not succeed in attracting his attention until she stood at last beside him, panting.

He turned a swift, unseeing glance upon her.

"You've not come back to pose? It's too late—effect has gone—I'm awfully sorry—," he was painting with the furious energy a man gives when he sees his effect vanishing. . . .

"Evelyn—is not in the house," she said quietly.

“What?” he wheeled round on her, saw her white face. “Just sit down while I pack up, and tell me.”

She obeyed, telling him what little there was to tell in a quiet, perfectly composed way.

He nodded.

“I should say he’s gone out with his man.”

“I don’t think so. It’s very unlikely. He says it’s like a — an idiot—going out with his keeper. He never has done it.”

“I see. Then he went for a walk by himself. He won’t go far. I’ll soon bring him back. What was that fool of a man about to let him slip away, I wonder?”

“I can’t think. I have been trying to understand it.”

She hurried down the hill beside him.

“He—would soon get tired,” she suggested.

“Go in for a rest at ‘The Rising Sun,’ he finished. “That’s what I was thinking. We’ll just look in at your place again, in case he has come back.”

He did not say any more; did not heap re-assurance upon her, but she was conscious of a great sense of trust in his power to help, of a great sense of comfort. Wingfield had not returned, nor Davenport; the house was empty as before. Ridgeway, bidding her await him there, was aware of a curious longing for Ferney’s return. He spoke on the thought:

“What time does Ferney usually return from exercising the mare?”

“He usually exercises her early in the morning, but this morning Evelyn kept hoping he would be able to ride her, and I had to keep sending for her for him to look at . . .”

Ridgeway saw again that first morning when he,

warming his hands in the hall, had heard those homely sounds without—of bit and bridle and hoofs—of soothing voice, “Steady, my little lass”—and going to the window had seen the mare—had heard her whinny to the voice at the window above. . . . God, it was pitiful!

He left Prudence to be there in case Wingfield should return, and set out for the “Rising Sun,” his mind heavy with dread of what he should have to bring back to her. . . . But he brought nothing. He came after a while, alone, with no news. He had been away for more than an hour. She came to meet him from the kitchen.

“Will you come in here and tell me? I’m making him—afraid the milk will boil over.”

She spoke quite quietly, only shortening her sentences the sooner to hear what he had to tell her.

He had nothing to tell her.

“Hasn’t any one seen him? No one spoken to him? Did you question every one?”

“Yes: no one has seen him.”

It seemed incredible.

“He must have cut across country,” Ridgeway said. “I’ve gone along the road a bit the other way—it’s being mended, you know, and old Bartley would have seen him. Can you give me any clue? Is there any bit he’s fond of? I wish you would sit down,” he added impatiently.

She did not hear him; her whole mind was concentrated on the possibility of being able to give him some clue. . . .

Suddenly she hurried from the kitchen into the hall, and went swiftly to a window.

“Out there,” she pointed across the beautiful dusky

meadows opposite the house. "He sits studying it—he has imagined a line—that gorse—there, to the left, is the cover—the large meadows beyond—the fox takes to those—crosses the stream at the bottom——"

"I'll strike across there," Ridgeway said, and stopped, listening. "Wheels," he said. "They're—stopping here," he went to the door and opened it.

"Elizabeth!" Prudence heard him ejaculate, and then a voice—for a moment she shrank—"Hullo, old chap—hadsh shuch a time——"

She went forward, pale and still. Ridgeway was half lifting Wingfield from Elizabeth's brougham, while Elizabeth, pale, smiled re-assuringly and very charmingly upon Prudence.

"I gave him a lift," she was saying. "May I come in for a moment? Just let me find my handkerchief—it's somewhere amongst the cushions——"

Prudence found herself pushed aside, forbidden by Ridgeway to come near. "He will want me," she said, trying to follow.

"He wants nothing but sleep," Ridgeway said impatiently. "Stay where you are. I can manage. Go out to Elizabeth, you owe it to her."

He could have been brutal if need were, to save her seeing and hearing while he got Wingfield up the stairs, and into his room. And at the back of his mind lurked a thought:

"Elizabeth . . . She had brought this man home. . . ."

Prudence went out to the brougham; her eyes avoided Elizabeth's; in her face was an expression of intense suffering. . . .

"Will you come in?" she asked in a low voice, and it was cold with strenuous repression.

"Here's my hankey!" Elizabeth cried. "Yes, if I shan't bother you."

She followed Prudence into the hall.

"Now, let's sit down. I want to talk to you. I suppose you've had an awful fright? How did it happen?"

"I don't know. Davenport is out. I suppose Evelyn—felt he must go out——"

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise.

"Don't you know that Mrs. Darlington called? In the Dormer-Jones' car? And took him for a drive?"

For a moment the shamed avoidance of Elizabeth's eyes was displaced by such a flame of wild anger that Elizabeth, surprised, surmised depths of which she had not dreamt.

"No; I didn't know," Prudence said. "I was out."

"Oh, yes, I met Davenport—he told me—he was searching, because Mrs. Darlington had re-appeared here after a while, and told him that Mr. Wingfield had—taken a dislike to the car and insisted on getting out. She was, naturally, scared. Davenport said he had thought the drive would do his master good."

Prudence said nothing.

"I was driving home from Gillingford, and a little later, I—met Mr. Wingfield—and brought him back."

Prudence's lips moved. Elizabeth opined thanks, and went on gently:

"You must have had a horrible fright. I thought the maid would have told you——"

"She is out too, and Ferney."

"I see. I'm so glad I met him; it was very lucky."

Prudence cast her a sudden swift glance.

"He was, of course, tired to death, and some whiskey he has had simply went straight to his head. It always

does, when any one is as weak as that. I think it's awfully hard, because it's just then—when any one is weak and tired—that it is needed."

She paused: her cheerful, everyday tone, her charming person, her smile seemed to bring a less tragic atmosphere into the dim hall. It was nearly dark now, but Prudence made no suggestion of lights.

"It simply made him dead sleepy," Elizabeth said.

Prudence repeated the word, her face gleaming white in the dusk, tilted back suddenly with a suggestion of eagerness.

"Sleepy?"

"Yes: I think he was asleep—actually asleep—in the brougham."

"Asleep," again she repeated it, as if to assure herself of some fact.

"I kept very quiet. I thought sleep the best thing for him," Elizabeth said, rising. "I must hurry home now. Mark is with him. I'm glad. You look done up. I'd go to bed early, if I were you. I don't think this will really do Mr. Wingfield any harm. Probably the whiskey was the best thing for him, and it's not cold, you know——"

"Where did you find him?"

"Just by the cross roads—the pond corner—you know? He hadn't walked far, because he left the car only half a mile further on. I really believe he won't be any worse. . . . Good-bye. Do go to bed very early."

Prudence's fingers twined with poignant feeling round Elizabeth's hand, outstretched in farewell.

"I want to—I can't—thank you——"

"My dear child, what for? It was nothing. I'm so glad I happened to be driving that way. Good-bye."

Prudence's fingers relaxed ; she muttered once again: "Asleep?" and Elizabeth, moving to the door, smiled over her shoulder.

"Oh, yes, he was asleep quite comfortably in the brougham."

Alphonse, writing in his study, heard Elizabeth come in, and called to her.

"Presently," she replied. "No, don't come. I don't want you just yet."

She went to her room, bathed, changed her clothes, and came down to him. He met her with outstretched arms:

"How beautiful you are! But how pale, dear one."

She slipped into his arms, and clung to him.

"Put *your* arm round me—tighter, Alphonse—I want you to take that other out——" She burst into tears.

Presently she told him:

"That man—Evelyn Wingfield—I found him—he was dead drunk—in the meadow beside the large pond at the cross roads—he had his arms round an old cart horse—round his neck—and was weeping over him, and saying: 'Poor old chappie—poor old chappie—no use for you either—' It was horribly pathetic. . . . I took him back to Cherry Cross—don't—wait—I had to do it——"

"Why didn't you *send* him in the brougham?" asked Alphonse, gripping her, in his pain, so tightly that he hurt her. But she made no sign.

"I tried. He wouldn't go, unless—oh, I couldn't leave him there—and the disgrace—that poor child—there was no other way. . . ."

"Tell me everything."

She put her head down on his shoulder, and tried to laugh.

“Don’t sound so fierce, Alphonse! It—wasn’t nice. Drunken men aren’t nice. But it’s all over now.”

“Why did you say ‘*Your* arm’ like that?” he whispered. “Did he——”

“He tried to—hush, he is not responsible, even when he is sober. Alphonse, help me to forget it. I’m making a fuss,” she broke down again. “It was horrible—I’m frightened of drunken men. . . .”

He held her close, kissed her, soothed her.

“You must be very nice to me now,” she said, presently, and in response to his passionate rejoinder: “I’m thinking out a new frock and a hat to match it!” she said, with a shaky little laugh.

“A dozen, ma belle!”

Only once did she refer to it again, and that was later, after dinner:

“I am glad that I can act fairly well,” she said musingly, and added:

“It’s curious to think that there are many good folk who hold that a lie is never justified.”

Again she referred to it indirectly when she said:

“Alphonse, isn’t it queer how some people who would risk their bodies to help another, would not risk the tiniest scrap of their souls?”

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. DARLINGTON had found it expedient to go and stay with a cousin for a while. She had shaken the dust of Fernleigh Dene from her feet with a good show of martyred indignation; so good a show indeed that Mrs. Dormer-Jones, often in tears and volubility these days, had been torn again in two. Was her dear Dolly so bad, after all? Hadn't she meant it in all kindness? Was it fair that because the poor man had turned out so unmanageable she should be blamed? In truth, Mrs. Darlington's story, as told by herself to all who would listen and to some who would not, sounded plausible enough. She had called at Cherry Cross to enquire after the invalid, who had expressed a wish to see her. She had acceded, of course, although she found the poor man very trying, and he had grown very wistful and given vent to a longing for a drive. She had not dared offer to take him, but on consulting with his man learned that of all things the invalid was to be humoured, and moreover that he had been ordered drives, but had hitherto refused to take any. So, although she had important business to transact in Barchester, she had given in. She had thought his man would accompany them, but at the last moment the poor invalid, full of fads and fancies as they always are, flew into a violent rage, and refused to have him. There was nothing for it but to humour him by taking him for just a short turn, and bringing him back as soon as possible. (Here Mrs.

Darlington was won't to enlarge on her sensations of nervousness and fear at the prospect.) All had gone well for a little while, then suddenly he had expressed a wish to get out and walk ; he had expressed it very violently and had refused to listen to persuasion, command or reason. (Here there was another description of her sufferings.) At last in despair, as he threatened to jump from the stinking abomination (his own rude words) she had been obliged to tell the chauffeur to stop, and to let him get out. He had refused to tell her in which direction he intended to walk, and the only thing she could do was to tear back to Cherry Cross, pick up Davenport, and drop him at the spot where Mr. Wingfield had left the car.

So far her story sounded plausible enough ; it was more difficult to give plausibility to her flight from the scene, after the dropping of Davenport. Even Mrs. Dormer-Jones, who in all innocence, had lent her car, found it difficult to understand why Mrs. Darlington had not hung about in order to carry the poor man back to Cherry Cross in the car. Mrs. Darlington, inwardly fuming at the attack of rank cowardice that had overpowered her, and sent her from the scene, explained fluently that she and Davenport had thought it best, as Mr. Wingfield's old detestation of cars had evidently re-awakened with alarming strength, and they feared he would never consent to be taken home in it, and that the mere sight and smell and sound of it might be sufficient to send him fleeing in the opposite direction.

Plausible. . . . but Mrs. Darlington went to stay with her cousin, and Elizabeth remarked that it was an unjust world, for why should the poor cousin suffer ? Mrs. Dormer-Jones, in a fluster of worry and grief, her old friendship—" We were at *school* together, you know "

—at war with her kind heart, at length called despairingly on Prudence. By some chance she caught her, and in a quarter of an hour emerged redder than she went in. She could never give an adequate reason for the horror with which she looked back on that quarter of an hour. “Oh, no, she wasn’t *rude*! I don’t know—oh, she was like *ice*, and I tried so *hard* to make her understand that there are exceptional cases, and that sort of thing, you know, but—I don’t know—and I daren’t go a *minute* before the quarter of an hour in case she should consider it a *slight*, you know!—I don’t know, but—I don’t know—I declare at the last I felt as if *I* was the one who needed excuses made for me, not her!—I don’t know——”

Davenport had to Prudence borne out a good deal of what Mrs. Darlington gave as her plausible explanation. He was very sorry, but his master had been so set on it, he had thought it better to give in to him, especially as the sun was out, and it had turned so warm. He had not known what else to do, and the lady had seemed so kind and sympathetic. He was sorry he had made a mistake, but he knew that his master had been ordered drives, and it had turned so warm and the sun was out, and he had been so set on it—Prudence had dismissed him with a reprimand.

Ridgeway was for dismissing him altogether.

“I don’t like the fellow. Let me get you some one else.”

But Prudence refused, a brooding light of reminiscence in her eyes. She wondered passingly, what he would say if she told him of the last man’s horrible familiarity? Of the impertinence of another? How explain to him the difficulty of getting a man stable enough to withstand Evelyn’s alternate contempt

and familiarity? Davenport at least was quiet and respectful; no abuse, no maudlin hailing of him as a chum, seemed to have the slightest effect upon him, and Evelyn liked him.

Wingfield had slept heavily through the night following his drive with Mrs. Darlington, and in the morning seemed to have no recollection of what had happened beyond a confused idea that some lady had wanted to carry him off in one of those stinking abominations. He awoke very feeble and tired and wretched, and Prudence knew she had one of those days before her when it was impossible to cheer him; when hour after hour passed in wearying devices to interest him and bring content to him. He insisted on getting up, although when at last Davenport left him, dressed, he was so worn out that he looked ghastly.

Prudence, hoping he would fall asleep in his chair, read Jorrocks to him in a quiet voice. He sat so still that she hoped he was dozing, but presently, stealing a glance at him, she saw that he was not listening; he was gazing at the portrait of Mirth hanging on the wall.

She said tentatively:

“Ferney wanted to see you——”

He snapped at her.

“He can send a message!”

“Oh, it was only that he would like to have a talk with you——”

“Infernal impudence!”

She had known it would be no good; she had tried to induce him to have the groom up often enough before. He added, with bitter peevishness:

“Find me an interesting study, wouldn't he? Give him something to laugh at—me as he used to know me—and this damned wreck? Little chap used to look

upon me as a sort of god, don't you know. God ! And now I'm God's fool, eh ? ”

She cried out.

He laughed.

“ Well, I'm not much better. A man as sick as I am—tied to his room—fed on slops—he's little better than an imbecile.”

She strove, in terror, to turn the conversation.

He interrupted her impatiently, brushing aside what she was saying.

“ Why the devil is Ferney so quiet to-day ? Believe he's asleep, damn him ! You'd better go and see, Prue ! I won't have him shirking——”

She went out to the stables and told the groom to make more noise.

Ferney understood ; he knew how dear such stable noise was to Wingfield.

Prudence returning, found Wingfield huddled in his chair, gazing up again at the portrait of Mirth.

“ What do you want, Prue ? Bursting in like that ! It's extraordinary how I seem never to be alone for a moment——”

“ Did I burst in ? I'm sorry, Evelyn. I'd like to read some more Jorrocks to you——”

“ Poor little thing, eating her head off in the stable,” he muttered, his eyes still on the picture. “ Better have her shot and be done with it ! ”

Prudence remonstrated in horror.

“ Happy ? ” he repeated peevishly. “ How can she be happy ? Shut up all day long——”

“ She is out in the paddock, for several hours every day, Evelyn.”

“ Don't interrupt ! Shut up all day long—eating her head off. Give me her portrait ! ”

She took it down from the wall and gave it to him. Was he going to destroy it ?

“ Now leave me, please.”

She hesitated.

“ Mayn't I just sit here and go on with my work, Evelyn ? ”

“ No. I want to be alone. A man does want to be alone sometimes, you know, although apparently it's never allowed to me.”

She left the room quietly, pretending to close the door, but leaving it a little way open so that she could look through. But the next moment she had turned away, her throat swelling with unshed tears, and had hurried down the corridor. She went into her own room, and stood there, her hands locked, and before her eyes always the picture of that head bowed on the portrait of Mirth. . . .

Once she went back and listened outside the door, turning with repugnance from the thought of spying on him, for so now she put it to herself. After a while she listened again, and the silence frightened her so that she had to steel herself to look in on him. . . . He lay as before, his head bowed on the portrait of the mare, his arms round the frame. . . .

She went in noiselessly, and bent over him. He had fallen asleep, his cheek on the glass of the picture . . . his cheek was wet—the glass blurred. . . . Very gently she raised him and put him back amongst his cushions ; she took her handkerchief and wiped the tears away from his face. Then suddenly in a wave there surged over her an infinite pity, a great maternal tenderness. . . . She saw again the man—handsome, gallant, overbearing, who had come to her help that grey day in Sodgewick. It came upon her in a rush

—her grandmother's sudden death—the maid's frantic cry rang in her ears again: "She's gone! She's gone in the night!" That had been her first intimation. . . . She had been having her solitary breakfast in the sombre breakfast-room; it had brown walls, and a red and brown carpet where all the red had worn into a curious greyish yellow colour. She had been "making pretence" there were other people there—she often did that. Those other people stood out now clear and sharp in her mind—Joan Ingleside, always laughing and gay, with pink cheeks and blue eyes; her brother Harry, tall and thin and rather sad, but with very kind eyes; Mrs. Alchester, with a mole on her chin, and little Bobby Alchester, with bare legs. . . .

She remembered the sort of horrible shock which had scattered them, the running upstairs, the standing trembling outside that door . . . the awful feeling of being absolutely alone in the whole world. She remembered now with a shudder the sense of the vastness of the world that had come crushing down upon her, her own appalling insignificance, her terrible ghastly inability to cope with this thing. . . . She remembered a curious thought that had flashed into her mind as she stood there, trembling, sickly fighting the fear that stopped her from going into that room—"I don't know where you get funeral carriages." And then he had come—up those dark stairs—she had turned to see him—big, handsome, kind—a god, surely—the music of his voice mingling with the clink of his spurs. . . . Dazzled, she had felt his hands upon her, heard his voice: "No need for you to go in there, you poor child. . . ."

No one had ever called her a poor child before—no

one had ever spoken to her in that voice ; no hands been laid so kindly upon her shoulders. . . .

After that things grew blurred, only one figure standing out clear and brave—her god—

Bustle, noise, doctors—a kind woman who shared her meals—a long wet parade—day after day a long wet parade—a card lying in the road with “ Apartments ” printed on it, getting more and more sodden every day—men creeping about the house—up in that room—a peremptory voice bidding her put on hat and coat—tramp, tramp along the wet parade, ears drinking in wonderful talk of horses and worlds undreamt of—men trudging down the stairs carrying something heavy. . . . It did not seem strange to have her grandmother passing her in silence—she had rarely spoken to her—she did not follow her. That voice had bidden her stay behind ; she had no thought of disobeying. . . . Back to the view of the wet parade—the apartments card was rotting now—there was only ‘ ments ’ left—Would she never see her grandmother again ? Never have to meet those curious, sullen eyes that seemed always to ask what good you were, since you were only a girl ? It was difficult to realise—when one’s thoughts would turn and turn again elsewhere. . . . Would he take her home with him ? Would he ? He had been so wonderful—so kind—so godlike. It had seemed that he had only to smile—only to wave his hand—and all things were done. She was not alone in the world now. He was there, too. He would never leave her alone again—he was too kind, too wonderful. Had he a beautiful wife at home, who would put her arms round her, and bid her welcome ? . . . That was her dream.

And her heart throbbed with prayer that in some way she might be able to repay—to show her gratitude. Her passionate dream. . . .

When he drew her to him suddenly and kissed her again and again, she struggled wildly—brain and heart on fire with a horror not understood, but instinctive and agonizingly strong.

This man—her god—his wife—what was he doing ?

When he released her she fell back, white and trembling, into her chair. He thoroughly enjoyed the hour that followed ; it was so delightfully difficult to make this quaintest of ingenues understand what he wanted. He revelled in absolutely new sensations ; he had not dreamed that such a creature could exist ; he took her little, white, trembling soul in his hands, and examined it with the joy of the connoisseur. Some good it did him ; the whiteness of it purified him for the while ; when next he kissed her, he did it gently, saying : “ Will you be my little wife, Prudence ? ” . . .

She had had to re-adjust her dream, that was all. To refuse anything to this godlike man did not for a moment occur to her. Rather did she rejoice that here, at once, it seemed she could begin to repay him. In a blind exaltation she returned his kisses, with little cool lips fired only by the joy of giving—giving—because he wanted her to give. When he mentioned—vaguely—the disparity of age—she listened uncomprehendingly. It meant nothing to her ; had he told her he was seventy she had not been disturbed. To her at first he had seemed old in a sense, hence her instinctive giving of a beautiful wife to him, but now age and all such things had no significance for her. She was filled only with the fire of deep gratitude, and so, in a blind exaltation, she married him.

Why did it all sweep over her now? Why was she again that foolish, grateful, ignorant child? Ah, she had wept tears—bitter tears—for that child during those first months—till that night when tears for herself had been dried for ever, and only tears for her baby remained. . . . She thought now that it would have killed her, had it not been for Evelyn's illness—the illness following the stroke that he had had that same night. She nursed him through it—nursed him, with the walls of the sickroom, the very bedclothes and pillows bespattered with that word he had said to her—"illegitimate" . . .

Oddly she remembered of those days only that, and a terrible faint weariness that flamed into fierce revolt when rest and change were suggested to her by the doctors. They needed her—her baby and Evelyn—that was all.

Before his illness—before he came to her with the news he had discovered, she had been wondering if she could leave him—

Frightened, she had even written an appeal to him, to let her and the boy live elsewhere . . .

How queer that seemed now!

She stood looking down on him—oh, the pity of it! The contrast of that godlike man who had come clinking into her life—and this! Again a wave of tenderness swept over her; she saw a little spot of wet still glistening on his cheek; she bent and wiped it off, then bent lower, and for the first time for years, kissed him gently on his forehead. . . .

Then she quietly picked up the portrait of Mirth, and hung it again in its place on the wall.

CHAPTER XXIV

PRUDENCE said tentatively to Muriel one day about this time that she felt "uneasy." Asked in what way, she hesitated, and said finally that things were going so well. She said even that much with a halting tongue, and Muriel smiled gently, chiding her for the feeling as being an ungenerous one; she quoted Elizabeth: "I think those horribly unselfish people who can't enjoy a whole day luxuriating out in the sun, because they've got to visit some one who can't get out, are so ungrateful. They never enjoy anything wholeheartedly and with rapture; at the back or the front of their minds there lurks always the thought of that other or others who hasn't got, or isn't doing, whatever they've got or are doing. If when Alphonse gave me a present I sighed and said: 'Yes, it's very pretty, but poor so-and-so hasn't such a thing,' he'd be deadly disappointed. So must God be, over and over again. I believe God likes a wicked person like me, who just grabs all the joy she can get out of the things He gives—the sunshine and rain and flowers and things—with a grateful heart, and no thought of anything but just loving it."

Muriel laughed when she had finished: "I've gone wrong somewhere; it has nothing to do with what you said. I never can quote correctly."

Prudence said thoughtfully:

“If every one were like that, no one would ever enjoy anything thoroughly.”

Muriel assented.

“But if,” Prudence went on, always enjoying every word interchanged in this, to her, rare way, “every one were the other way, would any good be done at all in the world?”

“Well, of course, that’s rather a difficult point, exactly how much one ought to do for others, how much one ought to give up. Elizabeth has no doubts, lucky person! She says frankly that she is selfish. She holds that all people are more or less selfish, and that those who get more pleasure, more joy out of working for others, should be the ones to do it, and that they’re selfish in their way, as she is in hers! Of course, Elizabeth is full of sophistry, but one finds oneself remembering the things she has said; it is partly her way of saying them, I think.”

Prudence said suddenly, on a hot impulse:

“I think I agree with her! If I were offered joy I’d take it, irrespective of all the suffering in the world!”

Muriel felt her eyes fill suddenly with tears; her mind worked rapidly over the years of Prudence’s life . . . joy? She drooped her head, ashamed of her own great joy. . . . Had there never been joy in that life? She looked up, her eyes questioned the other’s, and slowly Prudence answered, the while a smile lighted her face:

“Yes. . . . once,” she breathed, “unalloyed for a little while——”

Muriel knew . . . Dickon . . . not the other——

She sat silent pondering the capacity in Prudence for happiness; she saw suddenly the size of it—she had a

huge capacity for it, and hitherto it had been suppressed, had never been fed at all. Could it ever be fed? Startlingly, against her will, came the thought of death. . . . Afterwards—perhaps—love. But even so Dickon—Would her joy ever be complete? Could it? Looking into the other's face, rapt with thought of that one time of unalloyed joy, she doubted. . . .

Mark Ridgeway was right; she was like the Sistine Madonna; there was the same look of ineffable tenderness with a wonderful suggestion of fear—almost fear—as if this thing that had come to pass was a little too great for her; the same look of innocent youth. . . .

What was it that made her sometimes, in spite of her tragic life, so young? Younger than her twenty-five years? Were there depths still that had never yet been stirred? Were they deep depths? Muriel had grown very fond of her in these days; she had induced her to come often to the Hall; had said to her, gently: "Will you just come, and if you're tired, sit still—just be quiet. Listen to our nonsense, if you want to, or don't, only never trouble to talk unless you really want to talk. Once, after I'd been ill, a friend made me do that, and I found it so restful."

Prudence did come; sometimes she would sit quietly in the dusk and perhaps not speak for an hour or more. Quite simply she took Muriel at her word, and she would sit and listen to the talk that went on, sometimes only between Hugh and Muriel, sometimes with others—Elizabeth—Ridgeway—Alphonse—the boys. At times Prudence joined in; losing gradually her strangeness, they found in her a quaint humour that surprised them. If other visitors came Prudence was allowed to slip quietly away from the hall into a beautiful little room with panelled walls, where were few books, all dearly loved,

little furniture, exquisitely old and valued, very few ornaments, which had stood there, in that room, just as they stood now, for more than two centuries. It had a quaint name—this little room—it was called “the room of Peace,” and lovingly, generation after generation, not one day missed, had there been placed in it white flowers.

Prudence had once been hurt in a visit to the Hall, only once. It had, perhaps, hurt Muriel more than herself, since in her large trouble these little stings did not seem of much importance. The good lady who, in some rush of talk or laughter, had entered unexpectedly, and cut off Prudence’s escape, was well-meaning and kind-hearted enough. That she ignored Prudence, and refused to respond when Latimer blunderingly bade her “ask Mrs. Wingfield” something or other, did not alter the fact that she would sit up all night with the poorest of the villagers, if sick, or that she had given away so much that she had found it impossible to keep even a pony and cart to drive in. This too when she suffered from rheumatism, and walking was often an extremely painful exercise. She put it concisely enough when she said :

“She should not continue to live with the man. If she had left him directly she became aware that she was not legally his wife, one would, of course, have had nothing but great sympathy and pity for her and the child.”

Confronted with the fact of his illness and need of her, she replied inexorably : “Yes, very sad, of course, but people have to bear worse things than that. He could have borne it ; he could pay for nurses. She is committing a sin against both heaven and society. If each person does not uphold the laws made for the good of the whole universe, we shall come to ruin and chaos.”

Quite reasonable, without rancour or spite, spoken from good honest worked-out opinion. There were others in Fernleigh Dene who thought the same ; others who, quaking, were sincerely glad that it had never been considered necessary to call at Cherry Cross ; and of course, yet others who believed everything that was bad of Prudence, and revelled with bated breath, in details of the man's wealth, her manœuvring to keep him from leaving his money to his poor wife. To these her refusal to admit Mrs. Darlington evolved into an elaborate plan of action thought out to prevent the possible inadvertent admittance of the poor wife. After a while it went further—she had actually once shut the door in the wife's face ! So it went on, winding sluggishly and foully through mud, energetically stirred by the pen of Mrs. Darlington, who was extremely bored at her cousin's.

Prudence continued her visits to the Hall. Wingfield had suddenly shown a wish for her to accept these people's invitations ; he seemed much stronger himself, and as always when his general health was better, his mind was clearer ; his appetite improved, and his digestion seemed stronger. Prudence once said thoughtfully to Muriel :

“ If Madame du Pierre had not wanted to see me about changing houses, should I ever have known you ? ”

“ I don't suppose so,” Muriel answered frankly. “ One doesn't bother about a house that is constantly being let furnished for a few months to different people, when it is as far away as Cherry Cross. And, of course, I heard that you did not wish for callers. No, it is all Elizabeth's doing. It's a curious thing, but somehow things are so often all Elizabeth's doing.”

Elizabeth came in with :

“ Who is talking about me ? ” she added, as she sank

into a chair. "All Fernleigh Dene will be presently. Alphonse and I are going to separate."

"Incompatibility of temper?" Muriel asked.

"No; every one would know that was only another name for Madame du Pierre's wicked temper. One could not be incompatible with Alphonse otherwise. It's food and economy. Do look more horrified! This is a big thing! A crisis! Don't you recognise it as such?"

"I'm duly horrified. Go on."

"We're tragically poor, as you know, so I set to to economise. I drew out a mental menu—like this. Alphonse does not care for soup, I do not care for fish, so I decided that we would have soup one night and fish the next, and so on alternately. Well, it's a failure. I wish I'd married a pig; one hears there are many husbands who are pigs. We never have a happy dinner now—on the nights we have soup I keep thinking of poor Alphonse without his fish, and on the nights we have fish *he* keeps thinking of poor me without my soup. Oh, *c'est trop bête!* It has got on my nerves, and I'm sure it's ruining his digestion—he looks so pale lately. And he made me buy a hat that doesn't suit me."

"How?"

"Bribery and corruption. I knew it didn't suit me, but I was weak enough to succumb beneath the strength of his compliments. I can't wear it. If I wear an unbecoming hat I'm in such a horrible temper that I grow more and more hideous. There are a few things in life that I really cannot bear—one is an unbecoming hat, another is a button off my glove. Great things I can bear—when there was a cry of "Fire" once at the Comédie Française, I sat quite still, while the people around me yelled and struggled." She paused and added

with a smiling drawl. "I confess I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to—terror simply numbs me."

Again she added, quickly :

"Did I wait there—perceptibly ?"

"Wait ?" Muriel said. "How ?"

"The young-husband-wait. Don't you know it ? This sort of thing : 'Dearest, it was your bravery ! not terror,—Of course, Alphonse is not really in the young husband category now, but some of his ways are, still, and I have to guard against that sort of thing in public. One falls so luxuriously and unconsciously into the habit of waiting for his flattering little contribution. I knew a young wife once—her talk was like this' :

"'Oh, my dear, the other day I was out shopping ; I was dead tired—I looked a perfect fright——' Long pause. 'Oh—well, and I wanted a hat, but of course *nothing* suited me——' Pause. 'Er—I tried on a score or so, and I simply did not dare to come out without buying anything ! I'm such an awful coward——' Pause. 'Oh, and—and so at last I decided on one—frightfully dear for what it was—five guineas, and I'm quite sure I shall *never* wear it. I really ought to be *smacked*.' Long pause, and when I couldn't bear it any longer, I said : 'I'll kiss you instead, darling,' and she jumped and went scarlet, and stammered : 'Why—oh, how awfully odd—that's just what—I mean, what on earth do you mean ?'"

Muriel leant back in her chair laughing lazily.

Elizabeth glanced at Prudence.

"Do I bore you ?" she said. "Some days I hardly talk at all, and some days my tongue won't keep still."

"I enjoy it," Prudence said simply.

"That's sweet of you. I suppose I must get back to

those boys of mine. I promised to read to them before bedtime."

"Do," said Hugh coming in, "they ask you awful questions?"

"Oh, s'ils demandent des choses!"

"Do you own to a shameful ignorance or tell fibs?"

"Neither. Which did you do when they stayed here?"

"My dear Elizabeth, there was no necessity for me to do either. But just for curiosity's sake I'd like to know what you do."

"I refer them to Alphonse, I say: 'I can't be worried, dearest, wait and ask papa.'"

"And do they desist?"

"Oh, yes."

"Doesn't André keep on with a minor refrain: 'I fought grown-ups knew everyfink?'"

"So you *were* honest, and owned up! They never dream I don't know, you see."

"They behave much better with you than they did with me. I think they're unnaturally good."

"Really? I wonder if they are. Yesterday Renaud painted landscapes on my bedroom door; a different landscape in each panel. I don't know if Miss Joker—no—Hoker—*Hoakes*, will like it, and he will probably adorn all the doors, for I simply hadn't the heart to do anything but pretend to be pleased. They've also given away various articles of my clothing, some that I particularly cherish, to people in the village, under the impression that they are following in my footsteps, charity way. I'm looking forward to seeing Mrs. Marks in church wearing that huge black hat of mine. Another little joke they had—they decided to eat only bread for their dinner, and to give away the food they should have

eaten. Well, at half-past three in the afternoon they were famished, so they took off their clothes, painted themselves all over with brown boot polish, tied such little things as my rope of pearls and my turquoise chain round their waists, and so raided the larder as kaffirs. They tied the cook, who was asleep, to her chair, danced a war dance round her, waving a cold chicken and jam tarts and such edibles in her very face. Of course she has given me warning :

“ You don't seem much disturbed,” Muriel said. “ I thought she was a treasure.”

“ She is ; she cuts all sorts of funny little bits of fat and stuff off the meat and makes soup out of them in what she calls a stock pot. But she won't go,” Elizabeth permitted herself a little fond smile. “ She will beg me to let her stay, in a day or two.”

“ Why are you so sure ? ”

“ They're all the same. I never have any difficulty with them ; they adore the boys too much to leave them.” Prudence rose to go when Elizabeth left the room, but Muriel persuaded her to stay.

“ Hugh will read to me. Need you go yet ? ”

Prudence was easily persuaded ; perhaps these hours in the dusk, when Hugh and Muriel talked or were silent, or Hugh would read aloud, were what she prized most. Sitting in her corner of the window-seat she would listen and look and muse, and slowly she was learning something which had never come near her life.

That afternoon Hugh came back, and picked up a volume of Henley's poems ; he read one or two, then, turning the pages, he read in a low voice :

“ What is to come we know not. But we know
That what has been was good—was good to show,
Better to hide, and best of all to bear.

We are the masters of the days that were :
 We have lived, we have loved, we have suffered
 . . . even so.

“ Shall we not take the ebb who had the flow ?
 Life was our friend. Now, if it be our foe—
 Dear, though it spoil and break us !—need we care
 What is to come ?

“ Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow,
 Or the gold weather round us mellow slow :
 We have fulfilled ourselves, and we can dare
 And we can conquer, though we may not share
 In the rich quiet of the after glow
 What is to come.”

Prudence sat gazing unseeingly out of the window, a new pain at her heart ; and in her brain a striving after something—something that seemed to hover just beyond her understanding. . . .

Those two, sitting silent behind her—they knew—they understood. . . .

“ Life was our friend. Now, if it be our foe—
 Dear, though it spoil and break us !—need we care
 What is to come ?

The words throbbed in her heart, while she groped painfully—painfully—

“ Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow,
 Or the gold weather round us mellow slow :
 We have fulfilled ourselves, and we can dare
 And we can conquer”

Brave words—beautiful words—and those two—they could read them together and know—and understand. . . . Did the words come to them wonderfully voicing what they felt ? Did they come without pain and hurt ? She locked her hands together. . . . To her they came—how ? She only knew that they had left behind them a pitiful desolation, a loneliness that seemed a physical thing, a turmoil as she strove after

that elusive meaning that she could not quite get. She rose and went away. . . .

It frightened her when she found that Dickon did not send the pain away. She sat on his bed and held him close and closer, his little slack, warm body pressed hard against hers. She whispered passionately, "Love me, Dickon! You must love me more!"

Dickon said in a sleepy voice :

"I don't—mind—you huggin' me—a bit."

"Don't you, darling, my darling?" she hugged him closer.

"Renaud's mother—does it—to him."

Still she held him, though he fell asleep in her arms ; she dared not let him go, she was frightened of that pain that, stilled a little now, lay waiting. . . .

"Prudence!"

Wingfield came into the room, smiling, delighted with himself.

"Oh, Evelyn!" she rose hastily, slipping Dickon back on to his pillows. "The corridor is so dim——"

"I'm not blind yet ; I've that one faculty left unimpaired," he said dryly. "So this is why I am left alone for hours and hours."

She stood beside the bed, her eyes on his frowning face ; she wanted to remind him that it was only half an hour since she had been with him, but she could not ; she could say nothing ; and the pain was getting worse.

. . . Those words . . . echoing. . . .

"Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow
Or the gold weather round us mellow slow :
We have fulfilled ourselves, and we can dare
And we can conquer"

She put up her hand to her throat—fighting—She and Evelyn . . . The beautiful "We"—she and Evelyn. . . .

Dimly, torturing her with its half-understood, half-perceived beauty, there was stealing upon her the sense of what she had missed. . . .

She stood there beside the bed, quite quiet, while Wingfield talked, and the pain of that awakening sense tugged at her heart, and sent the blood from cheek and lip. . . .

"Always the same. Once you had the boy I might go to the devil. Some women are made like that, and it's pretty hard on the man. Damn the boy! A little milksop, prunes-and-prisms changeling. I'd be ashamed for any of my friends to see him. What d'you see in him, eh?"

He took a step forward and before she, slow in her pain, could stop him he had seized Dickon's shoulder and was roughly shaking it.

Dickon opened sleepy eyes, and stared up into the face bending over him; the sleep left his eyes, but he continued to look up earnestly.

Wingfield recoiled.

"How he stares! Is the child an idiot, Prue? How old are you, eh?"

"Six years, and some weeks and days."

"Six! Good God, *six*! Have I been ill for nearly six years?" He put a shaking hand up to his head. "He was only a baby—wait—that evening—what was it? *Damn you!*" he roared as Dickon spoke. "I was just getting it!" He bent, trembling with fury, over the bed, shaking off Prudence's hand with a snarl. Dickon continued to look up at him placidly.

"I like that," he said in a contented voice.

"Like what, you little fool?"

"That '*Damn you,*'" screamed Dickon with extreme enjoyment and power of lung.

Wingfield's attention was arrested.

"Eh? What? Why?" he stuttered. "What d'you mean?"

"It's what you shouted at Lord Toppingham when he fouled you over the water jump at the Point-to-Point," Dickon replied.

"Eh? What?" Wingfield burst into a roar of laughter. "Who told you that story, you young varmint, eh?"

"Ferney," said Dickon.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! It's quite true—I shouted that and a bit more. Toppingham was always a fool—sort of chap who'd go to the best tailors, and always look a tramp. Pretty sister he had though, so I let him off fairly easy. Always the way—a pair of dark eyes, or blue for that matter—Fond of little girls, Dick, eh?"

"I don't know any, except Lydia's little sister, and she always has a dirty nose," said Dickon.

"That is rather a drawback certainly." He stood looking down at him frowningly.

Prudence said:

"Evelyn, will you come back to your room now?"

"No. Jealous because the boy seems to like to have me here, eh? Oh, my dear, you'll ruin him! Better hand him over to me for a bit. I'd soon make a man of him. Scared of horses, aren't you, Dick?"

"No."

"It's easy to say. Prove it."

Dickon pushed back the bedclothes, and stuck a leg out of the bed.

"What shall I do, father?"

"Ride the little mare bareback over a jump, my boy. Ha! Ha!"

Dickon slipped to the floor: Prudence caught him and held him, struggling.

“Evelyn, tell him you are joking!”

“What, going now? More grit than I thought. In your pyjamas, eh? Like father, like son. Ha! ha! ha! I’ve ridden her myself in the same undress uniform! Try the hedge in the paddock, Dick, it’s not more than five feet!—”

“Mother! Let me go!—I—I’ll *hate* you for *ever* if you don’t let me go!”

Wingfield roared with laughter.

“Rebellion at the pretty apron string! Bound to come sooner or later, my dear! That’s it, Dick, you’ll win out yet. Struggle a bit harder—no, no—no kicking—mustn’t hurt a lady, you know—fight like a gentleman——”

“Evelyn! Dickon, wait and listen! You must not go—Evelyn, you know he mustn’t do it! He won’t listen to me now—Evelyn, tell him it was only a joke!”

Dickon spared breath enough to ejaculate:

“I *will* go—I’m *not* scared——”

Prudence trying to hold him back hit her arm sharply against the edge of a chest of drawers, and uttered a little cry. Wingfield hurried forward, emitting a sudden volley of furious indignation.

“How *dare* you disobey your mother, sir? How *dare* you struggle with her in this disgraceful manner? Get back into bed at once! Do you hear? Or I’ll come behind you with a crop! You young scoundrel—you cowardly young scoundrel—fighting your mother—hurting her! I tell you I won’t have it? D’you hear! You deserve a good hiding! If I have another word I’ll give it you too! Now come away, Prudence! Leave him alone. I won’t have you staying behind and

petting him. He ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself——” He tottered as he made for the door, and Prudence hurried after him, and gave him her arm. She looked back at Dickon, lying wide-eyed and serious in his bed ; she smiled at him, strove to catch his eye, but Dickon’s gaze was on his father, unwavering, solemn. For a quarter of an hour Prudence found it impossible to leave Wingfield, then on the pretext of fetching a book he wanted, she ran into Dickon’s room ; to her relief she found him awake, and she set herself to the difficult task before her. That new pain had gone, or rather her consciousness of it was in abeyance, as her consciousness of self had been in abeyance for five years, held back, suppressed by the larger need of Evelyn and Dickon.

“ Darling, I want you to try to understand. Your father is ill—he—didn’t mean to be unkind——”

Dickon gave her a happy little smile. “ I don’t mind,” he said. “ That’s just how he shouted at Tom Griffin when he found him kicking his horse.”

Prudence stared at him a little helplessly.

“ Ferney told me,” Dickon added, with an air of careless pride.

What other stories had Ferney told him ? Her old care—her old fear—returned. Had she, after all, been wise to give in to Mark Ridgeway ? She caught Dickon to her.

“ What else has Ferney told you ? What else ? ”

“ Lots.”

“ Tell them to me, Dickon. I want to hear them too.”

“ Ferney will tell you, I ’spect, if I ask him to, but you must be very careful not to in’trupt him.”

“ I want you to tell me, Dickon.”

“ Ferney will, mother, if I ask him, and if you’re very careful not to int’rupt him.”

“ Why can’t you ? ”

“ They’re so long, and I forget. Ferney will, if I ask him, and if you’re very careful not——”

“ Do the stories make you feel proud of your father, Dickon ? ”

“ Yes. Ferney thinks an awful lot of him, he calls him his lordship ; I s’pose ’cause he’s sort of wonderful like the Lord God Almighty.”

Prudence strove to explain it was a mere courtesy title, but Dickon remained calmly fixed in his own idea. Prudence returned to the subject of Wingfield’s challenge.

“ You understand that it was only a joke, Dickon ? You will promise me not to try to get on Mirth’s back ?

“ No, I won’t, mother.”

“ Dickon ! You must. It was just a joke. Promise me, Dickon.”

He was silent.

“ Oh, Dickon ! ” Prudence’s voice broke. “ I’m so tired, and you are so naughty ! ”

With astonishing celerity Dickon sprang from the bed.

“ All right. I know ! ” He hurried across to a cupboard. “ You wait, mother ! I know.”

He returned, carrying a bottle of eau de cologne, and muttering to himself :

“ Pour a little on your fingers—so ! Den rub it very gently on de brow—yes——” He climbed on to the bed.

“ Shut your eyes,” he commanded, then back went Prudence’s head beneath the energetic “ rub ” administered on her brow. “ Is it going away ? How long do

I have to do it for, mother? It's a pity you've got such a very loose head. Is that enough?"

Prudence opined meekly that she thought it was quite enough.

"I've spilt a good deal on the bed. Renaud gave me the med'cine and told me how to use it. Has it made you feel better, mother? Lydia takes some med'cine out of a green bottle that makes her sick. I'd rather give you that kind——"

"I'm much better, Dickon. I should feel quite well if you would give me your promise not to try and get on Mirth's back."

"I'm not scared of horses."

"No, of course you're not. Dickon, if you don't promise I shall not allow you to go round to the stables."

"Oh well," said Dickon, pulling the bedclothes up under his chin, "of course I wouldn't do anything without asking Ferney. If he says better not, I won't try to get on her back, mother."

Prudence had to leave it at that, not daring to stay longer with him. As it was she found Wingfield so angry that he refused to speak to her, or notice her. She sat down, opened the book she had brought, and began to read to him. After a little while he said:

"Would you mind reading to yourself? It disturbs me."

He had his copy of *Handley Cross* on the table before him, and read assiduously. Prudence watched him anxiously; she knew that reading made his head ache; she saw him frown as the pain began to dart through his temples.

"Evelyn," she said gently, "don't be cross with me. I had to go back to Dickon——"

“ You need not trouble to explain. I know where you have been.”

“ How do you ? ”

“ I sent Davenport to find out.”

She shut her lips tightly ; it was an old trouble—this ; he had sent his servants before to spy on her movements.

“ I was afraid Dickon would really try to ride Mirth,” she explained patiently.

He laughed satirically.

“ He ? That little coward ? I don’t think you need fear.”

“ He is not a coward, Evelyn, he——”

“ Spare me ! ” He lifted his delicate hand. “ I have no doubt he is all that is brave and wonderful. We will consider it said. Now may I go on with my reading ? Or have you anything else of such tremendous interest that you wish to say ? ”

She gave a little nervous laugh.

“ I do want to talk to-night, Evelyn, if you don’t mind.”

“ Why should I mind ? Pray go and talk to Dick. I want to read, but I have no doubt you will find it quite as interesting to talk to him as to me.”

Silence fell again ; he went on obstinately with his reading, the while the veins began to swell on his forehead, and the hue of his face to deepen. She cast about for some device to woo him from his book, dreading the outbreak that might be the result of his obstinacy. She wondered aloud if the portrait of Mirth might not be placed differently, so that it should be in a better light at night ; she asked his advice on one or two points about a chair she was ordering for him ; she rose and took up his stirrups, making them clink

against each other as she observed that they did not look as bright as usual; she tried various other ways, but to each and all he maintained an absolute silence, till at last she said:

“What a long time it is since we have had a game of cribbage. I should like a game to-night——”

He stretched out his arm without looking at her, and rang his bell loudly. In a moment Davenport stood in the room, waiting.

Then Wingfield spoke to Prudence.

“You may go to bed, Prudence. Davenport will stay with me!”

For a moment she hesitated, then she left the room.

She went downstairs and out into the night. There was a young, pale moon overhead, lurking almost hidden behind great gold-edged clouds; when she lifted her face a drop or two of rain spattered down on to it; a little breeze ruffled her hair. She stood very still . . . but her thought was not for herself: it was of Evelyn she thought, as she stood there, and Dickon. Had she been wrong to go back to Dickon? Yet to let him sleep without a further word . . . She dreaded what this obstinate fit of Evelyn's might portend . . . and he had been so much better lately. A burst of uncontrolled laughter from the room above her made her turn and run up the stairs to his room. She turned the handle; the door was locked.

“Davenport, are you there?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Open the door at once!”

A pause filled with the murmur of voices; then Davenport's step approaching, his confidential whisper through the keyhole.

“My master is quite all right, ma'am, don't you

worry, but he refuses me permission to hopen the door. I may add that he has the key in his hown possession."

Prudence, out in the corridor, stood thinking hard. To plead—uselessly—before the servant. . . . Yet to leave him without her—She must see him.

"Evelyn, mayn't I come in? I won't talk. I'll be so quiet you won't know that I am in the room," the voice striving to be playful. . . .

Another murmur, then Davenport's respectful whisper :

"My master wishes you to go to bed, ma'am. I will sit up with him." An apologetic cough, then : "I must refuse to speak to you any more, ma'am, he forbids me to do so."

Prudence made one more effort, which was received in absolute silence, then she turned away and went to her own room.

After a little while, reminding herself of the probability of a hard day before her on the morrow, she undressed and lay down on the bed. She could not sleep ; she was restless, uneasy, full of foreboding. Once she rose, and slipping on her dressing-gown, went noiselessly along the corridor, and listened outside Evelyn's door. All was silent, then she heard a faint movement, a long contented sigh, a little chuckle, and presently a lazy murmur : "Life's worth living even yet." Silence again. She waited a minute, then went back to her room, and stood inside the door thinking. . . . Her mind worked rapidly, but vaguely, achieving nothing in the way of definite thought ; only worrying, nagging, spinning round. . . . Fear lurked somewhere, a heavy apprehension. . . . What was it? What had soothed him into that frame of mind? What power had Davenport to bring him content? And suddenly

it started up before her ; her spinning thoughts settled down clear and definite ; the fear that lurked came out sharp and strong—whiskey. She sat down on the bed, suddenly too tired to stand. Could Davenport be playing them false like that ? Was that the reason of Evelyn's liking for him ? Ruthlessly memories surged over her—Evelyn's wish that she should have more freedom ; his brightness—What was it Sir William had said ?—“ It would probably seem to do him good at first, if he took it in moderation, but after a while it would mean absolute ruin ! He must not touch alcohol in any form.”

Could it be that Davenport had been secretly supplying him with whiskey ? She started to her feet—she was foolish, mad . . . What grounds had she for such a suspicion ? . . .

“ Once he was allowed alcohol in small quantities the craving would grow and grow till it became an obsession.”

The physician had said that too. . . . She left her room again and sped along the corridor ; all was quiet ; she listened for a few minutes, saw that the crack of light beneath the door had gone, and returned to her own room. He had evidently gone to bed ; her suspicion seemed unwarrantable, absurd ; she strove to reason it away, but only succeeded partially, one half of her brain remaining worryingly impervious to all the arguments the other half urged. . . .

She lay in bed trying to sleep, while her brain waged its goading war to the tune of the rain spattering on the window-panes, and somewhere, suddenly, at the back of her mind there started up those words :

“ Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow,
Or the gold weather round us mellow slow :
We have fulfilled ourselves. . . .”

But now they brought no pain ; they were there, but with no possible reference to herself. . . . Beautiful words—for others. . . .

Davenport would never dare—why should she be so ready to think evil of the man ? What had made Evelyn sigh with content ?—She must sleep ; to-morrow would probably be a bad day. What did Ferney tell Dickon of his father ? Had she been wrong to let him go round to the stables, against the principle of years ? Had she ? She must sleep. . . . Why had Evelyn seemed more content lately, as if he had some alleviation to look forward to—Oh, she was wicked—mad—she *must* sleep. This new admiration of Dickon's for his father—how would that affect him ? Evelyn could not be trusted with the boy. . . . Sleep—why couldn't she sleep ? She sat up in bed, and pushed her hair back from her hot forehead. As her hand fell back on the coverlet a sentence of Ridgeway's darted into her mind : “What a lot of drawing there is in your hands.” How keen he was on drawing ! He was keen on most things ! She lay down again ; she would ask him—he would know if Evelyn were having whiskey. And he would find out what sort of things Ferney was telling Dickon. He could always find out things, and he always knew. . . . There was a moon again now—he had been waiting for it—he wanted to paint that bit down by the stream. . . . He would know if Evelyn—and if Ferney—Dickon. . . .

She fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXV

SHE awoke early, feeling almost as tired as when she had fallen asleep, but with a dogged determination that was stronger than her weariness. With an instinctive desire to strengthen it still further she rose, and going to the window opened it wide and leant out. The early morning air was sharp, keen, fragrant after a night's soft-falling rain; the east was still faintly glowing in a pale golden mist; the skies were high and light and grey; a breeze came from the south, blowing back her hair. She stood till the sharpness of the air drove her shivering back to bed, the while she sternly quelled the impulse to dress and go to Evelyn's room. She was ashamed of her suspicions of the night before; they appeared to her now wild, unbalanced, very foolish. With all the strength of her will, almost unconsciously, almost purely instinctively she was fighting the recognition of an intolerable sadness and depression. She fought it subconsciously, her conscious thought with Evelyn and the day before her, till a curious resentment arose within her towards the memory of the pain that Henley's poem had brought to her. The feeling was vague, but strong; she resented, without at all defining it, the encroachment of self into her life. She fought the consideration she was being forced to give to her own feelings, her inner self. Her thought must be for Evelyn, for Dickon. She lay down quietly, and in thought lived the day before her: Evelyn would be

exacting, peevish after his anger of last night ; she must think of ways to interest him.

When she finally rose she had conquered all thought of self again.

She found Wingfield, as he often was in the morning, peevish, sick of his bed, yet too tired to get up. His eyes were bloodshot, his hands trembling, but she knew that this was very often the result of an attack of furious temper. There was nothing unusual about him : her fears of the night before grew absurd. When Wingfield in a fury of irritability swore at Davenport and ordered him from the room, she felt a twinge of compunction for her groundless suspicions. Nevertheless something prompted her to question the man.

“ Your master went to bed quietly last night ? ”

“ Oh, yes, ma'am, very peaceful.”

“ Did you read to him ? ”

“ Not to speak of, ma'am, just a bit out of the paper, and then he settled down very quiet, and kept smiling and laughing at his thoughts. Perhaps you heard him, ma'am ? ”

She restrained a start.

“ He went to bed in good time ? ” she said.

“ Not very hearily, ma'am, I thought it better not to worry him.”

She asked no more questions ; there were no more to ask. She went back into Wingfield's room ; he was asleep ; she began noiselessly to dust the outer room, trying to think of some new means to interest him in the weary day before him. Presently he called her, but when she stood at his bedside he turned aside his head.

“ You stare so,” he said peevishly, “ you're just like the boy ! He stares, too. Don't you want to go out, Prudence ? ”

"No, I'd rather stay with you, Evelyn."

"Why? D'you think I shall elope with some other woman? Good God, what a useless hulk I am now!"

She had expected this, and she knew that the day would be full of it.

"You have been much better lately, Evelyn."

"Don't be a fool, Prue, and don't treat me like a fool! I know I've got one foot in the grave, but, please God, I'll kick to the last with the other! And I'll go without a whine! By God, if I thought I'd funk it at the last I'd poison myself this minute!"

She wiped the drops of sweat from his forehead.

"You would never funk anything, Evelyn," she said, and something tugged at her heart as she saw the wistful look of pleasure that crossed his face. It was so seldom—so pitifully seldom—that she could give conviction to her praise of any quality in him.

"One can never be sure, Prue, never be sure! There was Pender—John Pender, you know, who rode that big bay in the Point-to-Point—brute who always refused—he took his falls like a man—smashed every bit of him some time or the other—but at the last he funked—he funked badly—I was with him—pneumonia, you know—scared to death——" he gave a shudder. "It's beastly to see a brave man turn coward," he said, almost in a whisper.

"You never would, Evelyn. I know it."

"Well, yours are not the first pair of pretty lips to tell me I'm a brave man, my dear! Don't go now—jealous again, eh? I've always said you cold women are the worst, and I'm hanged if I'm not right!"

"I must finish dusting the room, Evelyn."

"You oughtn't to be dusting the room! Where are the servants? Why don't you get one with red

hair and let her come in to dust the room? You'd be safe enough then! Ha! ha! Never could stand a red-headed woman. There was that pretty little thing—I forget her name—Rose—no—Molly—no—never mind, she had the whitest skin and the bluest eyes you ever saw, but her hair was red! No good. I could manage a flirtation when she wore a large hat, but her hair was too much for me. Funny thing, the governor was the same. I remember him warning me when I was a little chap: 'Never trust a red-headed woman, my boy'—he stood me on the table—I was half drunk by then—and made me drink to all the pretty women in the world, bar the red-headed ones. Just the same—funny thing—heredity."

Prudence's hand closed suddenly on the duster.

"It wasn't heredity—it was example," she said breathlessly.

"Eh? Not a bit of it. Heredity. I expect you'd find the same thing in Dick. Let's have him up and ask him. No, I don't want him, he stares so. Has the boy ever tasted champagne, Prue?"

"No!"

He laughed.

"Perhaps it's better so. Plays the deuce with one's constitution. But drink in moderation—best thing in the world."

He sank into silence. Prudence continued to dust the room.

"Prudence!"

"What is it?"

"D'you think I'm going to die to-day?"

"Oh, Evelyn, don't talk like that! You have been so much worse. Why should you?"

“ Oh, I shouldn't mind, my dear, if it weren't that the thought of dying in my bed turns me sick.”

In his pallid face she saw suddenly a curious resemblance to Dickon—a fleeting expression. In her ears sounded Dickon's voice : “ Very likely in the mornin', when I wake up I'll be dead ” . . .

She bent and smoothed the bedclothes gently.

“ You're not going to die, Evelyn. It's a long while since you've felt as bad as you do to-day.”

“ D'you think I shall die in my bed, Prue, eh ? ”

“ No, Evelyn.”

A look of relief crossed his face ; her perfect truthfulness gave her word a tremendous weight with him. He could never have understood the strength of the power that made it possible for her to lie to him. It had been the last thing of attainment, that power, but in the end attained easily enough, so much had she gone through, so greatly struggled, before then. She thought it right to lie to him, and she did it without flinching. He began to talk of Mirth, to fret for her, finally insisted on rising to see if he might not feel strong enough to ride her ; declared he would go round to the stables . . . tried to go, nearly fainted half-way down the stairs, and had to be helped back to his room.

So the morning wore slowly on, the strain never relaxed for a minute ; his restlessness unceasing, never satisfied, always asking for some new interest. He turned from food with loathing, grew peevish and finally furious when Prudence tried to tempt his appetite. At last he ordered her from the room to go and have her lunch. She went downstairs slowly and into the dining-room. Dickon sat at the table, knife and fork in his hands, waiting.

“ I'm very hungry, mother,” he said reproachfully.

She stopped and stood looking at him.

“Do you like women with red hair, Dickon?”

“I like mutton and potatoes,” Dickon said severely. She sat down and gave him what he wanted.

Presently she said it again.

“Dickon, do you like ladies with red hair?”

Dickon nodded.

“Miss Hill has red hair, she’s promised to give me a bit next time she cuts off the ends, to patch my horse’s tail with.”

Prudence suddenly laughed.

“So much for heredity!” she said, and laughed again, and the laugh ended in what she just caught back from being a sob. And at that she rose suddenly.

“Dickon, finish your dinner; there is rice pudding. I am going out.”

“You haven’t had any dinner, mother.”

“I do not want any.”

“Where are you goin’?”

“I shall be back soon.”

She left the room; as she went up the stairs she heard a plodding step behind her.

“What do you want, Dickon?”

He went on plodding up the stairs, lifting a cross little face to her as he answered:

“I s’pose I’d better fetch that eau-de-Cologne and rub your head!”

“I haven’t a headache, dear.”

He paused.

“Aren’t you dreadful tired?”

“No.”

He turned and began to stump down again.

“Then I’ll go and have my rice puddin’.”

At the foot of the stairs he called, a gleam in his eye:

"S'pose it needs sugar, mother?"

"You may take some."

"May I put it on *myself*?"

"Yes."

Dickon ran back into the dining-room.

Prudence went into her room and put on her outdoor things; there was an unusual nervous hurry in her movements; she was conscious of a new weakness, a curious tiredness that seemed to warn her that her strength was somehow failing. She left the house, and without hesitation, turned to the right, and began to walk swiftly up the road. She was obeying the impulse that had come to her as she had sat at the table with Dickon. She did not reason or question; she followed blindly where it led, because subconsciously she knew her need was so strong that, denied, her power to help Evelyn would fail.

She did not pause till she reached Dickson's studio, then she stopped, breathing hard, and knocked.

"Oh, confound it! Come in."

She opened the door and went in.

"You!"

She stood just within the door.

"Sit down. What is it? Anything wrong? Why did you come?"

"I wanted you," she said simply.

"Well, here I am," he said gently, "at your service."

Her eyes went to the large canvas on the easel.

"No—that's all right. I was chucking it anyway. I'm only spoiling what I've done. Tell me why you want me."

She looked up at him with a curious questioning expression.

"I don't quite know," she said.

"I see. Sort of general utility—well, first I'm going to boil some water and give you a cup of tea——"

She put out her hand.

"Oh, no, I must go back at once."

"All right. I'm coming too."

"Yes," she said, with a queer, childlike contentment.

He pretended to have to do a good deal of clearing up: he wanted to give her time to rest. She watched him as he scraped his palette, stuck his brushes into a jam-jar, stacked some canvases against the wall.

"Now I'm ready. Sorry to have kept you."

She rose, and they left the studio.

"You look pretty well done up," he said abruptly, as they turned the corner by the pond.

"I feel better now," she said.

Ridgeway flushed slightly, something seemed to beat loudly in his ears, then passed.

"I haven't done anything for you yet."

She did not answer at once; she was giving a passing surprise to the wonderful lightening of her load; it was as if he took the weary weight of it from her, and bore it on his own broad shoulders.

"You are here," she said with a deepening of the childlike contentment. "You are coming back with me."

"Yes."

He turned his head and looked down tenderly at her; she lifted her pale face and smiled at him.

"I was very foolish," she said ashamed. "I—I don't know—suddenly I thought of you, and it seemed as if I could not go on—alone——"

Again he felt that loud throbbing in his ears; he shook his head impatiently. "Has Wingfield been

very bad ? ” he said, experiencing a curious effort in bringing out his voice.

“ Yes ; it is one of his miserable days. I cannot cheer him or interest him. I hope you will be able to.”

“ A fresh face may do it. I’ll do my best.”

She said after a little while :

“ I never thank you.”

“ Good Heavens, don’t start that ! There’s no need.”

They went on a little while in silence, along the road where the puddles were turning a vivid blue, with splashes of glittering sunshine in them, and the breeze seemed to have lost its sharpness, and to come to them sun-warmed.

A curious exaltation possessed Ridgeway ; it affected him physically, so that he felt, with whimsical consciousness, as if he must stretch his neck, holding his head high. She had come to him, simply, naturally—wanting him, she had come to fetch him. . . . His heart was uplifted. When a cow came clumsily trotting round a corner, his nerves involuntarily attuned themselves to the pitch of grappling with a lion. He walked looking, waiting, protecting, at once exceedingly young, and older. . . .

She said, breathless :

“ Will you go on alone ? I have been away so long—if you would hurry on and go straight to Evelyn—You can go faster without me.”

It was as if she had pushed him a hundred miles away. . . .

He looked down, incredulously hurt, into her face ; he saw it again pale, cold, gently aloof. . . .

She had wanted him for Wingfield—of course, what else ? What was he in her life for but that ?

He tried unconsciously for a word that should lift

this load of depression that had suddenly fallen upon him, holding him down. . . .

“ I don't like to leave you——”

Her surprise pressed the load down.

“ Why ? ”

It was a natural enough query, but he had no answer to it ; he turned away, raising his cap.

“ I'll hurry on,” he said, and strode away with a grateful “ thank you ” subtly tormenting him. She walked on behind him, watching his tall figure till he reached the corner where three great haystacks scented the air, then she had to suppress an inclination to call to him to wait. . . . She suppressed it angrily, wondering what was happening to her nerves, not sparing herself, but unable to avoid consciousness of the almost unbearable sense of depression that the empty road brought to her. She was able to check the impulse that would have set her hastening—running—to turn the corner. . . . When she reached it the next stretch of road, which curved, was empty too. . . . The hedges, the wet road, blurred . . . she rubbed her hand almost violently across her eyes. She was dismayed, aghast. With a strenuous effort of will—a hard trained will—she swept her mind clear of Ridgeway, the empty road, all but Evelyn and the necessity of getting back to him. But the effort had to be more strenuous than usual, and it left her oddly tired.

She found Wingfield and Ridgeway deep in an argument as to the relative merits of two saddlers : she waited a few minutes, while technical words rained about her uncomprehending ears. Then she left the room, and went to seek Dickon. A heavy depression weighed her down ; at the back of her mind she knew though she refused to

face the knowledge, that tears were being kept back with an aching effort. She knew too that there—some-where—was Henley's poem throbbing—hurting again. She was in such a hyper-sensitive, over-strained state that she felt no sense of relief when she saw Evelyn, pale, tired, but without the peevish, hunted expression she had used every power and nerve in vain to banish ; she felt only a further sense of depression, of failure. Why hadn't she been able to discuss saddles and harness with him ? She should have been able, since saddles and harness formed one of the few interests of his maimed life. Then she recognised with a shock of horror her selfish consideration of herself. Again the vague resentment rose within her ; she fought, or tried to fight, her way back to the old cold, brave standpoint, she strove to banish thought of herself. . . . Dickon—yes, she must have Dickon. She hurried till her footsteps quickened into a run in their search. " He's round mucking about with Mr. Ferney, ma'am," Lydia told her. She must have him—she would go and talk horses with him ; murmuring to herself—" ankle, fetlock—lower down, near hoof, pastern—" she went round to the stables.

Dickon was in the harness-room helping Ferney ; he was seated on the lowest tread of a pair of steps polishing a brass buckle on a breeching strap. As Prudence approached she heard him say :

" Oh, yes, you've got to feed a horse well, or he won't do you well—stands to reason."

The tone was exceedingly grown-up, the manner a fair copy of Ferney's. When he saw Prudence he flushed shyly, and became silent, absorbed in his rubbing.

" Dickon, shall we go and see Mirth ? "

"I've just been in there, mother; I'm very busy."

Ferney glanced up at her.

"His lordship—is 'e better to-day, m'lady?"

"He had a bad morning, Ferney, he seems a little better now."

Ferney hung a bridle up.

"Went to bed very late last night, didn't 'e?" he said abruptly.

"About eleven, I think."

Ferney flicked over the harness with a duster.

"'E wasn't in bed at one o'clock, m'lady," he said slowly. "Leastways there was a light in 'is room then."

"Are you sure? Which room?"

"Bedroom."

"Davenport was with him——"

"Yes, m'lady."

"I suppose he could not sleep."

She looked at Dickon, quite aware of the surreptitious glances of anxious fear which he was casting at her: she knew that he was terrified she was going to interfere in his afternoon. She turned away and went back into the house, the load of depression, fought against in vain, weighing her down till every nerve seemed to have a separate physical ache. She went up into Wingfield's room again; his voice stopped abruptly as she entered, then he asked peevishly: "What do you want, Prudence?"

She could frame no want, at such a low ebb was she, could only stand, fighting the load. She heard Ridgeway say: "She ought to lie down, she's tired to death." His voice seemed to come from a distance, mixed somehow with Henley's poem: the echo of his words ran into the echo of those others. . . .

“ Yes, yes, go and lie down, my dear—man’s talk, you know—you wouldn’t like it——”

Again the other voice—Henley’s poem voice——

“ Veterinary talk,” it said.

Prudence heard herself murmur “ thank you ” in a confused sort of way, for she understood the impulse that had led him to give the explanation, but it was difficult to understand anything clearly with that curious medley running in her head, and the pain was worse. . . . And Evelyn didn’t want her any more than Dickon had. She went downstairs, got out the shirt she was making for Dickon and tried to work. Once she put the linen up to her face in a sudden uncontrollable impulse, but then she drove the impulse back again, and the storm of tears remained in aching throat and heart. . . .

Lydia brought in tea, and Dickon came in and had some. He talked more than usual, pleased that she had not dragged him from Ferney ; he hurried through his tea, anxious to get back to a promised lesson in grooming a horse. He went away and then Ridgeway came down. “ He’s asleep,” he said. “ May I have some tea ? ”

“ It’s been in a long while. Will you ring for fresh ? ” she said listlessly.

“ Oh, no, thanks, that’ll be all right.” He took his cup from her and sat down.

There was a long silence : from the stable yard came the clink of a pail, Dickon’s laugh : in the kitchen Lydia clattered some plates ; Davenport’s voice rose mournfully :

“ What time the evening shadows fall
Around the Church on earth,
When darker forms of doubts appal——”

“ Ferney says Evelyn was not in bed at one o’clock.”

She spoke suddenly, for no particular reason, except that she felt vaguely worried.

“ No ? ”

“ Davenport told me he did not go very early—he says hearily. One o’clock is very late for him.”

“ That’s why he’s so done up to-day,” Ridgeway said, wondering what it was in her way of speaking that was so different from usual: she spoke evenly, dully, almost as if it were not worth while, but she would go on, as she had begun.

She did not speak again, and they sat in silence. Ridgeway was conscious of a curious element of constraint in his silence; he felt that he ought to speak, but could not bring himself to do it. It worried him; he had never felt like that before with her; there had been long silences—restful silences. He broke it brusquely:

“ I must lend you my copy of —— ”

She interrupted him sombrely.

“ I don’t want it, thank you.”

He gave a little laugh.

“ But I haven’t even told you what it is ! ”

“ I don’t want it,” she repeated, looking at him with a queer expression of slumbering defiance in her eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“ Very well.”

In a minute he added gently:

“ I’m an awful brute.”

She put up her hands to her eyes with a gesture as if she were pushing something away.

“ What is it ? ” he asked.

“ That—again—you and those words—it hurts!—hurts——,” her voice came to him stifled with grief.

“ What hurts ? ”

She dropped her hands into her lap with a hopeless gesture.

"I don't know," she said, and she looked to him as a child looks to a grown-up for help.

"Let me read to you."

"What? Dickon's geography?" She picked it up, and opening it, read: "A peninsula is a piece of land nearly surrounded by water!" She looked at him with brooding eyes. "That is the best sort of literature for me," she said.

He blundered then; he could not see and understand as readily as was usual with him; his thoughts were blurred, hurried into an unusual vagueness by that loud beating again in his ears. He said:

"Where's the *Browning* I lent you?" and rose to fetch it.

In a moment she was up and before him, before the table on which the book lay, guarding it with her body.

"No!" she said in a low voice, and her breath came rapidly. "I won't have it—ever again!" She paused, then suddenly in a storm of low quick-breathed words it came. "Oh, it's you—you! Why couldn't you leave me alone? I could bear it—then—I was right! And you were wrong. I am afraid. I don't know what it is—last night I wanted to die—ah, more than that—I have wanted to die for years, but now——" she stretched out her hands with desperate appeal. "Give me back my wall!" she cried.

He took her hands in his, crushed them in his; he said nothing, he was inarticulate now when she needed him—when she needed his help more than she had ever needed it before.

"Can't you?" she breathed wistfully. "Can't I go back? It was easier—so."

He led her to her chair, and pushed her gently into it. He had no thought for himself, no thought for the storm of emotion that had swept down upon him: his old decision, his old wish—to help her—was so strong, that all his mind was given to that, and only to that.

“ You are over-tired—ill—it’s been too much for you. Hush—wait a little——”

He did not understand the meaning of the almost unbearable longing he felt to put his arms about her and draw her close. Blinded by the reverence in which he held her, she was still in her peculiar position, almost sacred to him, all thought of the truth of that longing to hold her close was as yet impossible to him. He did not wait to analyse his feeling; he would, had he had time, have merely defined it as an intense longing to comfort her; he was still possessed, perhaps obstinately, by his original purpose. Nor had he the most remote conception of what it was she, in her troubled ignorance, was showing him. A woman would have known.

“ Can you tell me—a little—now? ” he asked presently.

She had locked her hands together, was striving to keep back the tempestuous storm of words that seemed to beat in throat and head.

“ Last night—that poem of Henley’s—” She quoted a line—“ ‘ Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow—— ’ ”

“ I know,” he said.

She was mute.

“ Can’t you tell me? ” he said gently.

She lifted pitiful eyes.

“ I—don’t know—it was that—the pain came.” She added: “ I want the wall back again.”

“ You won’t to-morrow. No, you won’t—you must-

n't ! This will pass, and then those things will help you. They'll help you, Prudence."

"Will they?"

She closed her eyes, afraid of tears ; she strove to close her heart ; the storm of words—inarticulate words they seemed—beat painfully in throat and head. She could not get them out ; the old reserve was too strong in her, some faint instinct warned even her simplicity, and made it impossible to pour them out to Ridgeway. But the stemmed torrent hurt and racked her, the hot tears pressed against her aching eyelids, the weary load of depression was almost unbearable ; the longing to get back to the cold shelter of what he had called her wall became almost insupportable.

"Help me to get back," she whispered.

He stood, silent, helpless, his face paling with the stress of his longing to help her ; he stood looking down on the bowed head.

"I don't know how," he muttered, and he would have built the wall about her again if he had known how to set about it.

Not knowing how, he obeyed the instinct of help that came to him, and quietly picking up a pocket *Keats* that lay on the table beside the *Browning*, he sat down and began to read, "The Eve of St. Agnes." He read very quietly without a glance at her, but he knew that she had leant back, and he hoped that the beautiful words were soothing her ; his desire was to quiet her and soothe her till she should cease to think, and, her tired brain at rest, should perhaps fall asleep.

"So mused awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies," he read and paused, and glancing up, saw that she slept.

He put the book down quietly and sat in thought : some inner feeling kept his eyes from her. Only once

he looked, and looked away again in haste ; the memory of the pale face, almost like a dead face, in its tired white peace was to remain with him to haunt the hours when his vitality should run low and sad. . . .

He rose and left the room ; shunning thought and solitude he went upstairs again to Wingfield.

CHAPTER XXVI

“ **A** PICNIC in de blue bell wood ! Ah, bien ! ”
“ Bien indeed,” Ridgeway ejaculated when they had reached the wood. He said to Prudence :

“ To-morrow I shall come with brushes and paint—foolish mortal striving to depict on a yard or two of canvas—this ! But to-day I shall forget that I am an artist——”

“ No ; remember only the soul-pictures,” she said.

He looked out over the shimmering haze of blue, ablaze where shafts of sunshine shone down through the trees ; softly, wonderfully, coolly mysterious where shadows lay. . . .

“ Soul pictures,” he said, and smiled at her.

“ What they must be ! ”

“ If I could show them to you on canvas ! ” he stretched out a longing arm. “ That—look—silver and gold sun mist and a haze of blue—and the trees—If I could paint them as they are—catch them to keep for ever—to give to you. Over in the shade there—could any one ever get that tremendous darkness that is really quite light ? The sea of blue—what a blue it is ! The life and the fragrance of it—how could you express that ? . . . My fingers itch for my brushes.”

“ You said you would——”

“ I know. I can’t.” He turned away restlessly.

“ Mark, pourquoi donc—why did I not bring my paints den ? I wish now to paint.”

“ Think you could manage it, old chap, eh ? ”

“ Oh, but yes, for I have de two blue colours in my paint-box, and one will paint de light bluebells where de sun shine on dem, and de oder will paint de dark bluebells where de trees shade dem. Voilà tout ! ”

“ You simplify life a good deal, old chap ! ” Ridgeway said, and his eyes were envious.

“ Ridgeway,” called Latimer, “ you needn’t think you’re going to pose as an artist and survey the landscape while we get lunch ready. You come along.”

“ Give me work to do—food to eat—anything to stodge my brain and fingers,” Ridgeway said restlessly.

“ Eat and drink and go to sleep,” Elizabeth advised. “ Men are made to go to sleep on the grass. I always hate men at picnics—they can lie flat butter side downwards with comfort.”

“ To sleep—with that round you,” he muttered, but not happily quite—Elizabeth noticed that Ridgeway was not quite like himself that day. She mused, amongst cushions, leaning against a tree trunk, as comfortable as in her own room, which was Elizabeth’s way at picnics, and all else.

Alphonse probed, being interested, as he was interested in everything that came his way.

“ So you, an artist, do not enjoy this beautiful wood as we, who are not artists, enjoy it ? Is that so ? ”

Ridgeway looked at him, frowning in the effort to give him his attention ; he had a curious sensation that day as if all these people were unreal—all except Prudence. He was filled with a primitive impatient wish to snatch her away, and plunge with her deeper into the wood, where they two should be alone and at peace. Civilisation and his chivalrous blindness cast over her wish a veneer of unselfishness, in that he took it for

granted that the wish emanated from pity for her weariness ; from sympathy with her unspoken desire for the privilege of being able to sit silent and gaze.

“ Oh, it makes you feel pretty rotten as a painter, you know,” he answered Alphonse, and did not hear his reply. He heard Prudence uttering commonplaces, and these were startlingly real to him in the unreality of the others' words. He met her dreamy eyes and saw them waken into sweet recognition of him. He turned, suddenly flushed, and watched André pounce on something amongst the bluebells, and come with fat closed fist up to his mother.

“ I've dot him, Maman,” he beamed.

“ Got what, my sweet ? ”

“ Dod,” said André, opening his hand and gazing sadly into his empty palm.

“ He's gone 'way,” he said. “ P'raps He wasn't in de buttefly.”

He trotted off intent on his search.

Elizabeth appealed to the others.

“ He's so dreadfully unorthodox ! I told him that God was in everything beautiful, and nothing will turn him from his search after Him.”

“ It's like the Holy Grail,” Muriel said musingly.

“ He's adorable ! ”

André was amongst the bluebells again, crawling on hands and knees, his face eager, his blue eyes wide with the intentness of his search. Dickon paused beside him once.

“ God's up there,” he told him, pointing to the skies.

“ He tums down to be near lickle boys when dey's dood,” André replied, pausing for a moment in his search.

“ He doesn't,” Dickon said.

"I'll bite your knee off!" André responded in a fury, his mouth being level with Dickon's knee.

"The dye off my stocking will give you blood-poison," said Dickon, who was full of scraps of general information.

André rolled over amongst the bluebells and began to weep.

Elizabeth rose and went to him, and took him into her arms.

"Go away!" she said to the staring Dickon.

Prudence said bitterly:

"He hasn't been brought up on pretty fairy stories," and Ridgeway noted how fiercely she was awake now. "Are you going to paint too, my darling?" she said to Dickon.

"Renaud's mother is cross with me," Dickon replied sadly. "I only said God lives up there, and never comes down and lives in woods."

"Never mind, Dickon."

"Dick, d'you think you could help me unpack this basket?" called Ridgeway cheerfully. "Catch hold of these plates, youngster, they're unbreakable."

"May I help 'wash up' after?" Dickon asked eagerly.

"Rather!"

"The plates with mustard on—may I wash those?"

"Certainly you may! I don't think any one will want to deprive you of that bliss."

"I wish to wash de pudding plates—with de pieces of juice and jam on dem," chimed in Armand.

"Why?" demanded Dickon.

"'Cause dey so easy to wash, one does but lick dem and dey are clean."

"It's not the right way to wash them," Dickon

argued, and Prudence drew him closer, her eyes defying them to deem him a prig.

Muriel turned the argument this time, and Elizabeth returned to her place, leaving a beaming André squatting in the bluebells, singing a hymn, to " 'tice God down," he informed them with a seraphic smile.

Latimer presently, having drawn the cork of a bottle of claret, declared, when he discovered that Renaud and Armand had emptied the wine on to a patch of bluebells in a scientific endeavour to ascertain the effect on their colour, that it was quite like old times. There were, during the day, several little bits reminiscent thus of old times, but Elizabeth, putting a question: "Frankly, don't you think they and their enjoyment are worth it?" received an unanimous assent, the while Ridgeway was occupied in wondering what Prudence thought.

"I think," said Elizabeth, her eyes on the three boys sitting amongst the bluebells, plucking them, mysteriously whispering, "they are valuable as mere aids to digestion."

"Um," said Latimer. "Some people might find their aid rather drastic, as when they pepper the sugar, you know, and little things like that."

"I mean the sheer happiness of them. Haven't you ever noticed the different feeling you have inside after a luncheon or dinner where the people have been cheerful and amusing and happy, and after one where there has been gloom and glumness?"

" 'Better a dinner of herbs,' " quoth Latimer.

Ridgeway, making an effort, amended:

"Better a dinner of peppered sugar where boys are, than the best sifted sugar——," he trailed off, giving up the effort.

Muriel said inconsequently:

“ They’re adorable.”

Alphonse said :

“ Do you really think surrounding happiness or gloom is capable of affecting the digestion ? ” and looked eagerly around. But every one was too lazy to start the discussion for which he was hoping.

“ Let’s all go to sleep,” Elizabeth suggested.

“ All right,” assented Latimer, settling down to look at Muriel.

There was a minute or two of peaceful silence, then Elizabeth sat up with a tragic upheaval of cushions. “ Those two dear old ladies ! All the way from Dirlingford ! Muriel, Hugh, you promised you’d come. They adore you——”

“ Miss Eleanor and Miss Isobel ! Oh, confound——”

“ Hugh, they’re such ducks ! ” interposed Muriel.

“ And they never go anywhere,” Elizabeth said.

“ It’s a tremendous honour. Those blessed boys must come too. Who’ll break the news to Renaud ? ”

But Renaud took the news of Elizabeth’s sudden remembrance with equanimity, Miss Isobel being a painter ; the only condition he made was that Dickon should accompany them.

“ For I wish him to see how she paint de trees, and she promise me to bring her picture of de trees,” he said with dignity.

Ridgeway helped in the departure, helped in the packing up, helped carry baskets to the inn, received Renaud’s tremendous secret : “ We are going to make de beautiful bluebell scent for Maman ! Hush ! See, we have de bluebells, and at home dere is water.”

“ Dickon, you would like to go to Elm Hill for tea ? ” This was from Prudence, and then presently they were standing there, outside the inn, alone, while they waved

hands to answering hands in the receding dog-cart and victoria.

“ We will go back to the bluebells,” Ridgeway said, and she turned and walked beside him in silence. They were alone now and the sense of unreality was gone ; they were real, throbbingly alive to each other’s nearness. Back in the glimmering blue of the wood there was no one else in the world, and the sense of it, felt, not thought out, was a wonderful joy with pain behind it, and instinctive strenuous effort to keep voice and eyes and gesture to a calm friendliness. . . .

And the beauty of it, and the scent. . . . Prudence with the aching pain climbing into her throat, closing it, pressing on it so that she could not speak, almost stretched out her arms to the wood in her longing to keep it a little—to keep this precious hour—this glimmer of sweet-scented blue—all of it—the warm glowing blue and the cool delicate blue—the pine-pungent breeze—the play of the light and shadow on the wide sweep of bluebells—the flecks of gold and silver—the wonder and mystery and silence of it all. . . .

Her breath caught in a little sharp sound that was almost a choked back sob

“ I want it—I want it so ! ” she whispered. “ To keep—just a little while—I want it ! ”

Ridgeway’s hand hovered a moment over hers clenched on a frond of bracken beside her ; he drew it back, slowly, heavily, with physical effort.

“ You can have it for some while yet,” he said, and his voice ended on a harsh note in curious contrast to the beginning of his sentence.

“ I think I ought to go back now.”

“ You would only annoy him ; he would not expect you for hours yet.”

“ No.”

She gave a little laugh that strove to be light.

“ I’ve such a queer feeling—as if I’m never going back—I can’t realise going back somehow.”

He strove to account for it, arguing for himself as well as for her.

“ It’s this wood—it makes the world outside seem impossibly mundane—it’s hardly like a human wood—it’s a fairy wood——”

“ Yes.”

Silence and the breeze coming to them bluebell sweet and warm, wrapping them round in forgetfulness and peace. . . .

And then coming laden with the sharper scent of the pines, wakening them to effort. . . .

“ Are beautiful things always sad ? ”

“ I think so.”

“ Muriel Latimer says they’re not to her.”

And their eyes met in a fearful knowledge of why beautiful things were not sad to Muriel. . . .

Ridgeway pushed it from him, pushed the reading of his heart and hers away, obstinately refused to believe.

And Prudence did not understand, had no thought beyond a great joy and pain, and that effort that was purely instinctive, which drove her now to say :

“ Talk to me.”

“ Talk seems rather—stupid—here.”

“ I can’t bear it,” broke from her in a sudden breath of anguish.

So he talked, comfortably, cheerily, making her smile and listen, and insensibly they were hoarding the hour, cherishing it, clinging to it, striving to lengthen it, while their hearts beat fast, and now and again there sounded a little breathlessness in Ridgeway’s voice, and in her smile

there was a tremulousness. Their thought was of each other, their pain and joy meeting—overlapping—bringing at once the ache of desolation, and the supreme joy—the wild deep throbbing joy—of unquestioning love and faith. . . .

Neither knew; there was no time for self-analysis that day; no room for more than love, and the torture of its instinctive denial; at once taking in widely, grandly, greatly their love with the beauty of the woods, and pushing it from them with that instinctive loyalty to their creed. . . .

And then they knew. . . .

It was Henley who told them, as he had told Prudence already, but then she had not understood; Ridgeway read it aloud to her. They had no warning.

“Latimer’s left his Henley behind. What a good thing we came back to the same place.”

“Read something,” recklessly, driven by a restless pain, she urged him.

“I don’t know much of his. What would you like?”

“I don’t know. Something. I will give you a number—they are all numbered—and you must read it.”

“All right.”

She gave it: “No. thirty-four,” and waited, her heart beating as it had been beating all that afternoon—so fast—

He read it; his voice faltered once, but making quick choice he decided he had no alternative but to go on. . . .

“There was no kiss that day?
 No intimate Yea-and-Nay,
 No sweets in hand, no tender, lingering touch?
 None of those desperate, exquisite caresses,
 So instant—O, so brief!—and yet so much,
 The thought of the swiftest lifts and blesses?”

Nor any one of those great royal words,
Those sovran privacies of speech,
Frank as the call of April birds,
That, whispered, live a life of gold
Among the heart's still sainted memories,
And irk, and thrill, and ravish, and beseech,
Even when the dream of dreams in death's a-cold ?
No, there was none of these,
Dear one, and yet—
O, eyes on eyes ! O, voices breaking still,
For all the watchful will,
Into a kinder kindness than seemed due
From you to me, and me to you !
And that hot-eyed, close-throated, blind regret
Of woman and man baulked and debarred the blue !—
No kiss—no kiss that day ?
Nay, rather, though we seemed to wear the rue,
Sweet friend, how many, and how goodly—say ! ”

They knew ; Henley had told them, had told them in his beautiful words, giving it to them plain to see and understand, and all the ache and pain and joy of that day grew clear to them. They did not speak again ; they sat there quietly, till at last Prudence rose. She stumbled a little as she moved forward, and Ridgeway put out his arm, and drew it back without touching her. They went down the bracken-grown path in silence ; he held back gorse and brambles for her, at the edge of the wood they turned and looked back to the glimmer of blue. . . .

“ It has been good,” Ridgeway said hoarsely.

And she went back to Wingfield to find him drunk

. . .

CHAPTER XXVII

ONE moment's longing for Ridgeway ; one shuddering movement away from the room and towards the hall door to call him back, and then realization that she could not have him there—after their hour in the wood. For herself she could bear it—she had borne sordid terror for so long—but not for him ; she shrank in agony from it for him. . . . That hour must be kept beautiful. . . . She had no time to probe into it ; she had left the wood in a mood of exquisite exaltation that in a curious way held little that was intimately personal in it ; it was just the coming of love. . . . And the wonder of it left no room then for thought of right or wrong—of ultimate joy or suffering. It was, and that was all . . . She came from it to hear Wingfield's voice rolling out a hunting song, interspersed with drunken laughter. She went straight, unhesitating, to his room and opened the door ; the fumes of whiskey that met her were torturing after the bluebells—the pines. For a moment she recoiled ; for a moment Wingfield, Davenport bending over him, the box of cigars upset on the floor, the whiskey bottle, were obscured by a dark mist. She groped her way to her own room and sat a minute or two, trembling, struggling after mere sanity, fighting this horror and sickness, praying inarticulately for strength. . . .

Then she rose and went back to Wingfield.

“ We must get him to bed, Davenport.”

“ Yes, ma'am, hit's what I am trying to do ”

“Evelyn, you must lie down. You will make yourself so ill. Davenport, take that arm—I—will take—this.”

She had to conquer a feeling of repugnance before she could take his arm, and all the while maddeningly bluebells were before her eyes. . . . and this—

“Leave me alone! Prudence, you surprise me. You really pain me. I assure you, I am enjoying myself immensely. Now, one, two, three—‘Do ye ken John Peel’—Why does no one sing? Dumb dogs! Dumb dogs!”

“I do not happrove of hunting songs, sir.”

“Evelyn, indeed you must lie down now—”

Oh, to keep this away from that hour—but the bluebells were there—and—ah, God, there it was—‘Nor any one of those great royal words’—no, no—she pushed it from her frantic, distraught, they must not come in here—not here—dear God, not here—their beautiful hour.

“Am I drunk? Good! Let me be drunker still! Here’s to the old hulk who can still get drunk! Don’t be frightened, Prue, I’m always a gentleman in my cups—manners grow positively courtly, don’t cher know. You’ll fall in love with me all over again.”

“Evelyn, come to bed.” Her voice was near breaking, her fight making her weak and faint, but she was keeping it away—the bluebells had grown dim—she was filling herself with this room, with Evelyn, fiercely guarding memory of that hour from pollution, striving to remember only that Evelyn needed her. Her fingers closed on his arm strenuously.

“You *must* lie down, Evelyn! You must not have any more whiskey!”

“You’re pinching me, Prue! You naughty girl, you’re pinching my arm! Hulloo, earthquake, eh, what?”

He lurched against her heavily as Davenport suddenly relinquished his hold of his other arm, and sinking into a chair, began to weep.

"Such a sad spectacle, ma'am! A fine gentleman like that. Oh, drink's a terrible curse! A terrible curse; good Lord, deliver us!"

Prudence caught at the table to steady herself; she forced her shrinking eyes back to the man's face. Was he drunk too? Davenport drunk?

"Get up, Davenport, at once, and help me!" she said sternly.

"Help? We all need help. We're all mishable sinners. Look at him there—a fine gentleman like that—What has brought his head so low? Drink, ma'am, the curse of us hall!"

Prudence pressed back against the wall, sheer sick terror for the moment driving all else from her mind; when Davenport half rose from his chair she nearly screamed aloud.

"He's drunk, Prue, the scoundrel! In your presence, too! Scandalous! Get out, you hound! D'you hear? Ha, ha, ha, I declare he's snivelling! Takes him like that, does it? Look at his long face! Jove, isn't he funny? Cheer up, Davvy, old chap, have another glass, and you'll feel better."

"Never touch it myself, sir, thank you. Drink, sir, is the curse of us hall!"

"There's a tear trickling down your long nose, Davvy! Lord, you're as good as a play!—"

"Davenport," Prudence said sternly. "Leave the room. Do you hear?"

"Certainly, ma'am, where shall I leave hit?"

"Go out of this room, Davenport, you are drunk."

"Drunk! Oh, ma'am! My heart is broken—"

‘Come, ye faithful people, come.’ And I ask you, my brethren, what is the curse of us hall? Why, drink——”

“Then drink, puppy, drink, and let ev’ry puppy drink
That is old enough to lap and to swallow,
For he’ll grow into a hound,
So we’ll pass the bottle round——”

roared Wingfield, and broke off to inquire wonderingly :
“Where is the bottle? Davvy, you artful dog, what’ve you done with the bottle, eh?”

“Bottle of medicine is hall I ever touch, sir, and long life to the blue ribbon! For, my brethren, I ask you, what is the curse of us hall? Why, drink! Spurn it! Cast it from thee. Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Prudence crossed the room, relinquishing her efforts to get Wingfield into his bedroom, and rang the bell. When she heard Lydia clattering up the stairs she went to the door and called through it, her voice harsh with strain :

“Tell Ferney to come here at once!”

A thought crossed her mind—Ferney might be out. . . .

Wingfield was at the table lifting a half-full glass of whiskey to his lips. She went to him :

“Evelyn, put it down——”

“Here’s to the blue eyes of my lady—go away, Prudence. Aren’t your eyes blue, my dear—next thing to it—grey—no cause for jealousy——”

“You mustn’t have any more, Evelyn. Give me the glass. It will make you suffer horribly.”

“No, no, my dear. Little girls like you don’t know anything about it. Here’s to the brown eyes of——”

She stretched out her arm and caught at the glass, it fell to the table, and smashed; one sharp piece struck

against her other hand and cut it. Wingfield saw the blood and shrank back aghast.

"What is it, Prue? Blood? Are you dying? Is it murder? There was blood like that on George Wil-mott's face—that day——"

"You sent for me, m' lady?"

As Ferney, entering, finished his sentence he went straight at Davenport singing hymns in his chair, seized him by the collar, dragged him across the floor to the door, and kicked him into the corridor. He gave him another kick as he lay there, then returned to the room, respectfully touching his forehead, and stolidly ignoring Wingfield's roars of appreciative laughter.

"Funniest thing I ever saw in my life! To see that little terrier go for the old fox! Ha! ha! ha!"

"I want to get him to bed, Ferney," Prudence said in a low voice.

"Very good, m' lady."

"I'm drunk, you know, Ferney, dead drunk——"

"Yes, my lord. Bed's the place for you, my lord."

"You leave me alone, or I'll kick you out into the corridor as you kicked that rogue just now. I'm going to sit here a bit, and have a cigar and a drink——"

"Best leave him alone, m' lady, he'll be asleep in a minute; it always takes 'im like that—a good laugh and then a sleep. I know 'is lordship," he deftly moved the whiskey bottle without Wingfield's seeing him. "You leave 'im to me, m' lady, I'll look after him——"

"Seen Lord Toppingham to-day, Ferney?" came drowsily from Wingfield.

"Not to-day, my lord, his lordship's down at New-market about that new hoss of 'is."

"Yes—yes—of course. Prue, where are you going? You've only just come in. Stay where—you—are——"

Good gallop I had this morning, Ferney—never—knew—the little—mare—go better——”

“That’s true, my lord, she’s just about as fit as they make ’em now,” Ferney’s face crinkled into eager lines. “I’ve been giving ’er a stretch across the downs every day, and walking exercise for a couple of hours——”

“Eh? What?” Wingfield roused abruptly. “Oh, of course—I’d forgotten what a useless fool I am! Lord, I thought for a moment I was a man again!”

Ferney’s face fell; he scratched his head in consternation.

“Man—not a pap-fed *thing*—Where’s the whiskey? Funny thing—Men’s wives never like their husbands—to—drink—always was good at his jumps—eh, what?—good story—that long-faced devil—Meet at Moltenev Cross to-morrow——”

“Yes, my lord——” Ferney, eager to repair his mistake, cut in, but Prudence signed to him to be quiet, and presently Wingfield had murmured himself to sleep.

“I can manage ’im, m’lady—well, if you’ll just take that arm,” Ferney lifted him gently to the bed. “There, now ’e’ll sleep as ’appy as a baby,” he said tenderly, laying a rug over him. “I know ’im—wonnerful head—wonnerful head. ’E’d never have been like this to-day if ’e was ’imself, m’ lady, it’s this crool illness that does the mischief.” He moved reluctantly from the bedside, then paused again. “Funny ’ow you can see hoss in ’im, ain’t it, m’lady? Even now—once he ’ad it written all over ’im, large as life! I never see a better horseman than wot he were, and as pretty a whip as you’d meet in a day’s march.” He had moved back to the bed, and was re-arranging the rug clumsily. “As pretty a whip as you’d wish to see!” He tucked in a

bit of rug : " You'd er been proud of 'im in those days, m'lady," he said wistfully.

Prudence roused herself to give what help she could to this Ferney, who was revealing himself to her for the first time.

" I know. I have seen him drive and ride, Ferney."

" Yes, m'lady, but he wasn't at 'is best then, not at the *height* of 'is fame. Him and me used to get a crowd round us when we started out in London—never see a prettier whip," he moved towards the door.

" I'll just kick that long-nosed feller into the road, m'lady, and then I'll come back."

" Put him in his room, will you, Ferney ? "

Ferney scratched his head.

" I'd sooner kick 'im into the road if it's all the same to you, m'lady."

" No ; his room, Ferney, take him to his room."

" Yes, m'lady."

He muttered as he left the room :

" Anyway there's that sharp turn at the corner of the passage."

Prudence ignored the mutter, although she comprehended its meaning before she heard the sharp crack of Davenport's head against the wall. . . .

She shuddered and stood—hardly knowing what she was doing. . . .

" I've put him on his bed, m'lady."

" Yes, Ferney."

Ferney retreated, re-appeared again.

" I'm just there if you want me, m'lady."

" I know, Ferney."

Once more he re-appeared.

" It's this crool illness, m'lady—'e'd never 'ave been like that without that. Such a 'ead I never see ! He'd

drink enough champagne to bath in, and a bottle of brandy atop of it, and never turn a hair! It's Gawd's truth I'm telling you, m'lady—its this crool illness. If it wasn't for that you'd never 'ave been able to tell 'e was drunk. True as I stand 'ere. 'E could drink a gallon of champagne and be as drunk as a lord, and you'd never know it, in a manner o' speaking. I never see 'is like. And as pretty a whip as you'd see in a day's march . . ." he went off muttering.

Prudence looked after him, a curious wistfulness in her face; for a moment she was pierced with a sad wish that she could share in his pride and belief. . . .

She wanted to go to her room—she must think—what was it she must think about? . . .

Ten minutes later, when Dickon came home, she was still standing there, and now all feeling seemed gone, she was conscious only of such tiredness that she shrank appalled at the thought of the stairs to be traversed to get to him. She made what was a tremendous, painful effort, and went slowly from the room and down the stairs.

"You are back, Dickon," she said in a voice that dragged.

"Renaud's pony is coming to-morrow, mother."

She looked at him with a queer dread in her face.

"Don't ask me to get you a pony, Dickon."

"Why?"

"Oh, my darling——"

"Why?"

"Because it's no good. I haven't the money, and I can't bear it—Dickon——" She held him close. "Did you enjoy yourself to-day?"

"Yes, but I would like a pony."

She searched his face hungrily.

“ Dickie, forget about the pony. You cannot have one yet. Perhaps some day——”

“ When, mother ? ”

“ I don’t know—some day. Did you have a nice tea, darling ? ”

“ Yes. When do you *think* I can have a pony, mother ? ”

“ I cannot tell you yet, Dickon, don’t you love anything but horses ? ”

“ Some things. When will you be able to tell me when I can have a pony, mother ? ”

She pushed him from her and rose. “ If you mention the pony again you shall go straight to bed without any supper ! ” she said, in a stifled voice.

Dickon stood staring at her, catching on the tip of his tongue the big tears that rolled slowly down his cheeks.

“ Are you crying for a pony, Dickon ? ” she said harshly.

“ I don’t know.”

She came to him and knelt beside him, putting her arms around him.

“ Don’t cry, my poor little one. There, let me wipe the tears away——”

“ They’re very salty.”

“ We won’t think any more about the pony for a long while——”

“ How long ? ”

“ Tell me what you did at Elm Hill.

“ We played fire in a theatre—we couldn’t have real fire—but we had a hose and played it on all of us—I’ve had all my clothes off and dried, and Renaud gave a tramp his shoes and stockings, and walked home bare-foot ; he says his mother is—is—char-itable now, and so he must be, and Miss Isobel showed us a picture, and

André looked for God down a bunny hole, 'cause he said it was so beautiful. But God isn't in a bunny hole, is he, mother? He's right away up in heaven, isn't He?"

Prudence looked out through the window.

"Sometimes—one would like to think He is nearer than that," she said wistfully.

"But He *lives* up in Heaven, mother; He never comes down 'cept Christ in the Bible."

A little sob seemed to catch in her throat.

"Sometimes—perhaps—He is in a bluebell wood——" she whispered, and bowed her head on her hands and wept. . . .

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN Ridgeway left Prudence he went back to the wood, but at the gap in the hedge where they had entered he paused and looked in. No, he could not go back there—alone. Beyond the pines, standing on their soft golden carpets, he caught the glimmer of blue. It would be desecration to go back there now, that glimmer of blue was for ever sacred. . . .

He walked on, for awhile not thinking consciously at all, content to feel, to thrill to the wonder of this thing that had come to pass ; it was almost as if he did not want to think, the thing seemed so precious that it must needs be fragile, and he feared a breath might mar it. An acquaintance on a bicycle it was who jarred him roughly from his dream, a jovial acquaintance fond of his joke.

“ Hulloa, Ridgeway, what you dreamin’ ’bout ? Picture or a woman, eh ? How’s Mrs. Wingfield ? ” and went chuckling on his way, a coarse and fatuous fool fond of his joke.

Ridgeway’s fury cleared the mist of his dream away, and he knew that he had to face life and no dream. Instinctively he longed to be on a horse ; it was, he had always thought, the best way to face life. He was only half a mile from the Hall, Flourish was at his service ; he strode there, grimly keeping his brain from definite thought, though he could not still the rapid beating of his heart. Once on the mare he cantered gently off to

the downs, and then, settling her into a walk, he thought. He knew that Prudence loved him ; facing that, it was difficult to think clearly, almost impossible : his mind followed his heart and soul and went off into that wonderful glowing dream of wonder. . . . But he had to think—for her. He had sworn always to help her. He strove with all the strength of his love for her, to put himself aside, to think what this would mean to her. Had he brought further trouble into her life ? Tragedy, where he had hoped to bring solace ? Trivial words of Elizabeth's sounded in his ears : " Don't fall in love with her." Was that only a few weeks ago ? Well, he had not fallen in love with her. What a stupid, inadequate phrase it was. He lifted his face to the quiet evening skies : " I have soared into love with her," he thought, and loathed the word fallen. . . . At that time, when Elizabeth spoke, he would have thought it desecration to approach the thought of love to her. But now, surely it was not that ?

For a while he worried, hot and disquieted ; he set the mare at a gallop over the moist grass of the downs, and as he drew her up again memory of their hour in the wood came to him ; he seemed to smell the warm sweet scent of the bluebells, the pungent scent of the pines ; he saw her pale, pure face, like the Sistine Madonna's, and there was a wonderful light in it. . . . His soul was at peace, he knew it was not desecration. . . .

But for her——

And as the sun went down in a softly luminous glow of pale gold, he dreamed a beautiful dream. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

HE went to her the next morning. He did not hesitate to go, his love called to him, and he went, his heart and soul a-fire with his dream.

He found her in the midst of sordid, ugly reality, and every nerve and sinew in him he put at her service, responding eagerly to her need.

“Davenport was drunk, too.” The “too” explained to him Wingfield’s state, which she shrank from putting into words. “He has been supplying Evelyn with whiskey—a little at a time—in secret. He won’t go.”

“Won’t go? What d’you mean?”

“I told him he was to leave at once, but—” she drooped her head and spoke in a low voice, “Evelyn doesn’t want him to go, and he says Evelyn is his master——”

“Good God!” burst from Ridgeway.

She stood unmoved, white and cold and tired.

“Ferney wants to throw him out, but it would mean a horrid brawl. Davenport when he isn’t drunk, is very strong——”

“Where is he now?”

“With Evelyn. Evelyn is very bad. I have sent for Dr. Fielding and telegraphed to Sir William Johnston.”

“I’ll get rid of him for you.”

She stayed him, in the same dull, level voice.

“I don’t think perhaps you had better. It would

upset Evelyn so terribly, and he is very ill this morning. And there would be only Ferney and me then."

"And me!"

"Yes, but you don't know much about sickness, do you?"

It was as if she were putting him outside her life; his heart that had been afire with his dream, was near breaking now with the pain of it.

"I'm strong," he said hoarsely, "and," pitifully smiling, "willing."

"You are always kind," she said gravely. Miles and miles away she was receding . . . back to her cold aloofness; he nearly cried out to her in his anguish. . . . And he knew that it was unconscious, that it was no thought of yesterday that dictated her mood. She had put him from her life, had gone back—Evelyn needed her. She was too weary and bruised to have room for more than that instinctive knowledge, and the need of responding to it was all she was capable of just then.

"I don't think Davenport would dare give him whiskey now," she said.

"But—he was impertinent to you."

"I don't think he would—now."

"Was he impertinent to you?"

"Yes. Do you think he'd dare—and I can watch——"

"Good God, let me do that much! It's not fit for you!——"

His maddened words slipped off her mind unheeded.

"If you will help——"

"I must turn that man out, Prudence! I'll get you another at once. I can do what's necessary till he comes. I won't have that scoundrel in the house!"

It burst from him in sentences abrupt, through what he was forcing himself to keep back.

"No. I dare not risk it while Evelyn is so bad. I must go to him now."

He followed her, suffering terribly, and crushing an impulse to take her into his arms, and force her to listen to his dream. . . . Would it bring back life to her? Warm her? Even if it hurt her—it must make her wake from that cold aloofness. . . . He crushed the impulse and followed her into Wingfield's room. He clenched his hands to keep them off the sleek, respectable manservant who stood beside the bed.

"You may go, Davenport," Prudence said, and he withdrew noiselessly.

Wingfield lay in a torpor, breathing heavily; his face looked white and flabby; the flesh bagged beneath his half-closed eyes.

"He would not miss the man—like that," Ridgeway said abruptly.

"No: but he may rouse at any moment. I cannot make him take any nourishment. He has had nothing since luncheon yesterday; he would take nothing in the night. He will be terribly feeble."

"Did you sit up?"

"Yes, with Ferney. He has been so good. He—quieted him when—he was delirious."

Wingfield stirred and opened his eyes.

"Got a head, my boy—feel pretty bad. You might give me a brandy and soda, will you? What's that? A beastly slop. Take it away. Had a hell of a night. What's your idea after a—" he raised a feeble hand half-way to his mouth, "you know, eh?"

"This beastly slop," Ridgeway said cheerfully.

"It's nasty, but it's soon gone, and there's nothing like it."

"All right. Give it here. I'll take your word for it."

Prudence slipped an arm beneath his shoulders, and deftly raised his head.

"You're right, pretty beastly's a mild way of describing it," he said, as his head sank back on the pillows. "Lord, I do feel done up! Is that that fool of a doctor's voice, Prue? I can't stand him this morning—I tell you I can't stand him!"

A dull blueish flush had risen to his face, he tried to lift himself from the pillows, but fell back exhausted.

"You must see him, Evelyn, he won't stay long." She left the room hurriedly, giving Ridgeway a glance that asked him to stay with Wingfield. When she returned with Dr. Fielding Wingfield was lying with closed eyes, and a frowning, sullen face. He refused to open his eyes or speak during the doctor's visit; he lay there heavy and inert, and they could not know how much was due to weakness and how much to sullenness.

Sir William Johnston came down by the 12.25 train, and at once the atmosphere was changed. He was a rotund little man with mild blue eyes, and rather a high voice, but there was comfort and strength in the very clasp of his lean hand; re-assurance and help in every jerk of his bald head, with which he was wont to punctuate his sentences. In a few minutes Ridgeway had received permission to get rid of Davenport, and had sent Ferney off to the post office on Mirth with a wire for another man. Wingfield had been forced to take a good deal of nourishment, at which he swore, but gulped down, and Prudence had promised to let Ridgeway sit with Evelyn, while she went and lay down. Then the great doctor went downstairs and out to the waiting cab.

Ridgeway followed him ; he was miserable with a sense of self-reproach, of failure.

“ I can't think how I was such a fool as not to find out that he was having whiskey ! ” he said.

Sir William paused in the path and gave him a keen, kindly glance.

“ I'm not a bit surprised,” he said. “ Their cunning is unbelievable. You'd have been bound to find it out soon, even if the man hadn't got drunk and let him have too much. But up to a point—with care—it's quite understandable you shouldn't.” He paused. “ I've been trying to make Mrs. Wingfield believe that ; it appears she had suspicions once and put them away from her.” He paused again. “ Poor child ! ” he muttered, “ poor child.”

Ridgeway grasped the hand he extended in farewell. Sir William looked up at him.

“ I'm glad you are here,” he said. “ Have you known her long ? ”

“ Since February.”

“ Is that all ? ” he appeared to muse.

“ Time isn't of much account,” he said.

“ No.”

“ You know what her life has been—a little ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ You can't know really. No one can know, except herself, and in a less degree, myself.” He moved on a step or two

“ There are women—and men—before whom I would always go bareheaded,” he said, “ but that girl—good-bye—good-bye—the man I've sent for is a real good fellow.”

“ Wingfield——”

“ Oh, he'll be a terror—fractious—unreasonable—

and very feeble for a while—brain weaker, too, I expect, but he'll pull through. I," he gave him a quick little sad glance, "shall pull him through—to live like that! It's a queer world. Good-bye. Shall I manage the 1.40? Good! That horse all right? Or will his legs give way if he's hurried? Don't know anything about horses, but hate to hurt the poor creatures. Good-bye."

He took a few quick steps, then paused.

"What is it? What do you want to ask me?"

"I?—" Ridgeway stammered, taken aback.

"You can ask a doctor anything," Sir William helped him in the cheery, commonsense tone that had heartened more drooping and frightened spirits than could well be numbered.

Ridgeway spoke out his thought baldly.

"If she left him to a nurse's care would he fret? Would it harm him?"

"No, no. In a week he would be calling the nurse Prudence, and not know she wasn't his—his wife. I wish she would do it." He held out his hand again, and looked straight into Ridgeway's eyes. "Yes," he said slowly. "I wish she would do it."

CHAPTER XXX

FOR a week Wingfield was very ill, too ill for Ridgeway to be of much use, and he saw little of Prudence. But each time that he saw her he saw too the building of that wall going on around her, getting higher and higher, leaving him always outside. And slowly a horrible misgiving came upon him that perhaps he had no right to try to climb it. He suffered then terribly; he could bear all else but that doubt, for the doubt struck at the very root and foundation of his love for her. If it would be to her hurt for him to try to scale that wall, he must give up the effort. It stared him in the face, ruthless, relentless, plain for him to see. And Wingfield lying there, feeble, irritable, mad, was to him the arrow pointing the way. . . .

At the end of a week Wingfield was less feeble, and after that he began to grow stronger in body every day, but his mind seemed to remain weaker than it had been before his outbreak. He took a liking to Williams, the new man, and had evidently no recollection of Davenport.

Muriel insisted on carrying Prudence off for a couple of hours at a time; Prudence went with her, talking little, listening in the detached way Muriel had known so well at the beginning of their acquaintanceship. It was as if she were deliberately erecting a wall between them behind which she took shelter. Muriel could not know that it was an instinctive responding to Evelyn's

need of her, a putting away from her all that could come between that need and herself, all that could remotely sap her strength so that she might fail him.

So Ridgeway, helping her, giving her his friendship, wrapping her about as far as he was able with the sense of his great strength, saw her day by day recede further from him. That hour in the wood took on a dream-like quality that seemed as if it would go near breaking his heart. He was tormented by questions—Had she forgotten? Had he been mistaken? Could that light in her face—that came to him now only in his dreams—have been imagined by him? He could not believe in the extent of her strength; he could not understand how the long tragic years had schooled her, so that in a crisis like this, she was able, for awhile, to push from her all but thought of the two for whom she had lived so long. It taxed heart and brain and body so cruelly that she grew, physically, weak, but she never relaxed, she had learnt the danger of relaxing, and she did not know that now unless she let that strenuous hold of herself go, she must break down. She, in her ignorance, had no conception of the strength of this new thing that had come into her life. . . . It was Dickon who sent the wall crashing to the ground.

It was curious that it should have been Dickon, since it was not like him to give flowers to his mother, but Dickon was opening out in the healthy new life he was leading, his strongest attributes, grown harsh from the unnatural atmosphere in which they had grown, softening into virtues, and he ran to her, as she sat with Ridgeway, a bunch of bluebells in his hand.

“I picked them in that wood,” he said, and ran off again, leaving them there in her lap. She sat trembling, her head drooping, looking down upon them. . . .

Their scent stole up to her—she shook with the sweetness of it, and their hour . . .

The wall was crumbling ; it fell and left her defenceless ; she cast him a piteous glance—" Bluebells "—she murmured wonderingly ; it was as if she had never thought there could still be bluebells in the world. . . . He was beside her—kneeling—The tears rained down—anguished pent up tears, the tears that kept back all these weeks, had seemed to form into ice in heart and throat. . . . He put his arms round her gently, reverently, and held her so ; no words of comfort would come, he was inarticulate except for a murmur that perhaps her love could read. . . .

That was all.

When the storm was over he left her. She asked him to go, and he went.

CHAPTER XXXI

HIS dream had come back to him . . . He strove to be practical, to see it from all sides, to settle details. He strove to push from him, for the time being, the pulsating wonder of her in his arms. . . . But he could not; the wonder stole through heart and soul and mind, uplifting him, thrilling every nerve so that he could only lie there, in the open door of his studio, and cherish his dream. In his dream she was there—in his arms—for always. . . .

The night grew cold, but he stayed there, he rolled himself in a blanket and spent the night beneath the high, dark skies, with the murmur of the stream in his ears, and the scent of the wet earth in his nostrils; he could not take his wonder and his dream away from the night and the stars; he stayed there and dreamed the night away, open-eyed, and when morning came in an infinite, wonderful peace and glow, he prayed: "God help me to make her happy."

It was when he went to Cherry Cross and stood in Wingfield's room that the old troubling thought returned, but now it was weaker. He looked into Wingfield's bleared eyes, and faced the accusation of treachery, of cruelty, which the world might make, if his dream should come true. But he knew, in his sane strength and apart from the glamour of his love, that there would be no truth, no real sting, in the accusation. He had tried in these days to put himself aside, and he knew that for her it would be best that his dream should be fulfilled.

He told himself that the daily sacrifice of her life was a sin. . . .

When he found himself alone with her she stood before him with drooping head, and she said to him : " I have brought sorrow into your life."

He cried low, in a voice that vibrated with truth :
" Sorrow ! God, if I had words ! "

She lifted her pale face then, and it was transfigured ; she stretched her arms wide and drew them to her, and it was as if she gathered something to her breast.

" Then I thank God for it," she said, and to herself she murmured : " I understand now." And she stood, her face uplifted, the while in her mind ran the poem :

" Let the great winds their worst and wildest blow,
Or the gold weather round us mellow slow :
We have fulfilled ourselves, and we can dare
And we can conquer, though we may not share
In the rich quiet of the afterglow
What is to come."

A murmur from his lips made plain to him her thought, and again she said : " I understand."

But he looked at her, anguish in his face.

" No ; you don't quite understand," he said.

She was silent, standing, it seemed to him, afar, and he dared not go to her. . . .

His dream struggled in his throat, at his very lips for utterance

She put a deep thought into halting words, because he was her love, and she must tell him all.

" You have made—my sordid life—beautiful," she said.

His dream—

" I want to make it beautiful—always."

" You have—for always," she said.

She left it at that. . . . And his dream. . . .

“ Prudence, we can’t—I can’t—ah, come down Prudence, come near——”

She put out strenuous hands.

“ You mean—must we do that—now ? ”

He was at a loss.

“ Do what ? ”

“ That : think of—a reason—for your going away—and—that— ” she turned from it in distaste.

“ Going away,” he repeated dully, and then sharply, roughly : “ Wouldn’t you care if I went away ? ”

Across the deep exaltation in her face there flashed a startled half-awakening.

“ Why do you speak to me like that, Mark ? ” she said wistfully.

“ I’m a brute. Don’t make the mistake of thinking I’m an angel.”

“ I know what you are,” she said to herself gently.

“ I must go back to Evelyn now.”

He let her move towards the door ; there she paused :

“ Was it true—what you said—about my not bringing you—sorrow ? ”

“ It was true, Prudence, but I can’t live up there—on a pinnacle of icy exaltation ! ” he cried it out in his anguish. He saw the startled shrinking that leapt to her eyes, saw her pale lips grow whiter.

“ I must go back to Evelyn,” the whisper, almost purely instinctive, came to him, as she put her hand on the door handle.

He sprang to her side.

“ Prudence—you can’t go like that—wait a minute—give me a minute— ” he was breathing hard.

She drew back, waiting patiently, while he strove to still the thought hammering at his brain, the rapid beating of his heart. . . . He was beginning to see,

to understand. . . . He saw that to her, joy was a thing unknown—sacrifice a daily duty—pain and trouble her portion through life—All else would seem impossible. She took instinctively the course that hurt. . . . He must be patient—his dream—ah, his dream must wait ; she was not ready to listen to it yet. . . .

He spoke gently :

“ Prudence, I’m not going away. I am coming here—as I came before. You will let me come.”

She drew a deep breath.

“ I—hadn’t thought of that.”

“ No. I shall do it.”

She hesitated, then she said simply :

“ You know best.”

“ Wait a minute. Will you be glad if I come ? ”

She lifted innocent grateful eyes.

“ Yes, Mark,” she said, and added :

“ You mean that—that we shall still—have our friendship ? ”

“ Yes.”

She left the room, then came back ; she came up close to him, and for the first time her pale face was flooded with colour ; she stood twisting her fingers, hesitating.

“ What is it, Prudence ? ” he asked tenderly, and she seemed suddenly to him very young. . . .

“ It won’t be—wicked—will it, Mark ? ” It came out in a shamed whisper.

“ No ; it won’t be wicked, Prudence,” he said gently.

She went away, accepting his word implicitly.

CHAPTER XXXII

IT went on like that for several weeks. Ridgeway put all his strength into it, but the strain told on him; he grew thinner, and he was irritable to every one except Prudence.

Muriel said innocently to Elizabeth that Mark was over-working.

Elizabeth said:

“Best thing for him,” and eyed Muriel curiously.

“He never goes anywhere now. He never comes to us, or even to you. He just paints and paints.”

“Let’s go down to his studio and see what he has been doing,” Elizabeth suggested.

Muriel hesitated.

“He mightn’t like it.”

“He can say so. My dear child, you needn’t be afraid; Mark will tell us quick enough if he doesn’t want us.”

“He’s never rude. I hate a rude man.”

“Oh, no, he wouldn’t be rude. Well, I’m going.”

“I, too, am coming, Maman.” Renaud sprang from behind a window curtain.

“I think not, Renaud.”

Renaud, who had a cobalt blue nose, and yellow ochre cheeks, replied with such a tremendous dignity that even his peculiar appearance failed to make him ludicrous.

“It is necessary dat I come, Maman. We artists must help each oder, n’est-ce pas? Pour moi, I paint

my nose! Why, je tu demande, why? Because I can paint noting else! I paint my cheek—mais pourquoi? Because it is all dat I am able to paint!”

“I’m not going to let you be an artist when you grow up, you know, Renaud.”

“Pourquoi?”

“I’m afraid of the French blood in you blossoming into low collars and long hair and flappy ties. You shall be a nice, clean, wholesome English sporting noodle, I think.”

“I shall be,” quoth Renaud solemnly, “de greatest artist in de whole world. I have made up de picture dat I paint first. Ah, mais il est superbe—dat picture.”

“What is it, sweet?”

He hesitated, glancing doubtfully at Muriel.

“I will keep it a great secret, Renaud.”

“Den I will tell. See, I love to paint de trees. I also love to paint Maman. Den my picture is Maman, in her pink shining satin dress—de one with de tiny little pearls on it—and her pearl necklace, and she is sitting in a great high tree—in de winter time when all de boughs are so pretty and dark—with her silver shoes on, and dat sparkle ting in her hair—ah, mais il est superbe—dat picture!”

“And my great fur coat, I hope, Renaud,” said Elizabeth unkindly.

He threw out his hands with a gesture of unutterable despair.

“Ah, you do not understand!”

“Well, run and tell Louise to get that paint off your nose, and you can come with us.”

“Bien! We artists must help each oder! Ah, but yes.”

So it was that Ridgeway, frowning before his painting

for Coles, heard voices drawing near, and on an impulse of sharp irritation stepped to the door and turned the key in the lock. He told himself that he did not want to be interrupted in his work, but behind that there was a keen distaste to having the atmosphere he had lately created there disturbed. In a curious way, caught and held in his loneliness and longing, he had impregnated the studio with the thought of Prudence, so that at times he could almost dream she was there. It was all he had—that, and the painting he had done of her standing on the hill, in the mist. . . .

Glancing at the window facing west, the curtains of which had been torn the day before, he slipped behind Dickson's bureau, and crouched low, out of sight from the window.

He heard the steps grow near, heard the knock on the door, the handle turn, talk, then, high and shrill :

"Is it a rat, Mark? Hush, he is hiding behind de bureau. . . ."

Renaud, on the roof, looking down through the top light.

Ridgeway, throwing wide his door, bowed ironically.

"I forgot the tree and a boy's proclivities."

"You are working, I'm so sorry," Muriel said, contrite.

Elizabeth said :

"What did he look like hiding behind the bureau, Renaud?"

"Oh, but ver cross and fierce—like dis!"

He skipped behind the bureau and crouched, glowering prodigiously. "Was it a rat, Mark? Were you den waiting for him to come out?"

"Come, Renaud," Muriel said. "You are disturbing the painter; you should sympathise."

"Were you painting, Mark?" Elizabeth demanded.

"Trying to. But don't go, Mrs. Latimer, perhaps you'll give me a fresh impetus. Do come in."

"I'd rather not, really. I hate doing that sort of thing."

Ridgeway smiled charmingly.

"You never could do that sort of thing. Do, please, come in."

Elizabeth had passed in, and was looking at the painting on the easel.

"It's a beautiful thing, Mark," she said, and added slowly: "Have you done any more to it since I saw it a few weeks ago?"

"Oh, tremendous lot," he replied. "Can't you see? That filthy hard edge to that cloud—that's fairly recent, and this mess down in the corner—it's not meant for cauliflowers floating in the stream—that's new too."

He picked up a penknife, and began to scrape the edge of the cloud.

"Eh bien!" cried Renaud capering. "Now I see! I understand! I also will use my penknife!"

For a moment Ridgeway's hand poised, clenched on the knife, before the canvas.

"It's a temptation sometimes," he said, and dropped his hand.

"To scrape it all out?" Muriel asked aghast.

"No; to slash it to ribbons!" he responded fiercely, and tried to soften it with a harsh little laugh.

"Oh, dear," sighed Elizabeth, "the pictures down here seem to madden you, and I'm responsible. Mark, if I hadn't insisted on your coming down here, you'd never have come."

"I should have come," he said quietly.

She was looking at him through her half-closed lids.

“ It’s a chance in a thousand. Why should you ? ”

He answered lightly :

“ Oh, some instinct would have told me what things there were down here to paint.”

Elizabeth wandered round the studio.

“ I don’t see that charming thing of the mist and Prudence Wingfield.”

“ No.”

“ Where is it ? I do want to see it.”

“ I’m sorry. I’ve made a mess of it.”

“ What a pity ! ”

“ Ah, Monsieur, do I not know ! ” cried Renaud, turning from contemplation of the canvas on the easel. “ I also make de mess ! Oh, but de deuce of a mess ! We artists must help each oder, n’est-ce pas ? Pour moi—I cannot paint de trees as dey look. Mais pourquoi ? I do not know ! I do not understand, for behind my eyes dere is de beautiful picture—it is here——” touching his eyes, “ and in my paint-box I have de colours, den, I ask you, why can I not paint de picture ? ”

In at the open door came two disreputable, half-dressed figures ; one, chubby and weeping, flung itself upon Elizabeth.

“ I do not like de brambles bitin’ me, Maman ! Dey catch my arms and my legs, and behold, one catch my tumnick, and dey poke little holes into me—ooh, I want my shoes and my socks and my knickbocks and my coat—ooh—ooooh——”

“ Armand, what have you been doing ? ”

“ It was like dis, Maman, Renaud, he become a pig——”

“ It is you who are de pig ! Ah bah, pig ! Pig ! Pig ! ”

From the scrimmage of words and fists that followed

they managed to elicit that Renaud had refused to tell where he was going, so that Armand had considered it his duty to follow in secret. He had allowed André to come also; they had followed at a discreet distance, and, being still afire with the glow of charity, had given away most of their attire to the gypsies who were camping down by the old mill.

"Mark," Elizabeth said, "I'm dreadfully sorry for you, but you'll have to give André house-room till I can send the cart for him. He'll go to sleep, he is worn out, poor sweet. Armand, you will come home with us—yes, barefoot—to punish you."

"Pour moi," said Armand carelessly, "I like de bare feet, for de grass, it tickle, and de stones dey make one a pilgrim, scourging his filthy body."

"You're rather startling, dearest."

"I also wish to be de pilgrim and scourge my filthy body," exclaimed Renaud, preparing to take off shoes and socks.

"Ah oui," cried Armand, "let us den dig de brambles into all de parts dat hurt de most!"

Elizabeth forbade further disrobing and mortifying of the flesh, and, in the midst of an intimate discussion as to which were the tenderest parts of the human body, she swept them off with her.

"I wish," she said outside to Muriel, "I had never made Mark come down here."

"Oh, Elizabeth, why? He has done some beautiful work."

"Beautiful? I don't know. One hankers after orthodox happiness for any one one cares for. The great tragic joys are lovely to read about, and to gaze upon, only when they happen to one's acquaintances, not when they happen to one's oldest friends."

“ But won't his tragic mood pass ? ”

“ Only with the unorthodox consummation.”

She gave a little impatient laugh.

“ How trying you people are, who object on principle to gossip ! I believe you teach your very hearts and minds to be blind to your neighbour's affairs. When you carry your charity to that extent it becomes self-absorption ! I'm much nicer—I love gossip.”

“ But not slander,” Muriel said. “ And gossip so often degenerates into that.”

“ I like slander when it's directed against the proper person, which is, of course, the person I happen to detest. I loathe people who are too just even to let themselves go in a good old burst of outspoken hatred ! ”

Muriel said slowly :

“ What is it you're hinting at ? ”

“ You know surely ? ”

“ N-no ; I'm beginning perhaps to wonder——”

“ Well, wake up. Can't you see that Mark Ridgeway is in love with Prudence ? ”

Muriel did not answer for a little while, then she said :

“ I hope not—oh, I hope not.”

“ It's too late for that,” said Elizabeth, who was in a very bad temper, for Ridgeway's sake.

“ Are you sure ? How can you be sure ? ”

“ Because I happen not to have shut my eyes and ears to my neighbours' affairs.”

“ Oh, Elizabeth——”

“ That's why I wanted to catch him suddenly in his studio—to make sure.”

Muriel flushed.

“ Then you had no right to let me come——”

“ Oh, it'll do you good ! I'm never above doing a

little doubtful work, if there's a chance it may help my friends."

"How will this help?"

"It has decided me to fight on Mark's side, whatever happens."

"You mean——"

"That I shall try to help him to win her for his wife"

Muriel gave a little cry.

"But——"

"Oh, I know all that. She has sacrificed herself enough for that poor man, who isn't sane enough to miss her. He should have a good nurse, and she should marry Mark. I don't like it. And there's the boy. I'd sooner Mark had married an ordinary, good, charming girl with no history and no child, but—*que voulez vous?*"

"She will not leave him," Muriel said.

Elizabeth glanced at her curiously.

"You may be right, but one can't foretell a definite course of action like that, unless one leaves love out of the question."

"You don't know that she loves him."

"No; it's difficult to tell with that coldness and reserve of hers, but I think she *must*——"

"Poor child," murmured Muriel sadly. "Oh, poor child, one would think she had suffered enough."

"Perhaps she has, perhaps this means the end of it."

But Muriel looked out before her through tears. . .

Rénaud and Armand came clamouring for permission to disrobe. Elizabeth refused sharply. She said to Muriel:

"If I belonged to a lower order I should scream at them, and hit their heads together! As it is, I feel I've

been a brute just because I spoke crossly to them. It's absurd. And I get no satisfaction out of it. I suppose if you have children you'll never lose your temper, whatever the little wretches do!"

"You needn't sound so fierce over a conjecture," Muriel said, smiling.

"I feel I want to stick pins into you!" Elizabeth said.

Muriel flushed.

"We come to the footpath across the fields in a moment; we can part there," she said.

"I don't want to part!"

"Perhaps," said Muriel, "I do."

A little smile trembled at the corners of Elizabeth's mouth.

"The pins were only because you're so horribly sure she wouldn't leave that poor man, even if she loved Mark."

"Do *you* think she would?"

"Yes! Of course! I'm sure of it. She would put Mark first. She has no right to ruin his life. She probably wouldn't do it for her own sake, although she'd be surprised how that sort of thing hurts and wakes her up! She may find, if her coldness turns, without will of hers, into flame, that life is more difficult to mould as one wishes, than she's found yet, with all her tragic misery!"

She added slowly:

"It's not easy to keep away—when the man's there—waiting and wanting you."

"No!"

It broke from Muriel like a little cry of memory, and her face paled; insensibly her steps quickened—she wanted to get back to Hugh.

Elizabeth said gloomily :

“ I wish I didn't find it necessary to produce so many reasons why she'd do it.”

“ They're good reasons,” Muriel said.

“ Yes ; too good and too necessary. It's when one gives and needs no reasons that one can feel sure of a thing's coming to pass. All the same, I *am* sure it will ! ”

In the studio Ridgeway, left with André, stood and regarded him with an unfriendly eye. “ Look here, young man,” he said, “ are you too young to understand that I want you to be quiet ? ”

“ S-s-s-hush,” whispered André, his blue eyes very grave. “ See, I betum a lickle mouse, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur ? ”

“ That's it. Roll this shawl round you if you're cold.”

André was sitting on a Persian rug, he continued to sit there, his gaze fixed longingly on a small lay figure lying on the bureau.

“ S-s-hush,” he whispered softly at intervals, and then he began to sigh ; he sighed more and more frequently, and his sighs grew louder and louder, as Ridgeway continued to paint.

“ What are you puffing away like that for ? ” he asked at last irritably.

“ I must not 'peak, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur ? ”

“ 'Peak away.”

The gravity of the brown little face was chased away by a beaming smile.

“ Dere is a dolly,” he said.

“ Eh ? Oh, that ! Well ? ”

“ Monsieur plays wif de dolly ? ”

The trembling anxiety in his voice made Ridgeway

turn, and look at him, and he remembered hearing of André's secret, shamed love for dolls.

"Artists always do," he said, and lifting the lay figure from the bureau put it down on the rug beside him.

"Den I also am de artist," André said, and clasping the figure to him, began to croon a lullaby. Presently, his shawl trailing behind him, he crept out of the open door to sit outside so that he might sing the louder, without disturbing Ridgeway. He put his doll to bed in a nest of grass surrounded by tall pink foxgloves, and sang in a sweet little deep flat voice till the word "God" occurring in his song set him thinking on his quest. He knelt up in the grass, and prayed, "Oh, Lord Dod, tell me where's you hidin'. Amen."

He waited gazing around wide-eyed. One of the foxgloves waved in the breeze, and dropped a beautiful pink cup at his feet. André pounced, his cheeks scarlet with excitement.

"I've dot Him! I've dot Him!" He chuckled, the flower between his hot little hands. "Oooh—I can feel Him movin'!"

He held it up close to his face, resting his cheek on his closed hands, making a picture that even the funereal and severe Mrs. Hawkleigh, driving into Barchester, was forced to stop and look at.

"Wait, George," she said to the coachman, and descending approached the chubby little scantily attired figure sitting on its heels amongst the foxgloves.

"Why have you so few clothes on, my dear? You will catch cold. What have you there?" she said. "What are you holding in your hands?"

"Dod!" said André beaming.

“ And who is Dod, my dear ? ”

The blue eyes widened incredulously.

“ Dod,” he repeated.

She put out a black-gloved hand and patted his head.

“ Show me this Dod,” she said playfully.

He hesitated, burrowing his cheek tighter against his hands.

“ I’m so drefful ’fraid He’ll ’scape,” he said. “ He’s in dere now, ’cause I can feel Him movin’.”

“ Oh, he is alive ? I am quite curious. Tell me who Dod is, my dear.”

“ He’s Dod—Monsieur *Lord* Dod ’mighty ! ”

“ *What ? What ?* oh, this is scandalous ! Iniquitous !——”

“ I prayed to Him to stop hidin’ and tum out, and He jumped on to me in a pink f’ower, and now I’ve dot Him—oooh ! I’ve dot Him—oooh ! ” he crooned, red-cheeked, aglow with joy.

“ You mean to tell me you are saying that—that—oh, I cannot utter the profanity ! Poor, ignorant baby ! ” She marched to the studio, and rapped sharply on the door.

“ I’m sorry—I can’t leave my work,” came in Ridgeway’s voice.

“ I beg your pardon, but I really must see you a moment, Mr. Ridgeway ! ” She opened the door and went in.

“ That child outside—it has quite upset me. He is sitting there with scarcely any clothes on declaring that he has—that—that—he has God in his hands ! ”

“ It’s a pretty fancy,” Ridgeway said.

“ A pretty fancy ! It’s horrible profanity ! It is desecrating the name of our Lord——”

“ Would your God mind a child thinking to find Him in all beautiful things ? ”

“ Most certainly ! It is sacrilege——”

“ Then your God is not mine, or that baby’s ! ” he said gently.

She poured out a deluge of doctrinal argument until Ridgeway, exasperated, cut in with :

“ I’m awfully sorry, but I’m hard at work, and anyhow I own no responsibility for one of Elizabeth’s children ! ”

“ We are all responsible for each other. I am responsible for you ! You——”

“ I’m sorry for you,” he said grimly.

“ I do not shirk or shrink. However, that little boy is not, of course, yours. I will talk to his mother.”

“ Do,” said Ridgeway maliciously.

She left the studio and went back to the road where her carriage waited. She did not see André again.

When the sound of the wheels had died away into the distance Ridgeway came out to fetch André in.

“ André ! Where are you ? ”

A clump of bracken on his right stirred, and André’s tear-stained face peered between it.

“ What’s the matter, old chap ? ”

“ It wasn’t Dod, it was a lickle red spider,” he said, forlornly.

“ Well, never mind, come along in now.”

“ I wish to stay here.”

“ Well, promise you won’t run on to the road ? ”

“ Mais oui.”

Ridgeway threw a rug over him and returned to his painting. It was a few minutes later—all in a moment she was there—André howling—his nose bleeding—Prudence hugging him up, soothing him—

Then she was in the studio—Prudence, no dream of her—with André on her knee—Ridgeway holding the bowl of water while she sponged the poor little nose—and his hand touched hers—some of the water was spilled. . . .

He heard his own voice saying :

“ What happened ? ”

And her's replying that André had fallen down the bank, and bumped his nose.

Then wheels—and Louise — and André was gone.

They stood within the door, and his heart was thumping with the knowledge that she was there in his studio with him—no dream Prudence this—but alive, tremulous. He shook with the strain of his striving after that cloak of calm friendliness.

“ Were you passing ? Or did you want me ? ” he said, and the vibrating of his voice made the commonplace words a message of his love.

She was for the minute mute, flushing into shy guilt at his question, answering at last :

“ I was—passing,” and at once confessing to him that she had chosen to pass his studio for no reason but that she could not keep away. She trembled as she stood there, afraid, instinctively, to move lest she evoke the storm of love which she felt he was holding back. Once she spoke, she said :

“ I must go,” but the words died in a whisper on her lips.

Then she spoke again, she made a great effort ; her eyes were fixed on an old painting coat that lay on a chair.

“ It needs washing,” she said with a little breathless laugh.

“ Does it ? ” he said, and with that his arms were round her—holding her close. . . .

When she tried to get away he freed her, and put her gently into a chair.

“ Prudence——”

But she shook her head, beseeching him to be silent ; she buried her face in her arms on the table. . . .

He went and stood in the doorway, breathing hard, and in his heart was a joy so great that, come what would, it must needs glorify the rest of his life. . . .

He went back to her presently and knelt beside her, and bowed his head on her hand, lying in her lap.

“ Prudence,” he said huskily, “ do you forgive me ? ”

She answered with her beautiful truth.

“ There is nothing to forgive. I know.”

She lifted her head and looked down into his face ; she was white and tremulous, but her eyes were shining, and her lips sweet. . . .

“ May I tell you my dream now ? ” he whispered.

She waited, letting her hand lie in his.

“ All these weeks,” it burst from him now almost incoherently, “ all these weeks—I kept it to myself—I wanted to tell you—may I tell you now ? You will be my wife—that’s it—that’s my dream—Prudence,” he broke off, “ don’t look at me like that ! My God—what is it ? ”

She was cowering back in her chair—afraid—afraid of him ! His breath caught in his throat—almost choked him : he whispered :

“ Prudence—my little one——” strove to say more, breathed at last : “ Don’t look at me like that—I—can’t bear—it——”

"I—I don't understand," she murmured in a frightened voice.

He caught at it with a great breath of relieved tension.

"No—no—that's it. I'm a brute. I frightened you, my poor little one! I was a brute to blurt it out like that—a brute. Try not to be frightened—there—I'll be so careful, my sweet. I was a brute. Don't be frightened," he was stroking her hand, soothing her, his face drawn with anxiety. "A great, clumsy brute——"

She drew her hand from his, she looked at him with wide, wondering eyes.

"You said—you asked——"

"Yes, I know. We'll wait a little. You're upset——"

"What did you ask?" she broke in.

"I'll tell you presently——"

She bent towards him.

"Tell me now," she whispered in anguish. "I—I'm thinking a terrible thing of you——"

"It was my dream—my thought of these long weeks——"

He was afraid to tell her just yet; she saw his fear, and misunderstood it.

"You are afraid! My horrible thought is right——"

"No; not if it's horrible," he said firmly.

She drew a little sobbing breath of relief.

"Forgive me," she murmured, and he saw the tears gather in her eyes.

"My dream," he said steadily, for he realised that he must say it now, "is a very beautiful one. It is to take what God has given us, Prudence—you and I——"

"You mean——? Oh, what do you mean? What are you doing? I—I *cannot* understand——"

"Hush, dear one. I am asking you to be my wife——"

She sprang to her feet and away from him ; her face flamed from brow to chin ; when he would have drawn near she put out her hand as if to ward off something evil.

“ What are you doing, Prudence ? My God, you look as if I'd insulted you ! ”

“ Yes,” she gasped, and made her way towards the door.

“ I *insult* you ! Prudence, I worship you ! You're the purest, bravest——”

She interrupted him, suddenly white and cold.

“ You asked me to—to——”

“ Yes ; is that an insult ? For a man to ask—reverently—the woman he loves to be his wife ? ”

“ From you—to me—yes——”

He stopped her progress to the door.

“ Prudence ! ” He broke into passionate speech.

She stood, shrinking from him, and in the midst of his storm of words spoke.

“ I—I suppose it is my fault—I—have been—very wicked—to—to let you——”

He broke in on the trembling words, suddenly quiet and stern.

“ Be quiet, Prudence ! I won't have it desecrated. Do you understand ? Sit down, and try to listen to me.”

“ I—want to go——” she said in a tired voice. “ Please let me go.”

“ Would you put me out of your life now ? ”

“ Yes,” she said.

He made no sign.

“ Sit down. I must talk to you,” was all he said.

“ I—ought to go back——”

“ You shall go presently.”

He stood looking down on her, and a curious thought

swept across his brain ; what would she do if he were to take her into his arms again, and *fight* that coldness into warmth ?

“ You’ve got to listen to me first,” he said quietly. “ Don’t you know that you’ve insulted me pretty badly ? ”

“ I ? You ? ”

“ You’re doing it still.”

She quivered into quietude, and stood by the table with bowed head.

“ My feelings don’t matter—it’s our love that matters—you’ve got to believe that I love you and reverence you, Prudence.”

She was silent.

“ Do you believe it ? ”

“ I—how can I ? ” she breathed pitifully.

“ Why not ? ”

“ Evelyn——”

“ Well ? ”

She gripped the edge of the table, and stood there, her head down bent.

“ You—would—not have—have done it, if—if——”

He waited inexorably for her to finish her halting sentence ; he was fighting for his love—his and hers—he could be almost cruel for that. . . .

“ You wouldn’t have done it if I were legally his wife,” she brought it out with a breathless rush of words.

“ You couldn’t have married me under those circumstances,” he replied.

She flung up her head at last, and her eyes seemed to blaze into his.

“ Nor under these ! ” she cried in a low voice. “ Oh, how much less under these ! What are you made of that you don’t understand ? Or are you wicked—bad—

cruel? Love! You call this poor, evil thing love! This thing that strikes at me—at my very heart and soul—to trail them in the mud—Oh, God, how dare you—*dare* you treat me as if I'm—I'm——”

“Hush!” he interposed gently. “Don't say ugly words, Prudence.”

“Only ugly words are possible now,” she said, and broke down again, whispering through her tears: “You have made it all ugly—hideous and bad——”

“To me it is all beautiful and good.”

“Beautiful! Good! And you want me to leave him and marry you. To live with him as long as it suited me, and then——”

“Oh, hush, hush, my love—my little love,” he groaned, and he went to her and put his arms about her gently, and drew her to him. “There, there,” he whispered, as if she were a child. “Rest a little while, my sweet—don't think—just rest——”

She drooped her head on to his shoulder, and her body grew slack.

“I—can't understand,” she whispered.

“You will presently.”

She whispered again in a small tired voice:

“But you're not wicked.”

“No, Prudence, I'm not wicked, I think.”

“I'll try to understand,” she said.

“That's right.”

She said presently:

“I'm very tired, perhaps that is why I can't understand.”

“Will you tell me exactly what it is you don't understand?”

“Why, how you—*you*—don't understand—I mean—surely if you loved me you would understand——”

“ I do understand, Prudence. I know what you mean. You think that I ought to be even more—more—ah, I can't get the word—more careful—than if you were legally his wife——”

“ Yes.”

“ You think it would be a greater sin for you to marry me, than the sin of coming with me if you were married to him ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Look at me, child.”

He put his hand beneath her chin, and turned her face up—her little white face with the pure brow and the eyes of the Sistine Madonna—A thought came to him that, as she looked now, so must that Madonna have looked on the day of the Crucifixion. . . .

“ Prudence,” he said unsteadily, “ can't you trust me ? Can't you believe me ? Look back—on our friendship—is it all to go ? Does it mean nothing to you ? Child, *dare* you let it go—like that ? Don't you see that unless you believe my every thought of you is pure, you are blaspheming against that friendship—against our love ? Would you do that, child ? That hour in the bluebell wood——”

His voice broke, he said no more. She had dropped her head down on his shoulder again, and was crying quietly.

“ I am sorry,” she whispered. . . .

He talked to her very gently, telling her all his dream ; he spoke of the uselessness of the sacrifice of her life ; he told her what Sir William had said, and his voice was quiet now with the deadening conviction that his dream was never to come true. He pleaded for their love at last, and she lifted dim eyes that yet shone, and she said :

“ You forget—Dickon.”

He was silent for a minute, fighting the curious sensation of having come up short against something impenetrable. . . .

“ I could never leave Evelyn,” she said quietly. “ But Dickon——”

“ He would be my son. He would take my name——”

She drew herself from him and stood erect, facing him, and in her eyes there was an exalted absorption that seemed to exclude him, and struck coldly to his heart.

“ Do you think I could ever tell Dickon my story ? ” she said quietly. “ What sort of a story would it be ? If I left his father when I wanted to, after living with him all these years, I should be what the world calls me now. Be quiet, Mark. I should feel that I was that. Do you think I owe Dickon nothing ? I could never leave Evelyn, but for Dickon’s sake too I could not do it. I could not marry you, because of Dickon. For his sake, I wouldn’t do it. I owe him that—I, who brought him into the world. I cannot give him a name, but I can give him a mother who tried to do what she thought right. He must hear my story some day. It must not be a story that will drag him further down. He is hampered enough, I have to help him all I can. Would you have me faced with the awful thought that I had failed there too ! That I had to tell him I was——”

“ Don’t go on ! ” he broke in harshly. “ There’s no need.”

“ No, no need. You know it for yourself. And yet you ask me to be your wife ! ”

"Yes ; I ask you to be my wife," he repeated doggedly. She stood a moment eyeing him, then turned from him gravely.

"I shall never understand you," she said, and so left him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WINGFIELD'S mind was weaker, although his bodily strength returned gradually after his outbreak. When Ridgeway ceased to come and sit with him he did not seem to notice, or in any way regret his absence. But one day after sitting huddled up in his chair in silence for a long while he said to Prudence :

“ That's a story I've never told you.”

“ Tell me now,” she said.

“ It's not a particularly pleasant story, my dear, but I'm afraid I shall have to tell you, because I shall have to move to other rooms.”

A little look of dismay flashed across her face.

“ Tell me why, will you ? ” she said cheerfully.

“ Well, it isn't healthy, to say the least of it, to live in a room where there's a dead body buried under the floor boards. Hush now, don't be frightened, my dear. He's dead, and can't hurt you, only unfortunately his right hand is still alive. Pity! Great pity! Most unfortunate thing. Can't think how it happened. So tiresome, because one can't very well go for it—it wouldn't be playing the game, when the rest of the chap's dead and done for. Don't quite know what to do, and that's the truth. Devilish awkward thing! Easiest thing in the world to get rid of it—a knife, don't you know—wait till it appears—and there you are! But it's not playing the game, poor chap! ”

Prudence tried to distract his mind, but presently he reverted to it again, and now he was frightened.

"Look—they're beginning to heave—the boards—quick, put down something heavy! There—by that chair! Damn you, haven't you got any eyes? It's pushing 'em up——" his voice rose to a scream of terror.

"Quick! Quick! Something heavy! Ah—h," as Prudence laid some large books on the spot to which he had pointed. "That's better. We've done him this time, my dear. I shan't see that hand come creeping up out of the floor now! You've never seen it, have you, Prue? Funny thing, but I always did have the most wonderful eyesight—always could see further than any one else. "Fox," Billy said to me, "what—over there—beyond the stream? Old dog fox—old dog grandmother—couldn't see a hippopotamus all that way off." But I hollered like the devil—put 'em on to it—and we had the best run of the season, and killed in the open. You remember, my dear? I lost sight of you, I'm afraid, always forget the ladies in the hunting field—You wore a brown habit and hat—Your hair was so yellow under it that that old fool—forget his name—declared you'd dyed it. But I gave you a good run, eh? And I claimed my reward for it—jogging home in the dusk, eh? Lord, Sally, that was a day, wasn't it? Remember Billy's champagne at dinner after it? And you stood up on a chair to toast the best pair of eyes in the room—all in scarlet you were—and red roses in your gold hair, eh? Such a tiny little thing you had to get on a chair to be seen? Eh? I put you there—ha! ha! Seems to me," he peered at her uncertainly "you've grown taller lately——"

"I am Prudence, Evelyn."

"Prunes-and-Prisms—chap called you—knocked him

down for it—broke his beastly nose—Yes—eh, what? Prue, come closer—hush—don't you see? *It moved!*" He shrank back in his chair. "Hold my hand, Prue—perhaps it won't come if you hold my hand—funny thing why it should haunt me—liked the poor fellow—I'd have saved him if I could, but I'm such a feeble sort of fool nowadays—I couldn't move—I just sat there, and watched that long-nosed devil stab him to the heart—poor fellow—he went down without a sound, and the long-nosed devil buried him beneath the floor. Pity! nice young chap he was—I liked Ridgeway—always did—Don't draw your hand away, Prue! I'm frightened—hold my hand tight. That's better. It won't come up perhaps if you're here. Can't think what it wants——"

"Evelyn," she spoke clearly, though her lips were white, "Mr. Ridgeway is not dead."

"Ah, no one knows except me. He's as dead as a door nail—all except his right hand, poor fellow. Nice hand too—long brown hand—sort of hand knows how to handle a horse—What is it, Prue? Eh? Did you see it? Don't let go! Stay by me, Prue! Did you see it? Hold my hand tighter!"

She held his hand, but her eyes were anguished; despite her will a cry broke from her:

"I can't bear it!"

"Eh? All right, my dear, don't you be frightened. Nasty story, isn't it? We'll talk about something else. The weather, eh? Ha, ha!——"

In a few minutes he had dropped into a heavy sleep. She sat by him till she thought she could move without wakening him, then she drew her hand gently from his, and rose. She left the room and went to her own, and as she closed her door the heavy sobs she had been hold-

ing back, broke from her painfully : " long brown hand—nice hand——"

She stretched out her own hands in an agony of longing. One touch of his hand, and she would be able to go on again. . . . Without it—her hand clutched the pillow as she fought. . . .

Three weeks and a day—was that all? She could go on if she might just touch his hand once—that was it—just once. If she went to Elm Hill—to the Hall—she might meet him, and they would shake hands. Yes, but there would be others there—looking on. She couldn't bear it—and yet—to feel his hand round hers again—it would make her strong—lately she was so weak. She wanted him—he always helped her—if she could just touch his hand. . . .

She lay there fighting her loneliness—empty-handed. . . .

Lydia knocked on the door, giggling. " Master wants you, ma'am—least ways, I think he does," and in a burst it came : " He called me ' Prue,' begging your pardon, ma'am," and more giggles.

" I will come, Lydia."

In her mind a man's deep quiet voice :

" He is not capable of missing you now. You must know that. In a day he would have forgotten you, if he had a good nurse." Would he call the nurse " Prue " ? How queer it seemed. It hurt in a dim remote sort of way, only nothing seemed to matter much somehow lately ; it was probably because her head always ached now.

" Mother," Dickon met her in the corridor, " have you got *another* headache? I've only a little drop of eau de cologne left in the bottle. You do use up an awful lot, don't you? "

"I'm afraid I do, Dickon."

"You ought to get out into the air more, mother. That's what Madame de Pierre said."

"Did she? When, Dickon?"

She spoke coldly, striving to repress the rapid beating of her heart at the approach of a chance of hearing Ridgeway's name. Hitherto she had discouraged Dickon, with a painful effort of will, from talk of his visits to Elm Hill and the Hall. She had thought it right to do it, but now she was weak, and she sought means to make him mention the name she had shunned.

"Yesterday. She said it to Mr. Ridgeway. Renaud's pony likes apples better than sugar, mother."

"Yes?" She was looking down at him through blurred eyes. "Did you shake hands with Mr. Ridgeway?"

"I don't know. I forget. May I take the pony some of the apples in the orchard when they're ripe, mother?"

"What did Mr. Ridgeway say, Dickon?"

"Oh, he said the pony carries his head awfully well. May I take some of the apples in the orchard when they're ripe, mother?"

"But what did he say when Madame de Pierre said I ought to go out more?"

"He didn't say anything, he didn't notice, he was looking at the pony, you see. May I take some of the apples in——"

"Oh, take them all!" she said.

She turned back in a moment, and put her hand on his head.

"Poor little Dickon," she murmured tenderly.

"I don't think Renaud would like me to give him *too* many," he said regretfully.

"I expect he'll let you give him a good deal," she

said, and went on to Wingfield's room. The man Williams met her outside the door.

"He's sent me for some heavy weights to put down on the floor, ma'am, that fancy of his is troubling him a bit."

"I know, Williams, I can't send it away."

"Don't you worry, ma'am, it'll pass in time. I suppose the gentleman he thinks is murdered, couldn't be sent for? That 'ud quiet him better than anything. It's a Mr. Ridgeford, I think the name he mentioned was, but p'raps he's dead long ago. You can't tell with him." He added hastily: "Don't you take on, ma'am, it'll pass. I've known 'em like that lots of times, and it always passes."

She went on into the room, white-faced, her lips pressed together.

"Evelyn, can you remember how that song goes—you know—'Here's a health unto His Majesty, With a fa la la——'"

"I wonder you can sing, Prue," he said with solemnity. "That poor fellow surely was a friend of yours? And now he's dead. Well, well! And here am I, alive. Muscular chap, too, not an ounce of superfluous flesh about him. Ever notice his arm, Prue? When he turned up his sleeve that time—muscle there—no fat—did you ever notice it?"

"Yes, Evelyn."

"Poor fellow! And now he's dead. A pity!" He gave a sudden cry. "Don't move that magazine, Prue! Don't pick it up! I put it there. It's not a pretty sight, and girls always hate blood. We must have a new rug, my dear—can't get it out—it trickled there in a great pool—Ridgeway's blood, you know, poor chap——"

“Evelyn, Mr. Ridgeway is not dead. Do believe me.”

“How d’you know, eh? You can never be sure any one’s alive unless you’re with him. Death comes in a moment. I saw him die, poor young fellow. I daren’t tell the police in case they hang me for it. Sort of thing the law does, you know. Funny thing—the law—there was a man once—”

He rambled off into a long story, while she sat down trembling beneath the strain of hearing Ridgeway talked of like that. And in a few minutes it began again.

“Prue, come closer, the boards are heaving! His hand will come up soon. D’you think it wants to be killed? Tied to a dead body, you know,” he shivered, “deuced unpleasant thing! I suppose you couldn’t kill the poor thing? Good hand too—long, brown hand—d’you remember? Nice grip—remember that, eh? Prudence, d’you remember his grip? Eh? What? Do you remember it?”

“Yes,” her voice sounded faintly.

“What? Why do you mumble like that? Are you frightened? Don’t you get frightened, Milly, you poor little thing—I’ll look after you. He’s a brute—that chap, and you’re only a bit of a thing, after all—you’re hardly grown up yet, eh? Now, feel in my pockets, and see what you will find there. Now you’re laughing, you greedy child! You’re all the same, never knew the dimples fail to come over a bit of jewellery!”

“Evelyn, some of these need brightening, don’t you think?” She had fetched hastily his collection of jewelled snuff boxes. “How beautiful they are! Look how these diamonds gleam,” she held a box up anxiously, but he turned from it pettishly

"Put 'em away, Prue! They worry me. I feel rather tired this morning."

"I'll read to you, Evelyn."

"No; I don't want that."

She suggested every diversion of which she could think, but he turned from them all in weary distaste. Her pity and sense of helplessness was so great that for the first time since that day in the studio her thought turned to Ridgeway longingly, but quite selflessly. Evelyn needed him, she thought, and did not think of herself.

"I know what would do me good," Wingfield said, peering up at her wistfully? "What I need is a canter over the downs, my dear." He drew in a long breath. "D'you think if I rest very quietly here for another hour I might manage it? Just a short canter, Prue, eh? Just to feel her move under me again! Eh?"

"Not just yet, I think, Evelyn," she said pitifully.

"That's what you always say! You and the doctors between you would like to keep me in bed for the rest of my days!" His eyes sought the open window. "It's such a glorious day, Prue! Sun and breeze, eh? She'd get hot—good homely smell, that of hot horse—" he lifted his head, and his delicate nostrils expanded. "Lord, I feel better already! Tell Ferney to saddle the little mare, Prue! Ring for Williams. Where are my boots? I haven't lost my leg, eh? Look at the shape of that! Lord, I can feel the little mare under me, bless her!"

And then the weary recognition that he was too weak—too tired—

The mare outside, her coat gleaming in the sunshine, lifting her beautiful little head.

“ To-morrow, Ferney, eh ? Think I shall be able to manage it to-morrow ? ”

“ Oh, yes, my lord, sure thing to-morrow,” and his weather-beaten little face crinkled into lines of bitter disappointment. . . .

After that the old fear of the hand came back, and preyed on him more cruelly now that he was worn out with excitement and disappointment.

Dr. Fielding came in later to see him ; he eyed Prudence amazedly.

“ But why not send for Mr. Ridgeway ? ”

It was so simple. She stood by, while he gave his directions. He was distinctly and disapprovingly surprised.

“ He thinks Mr. Ridgeway is murdered. He will not listen to our assurances to the contrary. We must confront him with him, my dear lady. It should have been done before. The sight of him, alive and unhurt, will in all probability chase this phantom from his mind. We can at least try the experiment.”

So the experiment was tried, and she met Ridgeway again, while Dr. Fielding talked long-windedly about the case, and the possible effect on his patient’s mind of Ridgeway’s appearance.

She was waiting in the hall when he came ; she had conquered the instinct to put the meeting off to the last possible moment, and had come down to greet him.

They moved towards each other, shook hands, and then they went upstairs to Wingfield’s room. Prudence was chiefly conscious of a sense of disappointment in that she had not noticed his hand-shake. She had noticed and felt nothing clearly ; there had been a racing of pulses, a beating of heart, a singing in her ears,

and before her eyes a blurred figure. Then cold weariness, as if after a severe physical strain. . . .

To Ridgeway had come peace of a sort, for now his muscles were taut for battle. The hesitation, the doubt of the past weeks, which had made of them an agony on which he dared not dwell, had gone for ever. The wrestling for certainty was over now ; her face had told him plainly what would be for her good. He could no longer torment his soul with the question of whether winning her for his wife would bring pain or joy to her. He could fight now with every inch of heart and brain : it would be a hard fight, but that did not daunt him. For the moment he was almost exhilarated ; after his long weeks of nagging doubt and pain, to have his end clear before him, was almost joy. Looking down at Wingfield, who greeted him as he had always greeted him, and showed no surprise on seeing him, he felt no compunction in the thought of taking Prudence from him. Instead his healthy mind recoiled from the thought of her tied to this sick room, of her delicate youth passing in this atmosphere. He understood clearly enough how little she really meant to Wingfield now ; he knew that she would be forgotten, or remembered only as Milly and Sally and the rest of them were remembered. The thought darkened his face for the moment, but looking down on the weary, huddled figure his eyes softened. He sat down and prepared to do his best to cheer Wingfield, who was in a very depressed state and possessed by that lurking fear of his—the fear of dying in his bed.

Ridgeway talked cheerfully of Whyte-Melville, of his death in the saddle ; his father had known him well, and Ridgeway had several little stories to tell Wingfield. Prudence left the room directly he had settled

down to talk. She went to her own room, and in the hour she spent there succeeded in erecting, to a certain extent, the old cold refuge, so that when Ridgeway came down and found her in the hall, she spoke to him calmly.

“ Is Evelyn asleep ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I am glad.”

There was a pause.

“ Did you ride over ? ”

“ You saw me ride up,” he said, and looked straight at her.

“ Oh—yes—I,” she faltered, and he noticed with tenderness how her tongue refused to finish the sentence it had begun ; she could not bring herself to say she had forgotten.

“ Will you have some tea ? ” she said faintly.

“ I should like some,” he smiled at the dismay in her face. “ But you want me to go.”

“ Oh—no——”

“ Prudence, there has to be frankness between you and me,” he said gently, “ I want to come here as I used. May I ? ”

She was silent.

“ May I, Prudence ? ”

She lifted her eyes to his.

“ You know——” she whispered. “ I—I know so little——”

“ You trust me to decide if it would be wrong ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ After——”

“ Oh, yes ! ”

“ Thank you.”

She said tremulously :

“ I—I know—I mean I am afraid I may have—said
——that day——”

“ No, dear, don't worry over that.”

She broke out with a little cry :

“ There—that—it must not be——”

“ I'm sorry. It shan't be again. Forgive me this time, Prudence. Only I want you to understand that I haven't changed.”

“ You mean——”

“ That I love you ; that I want you for my wife. That I think you are being cruel to yourself, as well as to me, in refusing. Wait. But if I may come here, I will come as a friend—for the present. If you change——”

“ Ah, don't ! I can never change. Don't think of that.”

“ Well, I'm coming as I used. You don't feel I've done anything to forfeit your friendship ? ”

“ No : I only know that we see—that—in absolutely a different way——”

“ Very well ! That's settled.”

She looked up at him gravely, earnestly.

“ What is it ? ” he asked.

“ You, I want to find out—for you. Oh, don't you see ? My life is lived—settled—but you—no, no,” her voice deepened in passionate denial of him, “ you must not come here ! You must go away. At once. You must go out of my life—I am greedy—greedy for you—I want happiness for you—with all my heart and soul I want it——”

“ I shall never find it away from you, Prudence.”

“ Don't say it ! ” she moaned, and hid her face in her hands.

“ I should never have found it if I hadn't met you.

I have had such happiness that—" he stopped abruptly, clenching teeth and hands, then went on quietly :

" I refuse to go out of your life."

" If I ask you—if I *beg* you ? "

" Yes."

" Mark," she pleaded to him now wildly. " I ask you to go ! My life is a hard one—you are making it harder—now, won't you go ? "

" No, Prudence."

She looked at him hopelessly.

He turned suddenly and left her ; a few minutes later she heard his horse's hoofs leaving the stable yard. She went to the window, incredulous of its being Ridgeway : there was so much more to say—why had he gone ? She did not know that he had begun his long fight, and had feared to lose by the breaking down of the friendly calm he had succeeded, with difficulty, in building up.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT first it brought a wonderful peace to Prudence : the mere sight of him was strength-giving, the touch of his hand in greeting and farewell enough to help her to face her life. Her gentleness and sweetness with Wingfield brought to Ridgeway, looking on, an almost unbearable pain. He spoke of it roughly to her one day, hurt beyond the power to keep silence.

" I believe, after all, you're only half human," he said.

" How ? " she asked, startled.

He looked across to Wingfield, who had fallen asleep in his chair.

" Anyone human would have to grow more impatient, a bit irritable sometimes. But—trouble—with you makes you more saint-like than ever, if possible."

Her eyes followed his, and rested with an infinite pity on the heavy, grey face that in sleep looked so old and ill.

" You mean—with him ? " she said in a low voice. " Oh, Mark, it's because I realise now what life can be—and what he has missed. I pity him so that—that—" tears choked her voice, and she was silent.

Presently she said :

" He has never had a chance ; his mother was a frivolous, selfish woman who left him to his nurses, and his father—you have heard his stories of his boyhood. Mark," she lifted deep eyes to his, " that is what I have

to do—to give Dickon all the chances I can. For that I would give up my life ! ”

“ And leave me to struggle on as best I could,” the words broke from him involuntarily. He saw her give a little shiver, but she made no other sign. But it was the beginning of the gradual withdrawal of her peace. It began then with a passionate longing to make him happy, a rebellion that became fierce and cruel against the fate that had sent to him pain to bear. For herself it was different, so she put herself aside in those early days of her trouble ; she merely told herself that she was used to pain. But for him—to be able to do nothing ! To bring misery into his life, and to do nothing to help him ! One half of her brain began to think of what she might make his life if she became his wife, while the other fought the dream and denied its existence. She met him two or three times in a week, and their talk was of commonplaces ; she shunned the old interesting talks, feared to read poetry any more.

He asked her one day why she would not let Dickon have a pony. She told him simply that she could not afford to buy one, or to keep it. To his look of surprise she explained :

“ Evelyn has no money beyond the rent of his place in Kent : it is let to an American family. He has lost all his money—racing and—he was very generous—and extravagant——”

“ And when he dies ? ”

“ There will be nothing. Fawley Bridge will go to a cousin of his.”

“ And Dickon——”

“ There will be nothing for Dickon.”

She added slowly :

“ A year ago his uncle—Sir John Wingfield—wrote to

me. It was a nice letter. He asked me to forgive the question, but he wanted to know if—Dickon were a legitimate son. If so, he was going to make him his heir."

"What did you do?"

"I wrote and told him he was illegitimate."

"Good God! You poor child! Why couldn't the old fool find out without insulting you!"

"I suppose there was some muddle about Evelyn's first wife."

"Where is she? Do you mind——"

"No. In Paris, I think."

"Prudence, would it hurt you——"

"You want to know how I knew? It was one night—Evelyn had been away—he had gone suddenly—on business, he said. You see, he had heard something about his wife's being alive, but he said nothing till he had made sure. He came back unexpectedly—he looked dreadfully flushed and upset—he was still weak from his illness after his fall—and he just blurted it out—and fell on to a lounge. It was a stroke brought on by the shock of finding she wasn't dead."

Ridgeway wondered if he were insulting the sick man by the terrible suspicion that had crept into his mind.

"How had he come to be so sure she was dead?" he said.

"I don't know," she answered in a low voice. "I have never tried to find out."

Ridgeway rose and began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

"You will waken him," she whispered, with a glance at Wingfield, asleep, as he so often was now, in his chair.

"Do you never think of any one but him?" he cried

out, maddened, and he left the room and the house abruptly.

And then in the lonely despair that he had gone without shaking hands, began the long torture in which she was forced to recognise herself and her own bitter pain. It was a torture she did not understand, the torture of longing for his touch, with the memory of that minute when he had held her in his arms, always to be pushed away. . . . She did not understand the aching sense of desolation that held her in its cruel grip ; she told herself she had more than she had had for years ; she dwelt passionately on his friendship ; and her loneliness was so poignant that, holding Dickon close to her, she could not rid herself of the burden of it. She clung to Dickon, giving way to her passionate love of him, risking his spoiling in her strenuous need of him. At times when her nights became more than she could bear she crept to his bedside, and by the light of a shaded candle sat and watched his sleeping face. Once he woke and showed a new side of his developing character that brought joy to her. He woke suddenly, and displayed no fear, his thought leapt to her.

“ What’s the matter, mother ? Is it thieves ? ”

“ No, dear, no——”

“ What frightened you, mother ? Don’t you be frightened. I’m here, and I’ve got that hunting crop Ferney gave me——” he was groping beneath his pillow. “ That’d cut a man’s liver out,” he said proudly, fondling it.

She told him in her mind that he must not use such expressions, but aloud she said :

“ Would you fight for me, Dickon ? ”

He nodded.

"I've been practisin' crackin' a whip. I wish I could do it like Ferney."

She said hungrily :

"You want to do everything like Ferney !"

"I don't want to drink beer, and smoke like him," he added : "not yet."

Interested, she asked why.

"Ferney says it's only silly little boys who want to look grown-up who do that, and he says the real fine boys wouldn't do it for anything. That's what Ferney says, and damn too and bloomin', so I'm not to notice when he says them sometimes."

She began to perceive the possibilities in his companionship with the groom.

"He's a good man," she said thoughtfully.

A little shy look came into Dickon's face.

"I think I'll go to sleep now if you're not frightened, mother."

Her arms tightened about him.

"I'm never frightened when I'm with you, my darling," she whispered.

"Aren't you? But you didn't know I'd been practisin' with my crop, did you?"

"No, I didn't know that, Dickon. There, go to sleep, my dear one."

She sat on there, afraid to return to her room. Twice she rose and went to the door, and came back. She flung herself at last on her knees beside the bed, and spread out her arms over his body.

"My baby," she whispered, "fight for me—yes—and I will fight for you——"

She lifted her head and gazed into his sleeping face, and into her there crept anew the awe of motherhood, the realisation of her responsibility. It came upon her

as fresh as on the day of his birth ; the sense of what she owed this small soul she had brought into the world ; the deep determination to love and shield and help it. Only with it now there was the added responsibility that his namelessness gave her, the responsibility she had accepted on that night five years ago when Wingfield had come to her and told her that she was not his wife and that their child was illegitimate. She had accepted the burden then, had accepted her own interpretation of her duty, and had never shrunk. Was she to shrink now? The candlelight shone on the tears that wet her cheeks ; they were quiet tears, and when she rose and gently kissed him, her face was calm. She went back to her room and slept.

CHAPTER XXXV

ELIZABETH said to Muriel that perhaps after all it wasn't so very serious, and was annoyed when she did not receive support of her suggestion. She added crossly that of course it wasn't very easy to tell, especially with a man. "I wish," she said, "I lived in a book. It would all be so easy then. I should read his love for the heroine in his eyes, hear it in his voice, see it in his smile, whenever her blessed name was mentioned. As it is I can speak of Prudence till I'm red in the face, and Mark doesn't turn a hair! He shows a disinclination to discuss her, but that might indicate a mere sentimental respectful sort of affection for her. How can I tell whether it would be better to do nothing, and let it fizzle out, or win their hatred by my interference?"

"If it would fizzle out without your help, there's nothing much to worry about," Muriel observed.

Elizabeth said pathetically:

"Don't be unkind to me. I'm so worried I don't know what I'm saying. Heavens, how I wish I'd never been seized with a desire to rusticate! If I hadn't, I suppose Mark would be painting away with his dogs and his horse, and never a care in the world!"

"Those 'ifs' are always unanswerable: they're one of Hugh's pet abominations."

"I like them. I always rub them in, just as one sniffs at a bottle of smelling-salts till they excruciate

one's nose and eyes. I've got a whole stock of mental smelling-salts."

She added suddenly :

" Am I growing plain ? "

Muriel's face of surprised amusement satisfied her ; she went on :

" When I have that sort of qualm I always spring the question suddenly like that. Faces answer more truly than tongues sometimes. I once asked a man—a Frenchman—you know, they don't admire me very much—he had been sitting staring at me, and I knew I looked hideous. I had been crying because the boys were convalescent from measles, and worried so, and I said : " Am I growing ugly ? " His face of horror at having his thought put into words was lovely, and the stream of compliments that followed was distinctly piquant. I should think that poor man—Wingfield—had charming manners before he broke down."

" I've never seen him."

" No."

Elizabeth shivered a little.

" Has it ever struck you to wonder why Prudence always dresses so soberly—almost like a nurse ? "

" No. I suppose she likes that sort of thing."

" Oh, do you ? "

She added after a pause :

" I should think he hates it." She looked thoughtfully out over the tall pink hollyhocks she loved so well that she insisted on having her chair placed in the narrow little path in front of them. " It's incredible to me how she has gone through these years."

Muriel, from her chair a good many yards off behind the opposite bed on the lawn, replied :

" I know. It's incredible to me too."

The advent of three doubled up figures on the lawn, all peering between their legs, diverted Elizabeth's attention.

"Dearests, what are you doing? You will have apoplexy."

"Hush, Maman, we are scaring de wolves away!"

"Peter Pan!" she said, and smiled. "I'd choose that play if I might be given the option of having written any play on earth!"

"Shakespeare?"

"What has Shakespeare done to equal it? Or Pinero either?" She added: "I wonder what Prudence Wingfield would think of it?"

She stretched her arms wide.

"Why can't I think of some way to help them?"

"Isn't it because it's—well—too big a thing for outside help?"

"Isn't getting to Heaven a big thing? Yet every parson and every religious person in the world is anxious to help you on the way!"

"Yes," Muriel said. She added:

"Is that argument a good one for your cause?"

"I don't care. It's so big that I'm willing to risk anything. My little dabs and snaps can't hurt much in a pain like that. It's her coldness and reserve that makes it so difficult; she's so unapproachable—she chills even my impertinence."

"You want to try to persuade her to marry Mark Ridgeway?"

"Of course I do."

Muriel bent and pulled up a plantain from the lawn.

"You are sure he wants it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And she? How do you know she cares?"

“ I don't know, but I *feel* ! ”

“ I don't believe she'll ever leave her husband.”

“ He isn't her husband. It's her duty to leave him. He's ill, but he needs only good nurses now, while Mark needs a wife. She should put Mark first ; it's horrible to keep him waiting for the poor man to die——”

“ Oh, Elizabeth ! ”

“ Well, it's the truth. And he will live for years. They always do—except in books. That clever little man Sir William will keep him alive, when he'd be doing every one a service by gently letting him die. The age is all wrong. Don't look so squeamish, Muriel, it's old-fashioned.”

There was silence between them then, while on the distant lawn “ Peter Pan ” was being acted with an energy that resulted in many bruises and tumbles.

“ I wonder how many children that play has fired with the determination to fly ? ” Elizabeth said dreamily.

“ Oh, dear, I am terribly worried ! ”

Renaud flying past fell into the hollyhocks, and asked :

“ What is it den dat worries you, Maman ? ”

“ Your spoiling my pink hollyhocks, perhaps.”

“ No ; for see, I have hurt dem ver little. But I must know what it is dat worry you, Maman, for how else can I make all well ? ”

“ Fly away, chéri, I don't want to talk.”

In a series of leaps and bounds he flew away.

“ After all, they arranged your marriage,” Elizabeth said.

“ Yes,” Muriel said dreamily.

“ But this—no ! The other was distinctly booky, but this would be absurd. If they managed to have their banns called, Prudence would not marry him.”

“ Don't ! ” Muriel said sharply.

“But——” she sat up. “They’re very irresistible. Which do you think the most likely to soften her?”

“None of them.”

“Why not? André now—isn’t he adorable?”

“Exceedingly. Aren’t you rather insulting to her? Treating her as if she were an obstinate, sulky child——”

“André!” Elizabeth broke in calmly. “Come here.”

Muriel went on, a note of passion in her voice.

“We’ve no right to talk about it—to discuss it. It’s too big and terrible. It should be sacred, and for them only. No one else can help—no one even dare to decide what is best——”

“In other words it’s the correct and delicate thing to sit aloof with brimming eyes while they ruin their whole lives? Well, I prefer to be indelicate and dry my eyes, and rush in where more refined folk fear to tread.” She added more earnestly; “Don’t you see that I’ve got to try? If I hadn’t been seized with the idiotic fad of going into retreat—oh, I’ve got to try anyway!”

Muriel was silent.

“André!” Elizabeth called again. “Come here.”

André continued to tumble and rise, and beyond sending her a beaming smile, took no notice.

“André! Do you hear? Come here at once!”

André flopped to the ground and rose again. Elizabeth called upon Renaud and Armand to bring him to her. They ran, laughing, to him, and gesticulated around his body, pretending to catch his legs and his arms, but not really touching him.

“What little devils children can be,” Elizabeth said; she added more loudly:

“Wretches, you are making my head ache! André, come here!”

“ But how den is he to come, Maman ? ” cried Renaud, pausing at the word headache. “ See, he is but a cherub, and has a cherub legs ? Has he arms ? How den walk to you ? How den run to you ? ”

“ For can a head run and walk ? ” annotated Armand.

“ Why not fly ? ” Elizabeth said.

There was a pause of surprise—they had not thought of that. Then in a burst of laughter they all came hopping, and flung themselves upon Elizabeth and Muriel.

Half an hour later Elizabeth arrived at Cherry Cross with André. Prudence came to her in the hall, a hint of surprise in her face, for visits to Cherry Cross had been tacitly dropped lately.

“ You won’t come to me, so I’ve come to you,” Elizabeth said with a charming smile. “ André wanted to come too.”

“ Mais non, Maman, I did not ! I wish to play de cherub in de garden——”

“ Well, I wanted to bring you,” Elizabeth said, in no wise disturbed. “ May I stay a little ? ”

“ Of course,” Prudence said.

“ Mr. Wingfield—is he any better ? ”

“ Just about the same, thank you.”

A laugh sounded from above, a pleasant laugh it was, and yet there was a note of irresponsibility in it that somehow chilled Elizabeth. She glanced furtively at Prudence, who sat unmoved. During the next half hour they heard the laugh again and again, till Elizabeth, her nerves strained, heard herself speak of it, quite against her will.

“ He is in good spirits.”

“ Yes.”

Elizabeth, nervous, baffled, looked at the pale, cold

face, and felt a futile anger rise within her. She did a thing unworthy of her ; in the midst of raging thought for Mark, she spoke :

“ Mark Ridgeway is looking ill,” and then, ashamed, she turned her eyes from the face still bravely upheld, still with its steady regard, but whiter now, and in the eyes a look as if she had been wounded. . . .

“ Prudence, mayn't I help—some way ? ”

“ No, thank you.”

That was all. Almost absurd. . . . But final.

Unnoticed, André had slipped away, and up the stairs in search of Dickon. He came to a door that stood ajar, and he looked in. An old man sat in a chair, but André was not noticing him particularly ; there were more interesting things in the room than the old man, all sorts of things——

“ How-do-you-do ? ” said André, extending a polite hand.

“ Hulloo, where did you drop from, old chap ? I say, did you come up through the floor ? Funny thing, all sorts of people come up through the floor nowadays.”

André beamed delightedly.

“ Mais oui, Monsieur, I tum t'rough de floor. I spring up like a—what is it ? A jacky-box, n'est-ce-pas ? ”

“ Well, don't you tell 'em, that's all. They won't believe you. Awful fools, most people. You stay with me a bit, eh ? Eh, what ? Most of 'em just jump up, and down again. Ha, ha, ha ! Funny thing, isn't it ? Ha, ha, ha ! You'd hardly believe it, would you ? True though, a fact, I assure you—saw it myself—green and then red—and then a sort of queer blue, and the rain simply poured down in buckets full. Harry's face was

a thing to dream of—'twas, 'pon my soul 'twas—What's that, eh? Eh, what? What?"

"It is a ver strange alimal, Monsieur. I wish to know what it is." André had picked up a carved wooden snuff-box, and was examining the lid.

"That? Oh, that's a griffin, little one. See here, here's something that would suit you better. What d'you say to that, eh? That's a crop—a hunting crop—see the old fox's head, eh? Here's another—carved that myself when I was a youngster——"

"Dere's a old fox on dat box also!" cried André shrilly. "See, and anoder one! Ooh, de wicked old fox! Look, Monsieur, dat is not a fox—what is it den?"

"That's a badger——"

"Oh, but yes, now I know, Monsieur, may I den sit on your knee, and look at *all* de tings on de table?"

"Come along then. Up you get. There, how's that?"

"Oh, Monsieur, see, dere is yet *anoder* old fox—see, on dat long box! Ooh, de wicked old fox! If he was alive, would he come creepin' down in de night, and steal a lickle chicky bird?"

"Rather! Ever heard a fox bark?"

"Mais non, Monsieur."

"I've heard 'em many a time. There was an old fox—an old grey fox he was—used to come stealing up through the floor, along the lane at the side of the cottage—night after night he'd come—you'd hear him bark as you lay in bed——"

"Did you ever get out of bed and *see* him, Monsieur?"

"Wait a bit, my little man. There was one night—a moonlight night it was, and I couldn't sleep. Often couldn't sleep in those days—pair of blue eyes or brown eyes enough to keep me awake—smiling, tearful—one

way or another—see 'em on the walls now sometimes in a row—like pictures—and blest if I can remember who the eyes belong to! Ha, ha, ha! Curious thing, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha! But a fact, I assure you. Ha! ha, ha!—”

“Did de old fox tum along de lane on dat night, Monsieur?”

“Eh? Eh, what? What? Oh—yes—yes, he came along right enough—as pretty a mover as ever you saw! Lifted his feet like I don't know what, and the muscle rippling along his flank—Lord, it was a sight for the gods! And Ferney knew how to manage him, the little devil, he always had a way with 'em——”

“What did he *do*, Monsieur? Did he *kill* him?”

“Kill him? Rather not. I'd have killed *him* if he had! No, he rode him for all he was worth—I can see him now—he was only a boy then—saving him now—humouring him—nursing him—God, what days those were!” He broke off with a weary sigh, and sat, his head drooping, silent.

But André's eyes were glowing, his cheeks pink with excitement.

“Was it den a *pet* fox, Monsieur? Ooh, *I* would like to ride a pet fox. Monsieur, where is de fox now?”

“Eh? I don't know, I'm sure,” Wingfield said wearily.

André put his arms round his neck coaxingly.

“Try to tink, Monsieur, oh, do try to tink! For I wish to also ride a pet fox.”

“Fox? I never see or smell such a thing nowadays, old man—there aren't any more foxes for me—never will be. I'm done for——”

“Are you cryin', Monsieur? Poor, poor Monsieur! I tink dat grown-ups never cry. I cry sometimes when

I must not go out in de rain. Is it because you want to go out in de rain, Monsieur, dat you cry ? ”

“ Yes, my boy, that’s it.” Wingfield rested his cheek on André’s cropped head, and one or two tears trickled down into his hair. “ I want to go out in the rain and the sunshine and the breeze. I want to smell horse, and fox, and good brown earth. I want to ride till I’m stiff. I want to hang about—get drenched to the skin—chilled to the bone on a bad day. What’s the odds ? You take the bad with the good—else, where’s the sport ? I want to feel the wind whistling past my ears—God, I want to be a man for a few minutes, instead of a feeble dotard ! ”

“ Poor, poor Monsieur,” crooned André, in his soft little deep voice. “ But I will find de pet fox for you, Monsieur, I will look and look——”

“ Nice little chap—eh, what ? Sleepy, eh ? ”

André’s head was rolling helplessly to Wingfield’s shoulder.

“ I will—find—de pet fox—poor—poor——”

Prudence coming up a few minutes later found Wingfield sitting staring out before him, and in his arms, held very carefully, André, fast asleep. “ H-hush ! ” he whispered. “ Poor little beggar’s dead tired—I took him a bit too far this morning, but he sat his pony like a little Briton——. Don’t wake him ! ”

Prudence went back to Elizabeth waiting in the hall.

“ André isn’t with Dickon—he’s asleep—on Evelyn’s knee——”

“ I can wait,” Elizabeth said gently.

CHAPTER XXXVI

'**T**HAT youngest boy of ours," Wingfield said, "is worth a dozen of the other."

A look of pain crossed Prudence's face.

"Funny thing, the way you've hidden him away, Prudence—low down sort of thing to do——"

"Evelyn, he is little André du Pierre—Madame du Pierre's youngest boy."

"You've told me that a dozen times already. Who else should he be? D'you think I'm deaf, or what, eh? I remember her—tried to get up a flirtation with me, ha, ha, ha! But I'm too old a hand to be caught that way. Women all used to want to flirt with me—must confess I was usually quite willing to oblige 'em. Funny thing, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha! But a fact, I assure you. Ha, ha, ha! All as jealous as cats over me. Don't know why. You're jealous—oh, yes, you are, my cold princess! D'you think I don't know why you've kept that youngest boy of ours out of my way? Oh, I know well enough—I'm not a fool, although I'm more than half dead. You're jealous of him, because he's like me, and you knew I'd take to him. Ha, ha, ha! I can still use my sick brains, can't I? But it was a low down sort of thing to do, Prudence. I haven't too much to amuse me nowadays, and he's a jolly little chap with his talk of foxes, and not afraid of me as the other is. It's a queer thing, but I've seen it before, it's a sort of purple, then blue and then a curious shade of green—funny thing,

isn't it? Ha, ha, ha! But a fact, I assure you. Where's the boy now?"

"He's gone out, Evelyn."

"Lucky little devil! Lord, what an existence I lead. Nothing to do, and no one to amuse or interest me——"

"Let me read to you, will you?"

"Buzz, buzz, buzz—that's how you read—just like a bluebottle on a window pane. Makes my head go round, and I see the inside of it. That chap—what's his name?—Ridgeway—he des'n't come near me lately—offended him somehow, I suppose, or he finds it pretty dull. Why don't you wear pretty frocks, eh? Always the same. Silly thing to do—you're wearing my affection pretty thin, you know—I've warned you often enough—'t isn't my fault—I've told you how I'm affected by laces and frills and that sort of thing—it'd warm my heart to you to see you dressed decently in circles and squares and dots—that's it—first, circles, then squares, then dots—millions of dots—the dots dance about in the circles and squares—they keep on and on—black dots—curious thing, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha! But a fact, I assure you, ha, ha, ha! Why don't you read to me? You neglect me shamefully, Milly! I'd never have thought it of you, with your melting blue eyes, and that little rosebud mouth. Read Jorrock's Lectors to me—that part about that run—on page eighty-four—the bit about Bill Johnson."

Prudence fetched the book and sat down; she turned to page eighty-four, and glanced down it.

"Do you mean here—'Now we are away! The cover's wacated, and there's not another within four miles——'"

"No, no! It's page ninety-nine I want."

"This?—'Well, now,' continued Mr. Jorrock's, returning, rubbing his lips——'"

“No, no, no! Confound it, is that a run? Don't you know what a run is yet? Page seventy-three.”

She turned to page seventy-three.

“I don't see anything about a run—

“My mistake. Page eighty-nine.”

She turned the leaves, and began to read again.

“Wrong! That's not what I want. Let me see—page 107. That's it. I remember now. That's where Bill Johnson comes in.”

She turned to 107; it was wrong again; for an hour she went on turning and reading bits aloud to him. Her hand shook as she turned the leaves; the room was hot, the sun streamed in at the windows, little pulses throbbed in her head; a curious sensation of faintness was creeping over her; the strain of keeping herself in control was almost too much for her strength, and then he burst out laughing. He lay back in his chair and roared.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha! Never saw anything so funny in my life! It's a wild goose chase, my dear! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, Lord, I shall die with laughing. To see you there, turning and reading and searching for a thing that's not in the book at all! It was my little joke—ha, ha, ha! Bill Johnson was a figment of my own brain. Lord, you're too funny for anything!”

She put the book down quietly and rose.

“Where are you going? Eh, what? What? Ha, ha, ha, ha! To see you sitting there patiently turning the pages!—”

Prudence went out of the room; in the corridor she met Ridgeway. She put out her hands, and he took them into his; they were ice cold. Her white lips moved.

“I am afraid,” they muttered.

"Afraid of what, Prudence?"

"Myself. My temper," her eyes dilated; she shivered. "I—I think I must be going mad," she whispered.

"You are worn out. Tell me what is wrong, Prudence."

She glanced back fearfully at the door of Wingfield's room.

"I—nearly lost my temper with—him."

"Is that all? Good God, child, the marvel is that you haven't done it years ago!"

"No, no! It's horrible—hideous—to lose my temper with him! It's never happened before. He has taken to—to playing jokes lately, and I nearly lost my temper just now! I think I must be going mad."

"I should think it's a sign of sanity," Ridgeway said roughly.

She looked at him with incredulous, hurt eyes.

"To be angry with *him*? When he doesn't know—doesn't understand——"

"You're quick enough to be angry with me, Prudence!" It broke out, childish, fiercely jealous; it was beyond his power to keep it back, though he was ashamed even as he spoke.

"With you? Angry?" She lifted a startled face to him.

"Yes—that day—when I asked you to be my wife," he said grimly, and waited, fiercely glad that he had at least broken through the difficult surface friendliness of these last weeks.

"Oh—that—" she said, in a low voice, and drew back from him, and away along the corridor.

He sent a little bitter laugh after her; and in her room it beat at her ears, tormenting her, hurting her. She wrote:

“ Mark, will you go away ? I beg you to go. I believe in your heart you have a mad hope still. It is mad. I can never change. It’s all wrong. Mark, won’t you be kind and go ? ”

She slipped with it down the stairs, to lay it in his hat in the hall, and found him there. She stopped with a little cry, then turned to go up again, but he was across the hall, and had caught her, holding her by her arms.

“ What’s that in your hand ? ”

“ Let me go—I—want to go back to Evelyn——”

“ What have you in your hand, Prudence ? ”

“ Nothing—only—a—a note——”

“ For me ? Was it for me ? ”

“ I’m going to burn it. Let me go, Mark. I must go back——”

“ Was the note for me ? ”

“ Yes.”

He opened her hand, and took the crumpled envelope from her.

“ Will you stay here if I let go, Prudence ? ”

“ Yes,” she said faintly.

He took his hand from her arm, and moved away a step or two. She watched him as he smoothed the envelope, tore it open, and took out the sheet of paper within it. He unfolded it ; and suddenly Prudence turned and ran up the stairs. Ridgeway swung round, and took a step towards the staircase, then he stood still, and slowly turned to the letter in his hand. He read it through, and went to the open door with it, and stood there looking out ; it was an instinct with him always to go to the open air for thought. Every now and then he looked down again at the letter he held in a characteristically strong grip. Gradually, as he thought

the frown on his forehead gave place to a more serene expression ; at the last an expression that was almost a gentle smile touched his lips. This was when he reached the conclusion—jerkily :—“ She has never in her life before broken her word. . . . She promised not to go away. . . . She’s afraid. . . . Wouldn’t she trust herself ? ” . . . He lifted his head, involuntarily looking up at the skies, as his soul was uplifted with hope and resolution.

When Dickon came into the hall he greeted him cheerfully, looking upon him thoughtfully.

“ Like to go to school, Dick ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Now ? ”

“ No.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ I want a year to train in.”

“ Train ? How ? ”

“ Muscles, and to use my fists.”

He nodded, well pleased.

“ You’re too young for school yet, anyway ; one’s apt to forget quite how young you are.”

“ That’s because I’m a bit old-fashioned,” Dickon said gravely. “ It’s livin’ with only one person, and she’s a lady, you see.”

“ Oh, indeed. And who told you that ? ”

“ Ferney.”

Ridgeway smiled.

“ Made up your mind what you want to be when you’re grown up ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Mind telling me ? ”

“ An M.F.H.”

“ Rather expensive, isn’t it ? ”

“ I’ll be whip first, and earn some money, you see.”

“ I see : you’ve planned it all.”

“ Me and Ferney has.”

It was a curious thing that Dickon never showed his usual reserve with Ridgeway : in a quiet, unemotional way they were good friends.

Ridgeway now, with the new hope trembling at his heart, stretched out his hand, and stroked Dickon’s head. Dickon jerked it away. Ridgeway said with an uncomfortable laugh :

“ Don’t like it, eh ? ”

“ I don’t mind, if you want to do it,” Dickon said, and Ridgeway laughed again.

“ Oh, that’s all right. Now, will you give your mother a message for me, Dick ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Tell her my answer is ‘ No.’ Just that, ‘ No.’ ”

Dickon turned to the stairs, and Ridgeway went away.

He came again the next morning, but did not see Prudence. He found Wingfield peevish, and with a grievance. “ I was in the middle of a most interesting description of a run, and Prudence suddenly rose and left the room. They’re all the same at bottom—take no real interest in anything worth being interested in. Curious thing, but a fact, I assure you. And no sense of humour, don’t you know. No woman has a sense of humour. Now this morning I played a joke on Prudence—very good joke—I began to groan and moan—I said I’d got a pain in my chest. I asked her to rub it. She got the stuff and rubbed and rubbed, and every time she stopped I said the pain came back, and she went on again. Lord, it was the funniest thing you ever saw in your life—there she was, rubbing my chest with

that filthy stuff, and first her face got red—with the exertion, you know—and then it got pale, and she was so grave—ha, ha, ha, funniest thing you ever saw in your life, my boy ! ”

Ridgeway walked across the room before he spoke then he said quietly : “ You mustn’t do that sort of thing, you know ; it’s not playing the game.”

“ Eh, what ? What ? She didn’t laugh a bit, when I told her the joke. She just put the stuff away, and buttoned up my shirt. No sense of humour, you know, none of ’em ! ”

“ If you do that sort of thing, you’ll wear her out—make her ill. Do you understand ? ”

“ Of course I understand. D’you think I’m a blessed imbecile ? Make her ill ? Not a bit of it. She doesn’t mind, so long as she’s near me. And it’s a queer thing, but the outer rim is blue—a bright blue—and a red ball in the middle and green dots. Fact, I assure you.”

Ridgeway looked down at him hopelessly : he realised the uselessness of trying to reach the poor intelligence, and make him understand what he was doing with this new sense of humour that he had developed lately. But standing there, in the room, hot, as Wingfield liked it, his eyes passed from the sick heavy face to the brilliant blue skies outside, and his heart and will gained fresh strength and assurance that he was not acting unworthily to this madman in using all his powers to take Prudence from him. He knew that many sentimental folk, knowing that he came there as Wingfield’s friend to sit with him and cheer him, on hearing of his purpose, would exclaim with horror at his treachery and cruelty. He knew clearly enough the stock phrases they would use, but he did not care ; he held that he was justified ; he knew that, had he no love for Prudence, he would

still strive to induce her to live her life away now from the man to whom she had sacrificed so many years.

A silence had fallen upon the room ; Wingfield was sitting, as he so often sat, looking up at the portrait of Mirth, and a curious feeling and thought came into Ridgeway's mind. Looking at the breadth of Wingfield's brow, into the pathetic, bleared eyes, he said half aloud :

" If you could know—with the best part of you—you would wish me to take her away."

CHAPTER XXXVII

PRUDENCE sought Muriel one day. She came to her, white, breathless, on the verge of a breakdown.

Muriel took her up to her room. "Tell me, dear. Let yourself go."

Prudence began to walk swiftly up and down the room. "I don't know how it is," she said at last, in a low, quick voice. "I got frightened—I felt as if something were giving way—I daren't be alone," she turned brilliant, feverish eyes on Muriel. "I saw your face suddenly," she said.

Muriel went to her, and put her arms about her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she sobbed.

But Prudence drew herself away, and went on walking up and down the room.

"I think I'm not very well," she said. "I think I could have borne it better another time. It's very hot, isn't it?"

"Yes, very hot," Muriel said gently, and going to her drew out her hatpins, and removed her hat. She did not know how to help Prudence to break through the reserve that even now was choking back the words that ached at her throat. Her own tears blurred her eyes and worried her, but she did not know how to make Prudence cry.

Suddenly words broke from the pale lips, broke passionately.

"Don't they ever think forward at all? Is that it?"

The wicked, cruel fools one hears of—reads of! Is it true? *Can* it be true? They *choose* it! Choose to have their children nameless! Oh, I—I feel as if my brain is going——”

Muriel stood silent in the pause, afraid to move or speak, lest she check the flow of words.

“They talk grandly of not needing chains! They object to marriage as a degrading tie. Fools! They don’t consult the children who will have no names—who will grow up to hear their parents spoken of lightly. Who will have to bear the burden of their namelessness all their lives——after their parents are dead and forgotten—the man and woman who soared above the need of chains, and dragged their children down! *Are* there such people in the world?”

“Yes. But you—magnify the awfulness of it, Prudence——”

“Do I? Do you remember once when I asked you if you would give your daughter to Dickon? . . . I have been thinking of those people ever since she came—Wouldn’t they care if a woman came, and offered to take their children off their hands? Wouldn’t they mind the awful insult? The hideous hurt——” suddenly she wrung her hands, while her face was distorted with pain. “But they wouldn’t feel that—the doubt—that’s what tortures and burns and hurts—the doubt——”

“What doubt, Prudence? Can’t you tell me?”

“The doubt,” her voice sank to a whisper, “whether it would not be the best for him. To give him up—to her——”

“Never!” Muriel’s voice rang out now clear and firm. “You are wrong to doubt, Prudence! You only doubt because you are ill and worn out. His

place—the only place for him—is with you—always—always——”

Prudence's shoulders drooped, her whole body slackened.

“But she would give him her name. She is a cousin of Evelyn's—very rich—she would adopt him—He is very young—he would soon forget——”

Muriel answered at once the wistful questioning note in the last sentences.

“Dickon is not the sort to forget. He would never forget. He would pine for you. His love for you is singularly deep for a child. His reserve hides it, but I have found it out. It would be a sin to let her have him.”

She saw tears blurring the feverish brightness of Prudence's eyes.

“But—she has a beautiful home—he would have horses—She would tell him, after a while, that his parents were dead. No one would know his story.”

“He needs you, and only you.”

It came then—the breakdown—Muriel sat beside her, touching her now and again, not soothing her with words, quite silent.

A murmur or two from Prudence, caught back before finished—that was all. She said no more.

Even now she was inarticulate: she could bare heart and soul to no one but Ridgeway.

When she went back to Cherry Cross she found him there: they came face to face in the hall: it was the first time they had met since that day she had broken her word to him. She lifted grave eyes to his—eyes set in purple shadows, blurred with weeping.

“Mark,” she said quietly. “I want to ask you again to go away.”

His face paled ; he was conscious again of that terrible feeling of being pushed away ; he felt that she was erecting the wall once more. Her face was white and composed, her dim eyes steady as they looked into his.

“ Come in here,” he said, and turned to the drawing-room, holding the door for her.

She went in, and turned and faced him. “ Will you go ? ” she said.

“ No.”

She was silent awhile ; then she spoke in a low voice :

“ Mark, I *know* I can never change. You will not accept that. It is the truth. I cannot make you *see*. Can't you believe I know ? I am not a young, inexperienced girl. I know what it means. I know what it all means—either way. I know what I shall have to face—to bear, and you—Mark, if you won't go for your own sake, won't you go for mine ? ” Her voice broke, she stretched out imploring hands to him. “ For mine, Mark ! We cannot go on like this—it is wrong—wrong for you. It is taking your life—dragging it into the shadow of mine. I cannot bear it—not that. . . . ”

He was silent, his hands gripping hers, his haggard eyes on her face.

“ Don't you understand what it is to bring sorrow—only bitter pain—to the one you love best in all the world ? ”

She said it simply, beautifully. . . . He dropped her hands, and hid his face. . . .

“ Let me think,” he whispered hoarsely.

She waited, resting her hand on the table, leaning heavily. . . . She was very tired.

He said presently :

“ It is joy to serve you—you forget that.”

Her face was flooded for a moment with a wonderful light.

"Give me the joy of sacrifice," she breathed, "and let me send you out of my life."

He caught hungrily at the word sacrifice.

"It would mean that to you—I—count for something—I help you——"

"I don't know," she said.

"Prudence, let me stay! You think it's wrong for me because I've been such a brute to you lately—an irritable brute—Child, you've got to believe me now. It is my great joy to be near you, even though I may not touch you. To be there, in case of need. My greatest honour to know that you would let me serve you. Send me away—what am I? My body in one place—mind, heart, soul here—tormented with the thought of the distance between us——" Suddenly his voice broke, he cried roughly: "I can't go, Prudence!" and stood silent.

When she spoke again it was about another thing.

"Mark," she said in a low voice, "I am afraid of myself—with Evelyn. All these years I have had patience with him, and now—oh, I am ashamed! Ashamed! This morning I nearly slammed a book down on to the table—oh, it was a joke he had been playing on me! But he doesn't know, and I—what have I sunk to? To find it difficult not to lose patience—Is this what our love has done? Isn't it a beautiful thing, after all? Or does it drag one down——"

"Don't say that, Prudence. You mustn't say that. Oh, my child, it's simple enough," he smiled sadly. "You're alive now—for good or ill you're alive. Love is human—warm—every pulse and nerve is alive—awakened—that's how love can drag down or uplift more

than any passion on earth. You were dead before—you had deliberately killed yourself—numbed yourself—to enable you to bear your life. You can never do that again. You've got to live every moment now—face it all alive—terribly alive." He added wearily: "Is that all I am to give you?"

"But at first—after—it all seemed easier. I felt lifted up—above everything but that one thing——"

"I suppose that was the first exaltation, Prudence—it couldn't last—it's not like that——"

The terrible sadness of his voice hurt her so that for a minute she could not speak. Then she lifted her head, and looked into his eyes bravely, steadfastly.

"Still, for myself, I thank God for it," she said.

"Thank Him for me, too, Prudence."

They stood a minute, looking into each other's souls.

"The pain—the longing—your sorrow—I accept them all," she whispered.

"I too," he said.

Then she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

“**P**RUDENCE, I must really insist on having that youngest boy of ours brought to me. I must really insist.”

“He is out just now, Evelyn.”

“He is always out when I want him. Curious thing. Is he walking?”

“Yes.”

“Tiresome! I want to take him for a ride this evening. Too hot for the little chap till then. I hope he won't over-tire himself with all this walking. Stupid exercise—walking—what is it? One foot in front of the other, over and over again! Absurd, on the face of it. How confoundedly hot it is! I'm as dry as my great-grandfather. Whiskey and soda! Lord, what I'd give for a good drink! Don't offer me any of your damned lemonades and things! When a man asks for a drink it makes him see red to be offered any of that filthy sort of stuff. Many men would throw something at your head for it, but I could never hurt a woman. Prudence, don't you think I might have just a *taste* of whiskey? Just enough to moisten my throat, eh? It's full of dust—beastly dust that car sent in at the window a few minutes ago——”

Pitiful attempts on her part followed, attempts to make him forget his thirst: this was one of the hardest things she had to face now.

“Prue, you're different lately somehow.”

She turned startled eyes to him to meet an unexpectedly sane look.

“ Am I bad-tempered, Evelyn ? ” she asked faintly.

“ No. But you’re different—you’re not quite so icy somehow, don’t you know. You look *almost* cross with me at times, my lady, not quite—and then you look kinder somehow—oh, I prefer it myself ! But you’re different somehow.”

So even he had noticed it ? Even he could feel it. She had not thought him capable of that. She looked down at him—he was so pitiably shrunk lately—and that glorious figure who had come clinking to her help seven years ago flashed into her mind. She gave a little pitying cry, and went and knelt beside his chair.

“ Have I failed you all these years, Evelyn ? ” she whispered remorsefully, bowing her head on the arm of his chair.

“ Don’t cry, my dear ! You’re a good little girl—don’t cry, Milly—I always hated to see a woman cry.” He lifted a feeble hand and patted her hair. She knelt there—quite still—letting him touch her hair—as Milly’s hair—feeling painfully that somehow perhaps she was expiating failure. . . .

“ Beautiful hair you’ve got, Milly—it’s growing darker though. All the same to me—rather prefer ’em dark, really. Where’s my buttonhole, eh, you minx ? Forgotten it, have you ? Run and get me one at once. Run along, and a beauty, mind you, or I’ll exact toll.”

She rose and moved to the door.

“ Read to me, Prue, I’m sick of doing nothing. I think if I sit quiet for a bit I might manage a gentle canter later on, eh ? I must go round to the stables presently. You might give me a few lumps of sugar now will you ? ”

She fetched three lumps and laid them on the table.

"I mustn't forget 'em—that little mare'll shove me over if I go to her with empty pockets—I'm not so strong on my pins as I was, you know. She's very quiet this morning—I don't seem to hear her, or Ferney either."

"The wind's gone round to the west," Prudence said gently.

"I can generally hear 'em, all the same," he said wistfully.

"I must go and order lunch," she said, going to the door. "I won't be a minute, Evelyn."

She left him sitting there, his hand up behind his left ear, listening. She went down to Ferney.

"Ferney, will you make more noise? Clink a pail, and that sort of thing: your master can't hear you this morning."

"All right, m'lady. Is his lordship any better?"

"About the same, Ferney."

"It's the 14th, m'lady, this day ten years ago we set out with that team o' greys—London to Brighton—there was a crowd a mile long to cheer us, and 'is lordship—I never see 'im look better nor 'andle the reins prettier—the off leader was a bit of a devil—'ot as 'ell, beggin' your pardon, m'lady—and to see 'im a-handlin' of 'er! Pretty a sight as ever you saw in your life—I s'pose 'is lordship won't be coming round to the stables to-day, m'lady?" he added wistfully.

"I'm afraid not, Ferney, he is very weak."

"Very well, m'lady, I'll make a bit of a noise."

He touched his forehead, and picked up a pail.

When Prudence re-entered Wingfield's room he greeted her with a childish pleased:

"Confound that fellow, d'you hear the fearful din

he's making out there? I shall have to speak to him. I can't have that sort of row going on. Hulloo, hear that, Prue? Ha, ha, ha, the little mare's restless this morning. She'll give me a good ride later on—I like 'em fresh. I think I'll try to get a nap now—I want to feel as fit as I can for my ride. Lord, how I'm looking forward to that ride, Prue! Feel like a boy off to his first meet! Damn that Ferney, that's the third time he's dropped that pail! The chap must be drunk! Have to speak to him——” he fell into an uneasy sleep.

Prudence rang for Williams to sit with him, and went to her own room. She sat wearily in a chair for a minute, then frowning, rose and went downstairs. A glove of Ridgeway's lay on a table in the hall, she stood before it, staring at it; it was an old glove, worn to the shape of his hand—his left hand—a driving glove—there were the places where the reins had rubbed. . . .

She turned away, not touching it, fighting the longing to touch it. Tears smarted in her eyes; she dashed them away angrily, whipped herself with cruel words—“maudlin—weak—ridiculous”; and a great aching loneliness dragged at her heart. . . .

“Dickon!” she called.

“Master Dick's not come back, ma'am,” Lydia called from the kitchen. She had forgotten he had gone to Elm Hill. Well, she must do some work, idleness was notoriously bad for morbidity. So she thought, shutting her lips tightly.

She worked on a pair of pyjamas she was making for Dickon; her fingers worked rapidly, but her mind went quicker—racing on and on—terribly busy on the tiring task of crowding out certain thoughts by keeping it full of other thoughts. . . . It was very tiring. . . .

Williams came to fetch her.

“ I’m sorry, ma’am, but he keeps asking for you, and he’s getting so irritable,” he said, with a pitying glance at her face.

“ Very well, Williams.”

She rose, putting aside her work. The man coughed behind a deprecating hand.

“ I think, if you’ll excuse me, ma’am, it’d take a lot of the work off of you, if you had a nurse—a female nurse, I mean, ma’am.”

She glanced at him quickly.

“ Don’t you think he’d call for me then, Williams ? ”

“ Maybe he would, and maybe he wouldn’t, ma’am, but with him as he is, one female’s very much the same as another, if you’ll excuse me, and he wouldn’t put on a nurse as much as he does on you, ma’am, I don’t expect. They never do.”

“ I like to do it myself, Williams,” she said gently and went upstairs to Wingfield.

He was very peevish and exacting all that day ; he swore at her when she could not do what he wanted, played his horrible jokes on her till she felt as if her brain were giving way ; she never knew, from minute to minute, if he were serious or indulging in his peculiar sense of humour. He fell into a form of reminiscence from which she had always shrunk, and insisted on replies to his questions, with that curious shrewdness he sometimes displayed, forcing her thus to listen to his stories. Towards evening he began to joke about Ridgeway, wonder if he were very deep, chuckling, vowing he never trusted those quiet fellows, suggesting that once he were roused, he’d be the very devil.

“ Dangerous fellow—devilish dangerous. I declare if it wasn’t that you’re such a dowdy nowadays, Prue, I wouldn’t have him here so much ! I declare I’d be

jealous! He's a well-made young fellow—ugly—but women don't mind that. But no one would notice you nowadays—never saw a girl go off as you have. 'Pon my soul, I begin to wonder where my taste was, when I fell in love with you. Rather hard on a chap, isn't it? I think you'd better get me a pretty nurse, eh? Eh, what? Only not red hair—can't stand red hair. Blue circles—red dots—and a green mist. Curious thing, isn't it? Ha, ha, ha! But a fact, I assure you!"

By the evening she was worn out; she went downstairs when she heard Ridgeway arrive.

"He is very difficult to-day," she said, and burst into tears.

He led her into the drawing-room, and drew her to him tenderly.

"Cry then, little one," he whispered. She buried her face in his shoulder, her hands clinging to him; but in a minute she had drawn away, and turned from him. He began to speak, but she turned her white tear-stained face to him, and her eyes were dark with a frightened beseeching.

"Mark," she whispered hoarsely. "I am so tired—I feel so weak—help me—don't—oh, I cannot bear it!"

Her voice broke into a heartbroken cry, and she hid her face in her hands. He stood a minute, his hands clenched, fighting the love that clamoured that now was his time. . . . Beads of sweat stood on his forehead. . . . She looked so helpless—she was afraid of him. . . . Was he to show himself a brute?

"Help me, Mark——"

He turned and left the room. He went out into the evening dusk, and walked up and down, the scent of mignonette sickening him. . . .

Then he came back and went up to Wingfield.

When he left, an hour later, he went into the drawing-room to fetch the rain-coat he had dropped there when he led Prudence in.

The room glimmered with a light that was partly the dusk of a day not yet quite dead, and partly the shimmer of the harvest moon. Near the window Prudence lay asleep in a chair, her arms on a table, her head prone. He drew near softly. . . . Her arms held his coat close, and her wet cheek was pressed into the folds. . . .

He answered the white appeal of her face.

He went away without awakening her.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WINGFIELD continued to ask for André, and Ridgeway told Elizabeth. Elizabeth said :

“ André, would you like to go and see Mr. Wingfield again ? ”

“ But yes, Maman, for I wish to ride de pet fox, and I cannot find him—but no—and I tink perhaps de sick Monsieur will tell me where de poor pet fox used to go to bed, and den I will find him. May I den go now, Maman ? ”

Elizabeth picked him up in her arms and held him close.

“ May I den go now ? ”

“ You’re very precious, mon chéri. I don’t know that I can spare you. And it isn’t he I want to soften, poor man——”

“ May I den go now ? ”

“ But he’s very sick, and you’re a love, so I suppose it will have to be.”

“ May I den go now ? ”

“ You like this Monsieur, André ? ”

“ Oh, but yes, Maman, for he has de lickle toy boxes wif de foxes on dem, and he rides a pet fox, and he is sad because he mustn’t go out in de rain—may I den go now ? ”

“ Yes, sweet.”

He slipped to the floor, and trotted off to Louise.

Wingfield was pleased to see him, and André was vastly

amused because he called him Dick ; he rather liked the name of Dick, for was it not " ver' Engleese ? "

" You've improved, Dick ; you don't stare so much as you used to do. We'll go for a little ride together later on, shall we ? "

" Oooh, and look for de pet fox ? "

" Ha, ha, ha, ha ! Good ! You're a chip of the old block ! Want to hunt already, do you ? You're my son after all, in spite of your mother's coddling. Prudence, you may leave us together."

" In a minute, Evelyn ; I want just to finish dusting these books."

" Monsieur, I wish to know where de pet fox goed to bed. Did he sleep in de wood ? "

" Oh, yes, in an earth, don't you know. Never smelt fox yet ? Lord, I must see about that. I'll take you down to the far copse this evening, old man, and you'll get a good whiff of him, I'll lay a wager. Green dots, or blue circles, what does it matter, eh ? Curious thing, but a fact, I assure you——"

" Monsieur, I wish to sit on your lap, and play wif de toy boxes," he clambered up as he spoke.

Prudence, looking on, felt a bitter pang of jealousy on Dickon's behalf ; for the moment she almost hated André's beaming face and broken chatter. She found it so difficult to bear calmly that she left the room, and sent Williams in her stead. She went to Dickon herself, and followed him even when he went to keep an important appointment with Ferney in the harness-room.

Williams went quietly upstairs and into Wingfield's bedroom ; not interrupting the talk going on in the other room he unostentatiously opened the door between the two rooms, and sat down with his morning's paper.

“ Oooh, it’s a dolly, n’est-ce pas ? ” chuckled André, clutching at a bronze Indian idol.

“ Ha, ha, ha ! Very good—very good indeed ! You’re a wit, young man, eh ? Used to be a bit of a wit myself once, but nowadays—what are you doing, eh ? ”

“ Hush ! I’se puttin’ her to sleep—she’s a lickle heathen dolly. You sing her to sleep while I rock her, Monsieur.”

“ Eh, what ? Sing ? ”

“ But yes, Monsieur, at once ! For if I sing I cannot say hush, you see. Commencz, Monsieur ! ”

“ Eh, what ? What shall I sing, eh ? Sing—used to sing a lot once——”

“ Sing now, Monsieur ! ”

“ Here goes then——

‘ D’ye ken John Peel with his coat so gay,
D’ye ken John Peel at the break of the day,
D’ye ken John Peel when he’s far, far away,
With his hounds and his horn in the morning ? ”

“ Is dat a lullelby, Monsieur ? ” came in a doubtful tone from the midst of energetic “ hush’s.”

Unheeding, the voice, pathetic with a weak and husky echo of a bye-gone sweetness and strength, went on to the chorus :

“ ‘ For the sound of his horn brought me from my bed,
And the cry of his hounds, which he oft-times led ;
Peel’s view hal-loo——’ ”

“ Monsieur ! Taisez-vous ! Je vous demande ! See you have wake my dolly—you make a noise, but oh, a jolly awful bad noise ! Monsieur, what is it ? Monsieur ! ”

There was a slight sound from the inner room.

Wingfield’s head had fallen forward, his face was buried in André’s shoulder ; a mutter came from him—heart-broken, weary. . . .

“ God—to feel a horse between my legs——”

“ Monsieur, what is it? Monsieur—it hurt—it h-hurt,” André wriggled his shoulder petulantly.

Wingfield lifted a heavy head, his blurred eyes looking blankly into the child’s tremulous face.

“ Give me that,” he whispered hoarsely. “ Just once—a horse—*any* horse——”

“ See, Monsieur, do not cry ! ” André’s tearfulness vanished, he was digging into his knickerbocker pocket with both hands, twisting and struggling with excitement. “ I have de horses—I have de *two* horses, and Monsieur shall have one—see ! ”

Triumphantly they were brought forth, two small real skin horses, one cream and one bay.

“ See, Monsieur, do dey not *shine*? Dey has to be *groomed*, n’est-ce pas? De one is John and de oder is Mary. See now, I will groom Mary, Monsieur ! ”

He stood the bay on the table, and with his handkerchief began to rub the sleek coat.

Wingfield watched with dull, dreary eyes : suddenly he sat up.

“ Come, come, that’s not the way! Haven’t you ever heard a groom at his work? I can’t let a son of mine do it in that dolly way! Hand the little mare here. Now watch! Listen! Wait a bit. Run over to that table—Can you open that little drawer? That’s right. Now, isn’t there a small brush there, like a little tooth brush without a handle, eh? That’s it. Bring it along! Now we’re all right. Now you watch and listen.”

André watched and listened with intent interest;

“ Why do you make dat funny spitty noise, Monsieur? ”

“ They always do it.”

“ Why do dey, Monsieur ? ”

“ To keep the dust out of their mouths. Now watch ! ”

In the other room Williams went back quietly to his chair, and picked up his newspaper.

“ Monsieur, may I den try now ? ”

“ Wait a bit. I must finish this little lass now I've started. Steady there—s-s-s-s-s-s—quiet now, none of your nonsense this morning—s-s-s-s—there's a little lass then—s-s-s-s-s—steady, steady, not so free with that hind leg—yes, I know the flies are worrying you—s-s-s—s-s-s—”

Andre's hand came down on the horse's head, André shrilled, heart and soul in this lovely game :

“ I've killed a fly, Monsieur, a great big *stingin'* fly ! ”

“ That's right ! Beastly things—they worry the horses to death at this time of year. Steady with that leg now——”

“ O-o-o-h, it is going to *kick*, Monsieur ! ”

“ Stead-y—that's a good girl—don't touch her ears, my boy, she's always a bit fidgetty about her ears—won't have 'em touched by any one but me——”

“ Monsieur, I wish to do it now. See, I can make de spitty noise—sh-sh-sh-sh-sh——”

“ Wait till I've just done her feet out——”

But the toy horse had stiff legs with no joints : Wingfield took the hind leg in his fingers, then pushed the horse away pettishly ; it fell to the floor, breaking one of its hind hoofs.

André blinked down at it through tears, but observed philosophically :

“ Dat is de one I gave you, Monsieur, n'est-ce pas ? ”

"You ought to be at your lessons!" cried Wingfield irritably, and there was a slight movement in the inner room again.

"Monsieur, are you *c'oss* wif me?" shrilled André incredulously.

Wingfield's face softened.

"No—no, I'm not angry with you, little man, but I've got a lot of blue circles to make, and I want to rest a bit, to see if I can get up a miserable little bit of strength for a ride—red squares—green dots," he said wearily.

Williams knocked at the door and came in.

"Master André is wanted, sir."

"Blue circles and then a red square—a queer sort of red—like blood—curious thing, but a fact, I assure you, Williams!"

"I dare say, sir, the world's full of curious things nowadays."

"That's it. It is! You're a sensible man, Williams—I'll write you a cheque for a thousand pounds to-night, when I've had my canter."

"Is it Maman who want me?" interposed André. "I have not yet groomed John wif de spitty noise. Monsieur," thumping Wingfield's knee, "may I not first groom John, *n'est-ce pas?* Just as you groomed Mary, Monsieur!"

Wingfield cast an uneasy glance at Williams.

"Ha, ha, ha! One has to play with the little ones at times, Williams, you know."

"Yes, sir, they like it, and expect it."

"That's it! You're a sensible man, Williams. I'll write you a cheque for five thousand pounds to-night after I've had a good gallop."

"Thank you, sir. Come along, sir." Williams led André from the room, and returning, found Wingfield

huddled in his chair staring at the little toy horse lying on the floor.

“Horses in circles—round and round they go—can’t get near enough to touch one—just my luck. Came a purler, poor beggar—he screamed, you know—beastly thing to do—horse never moved—just lay there. . . .”

Williams picked up the horse and laid it on the table. Wingfield suddenly straightened himself, and stared at the man haughtily.

“Throw that damned toy away at once!”

Williams took it, and threw it into the coal skuttle.

Prudence came into the room.

“I’ve got the most infernal headache, Prue,” Wingfield said.

She looked uncertainly at him, and at Williams, tried to laugh:

“Really, Evelyn? You mustn’t play any more jokes on me, you know.”

He flew into a violent rage; they could not stem it; she stood trembling beneath his abuse till it wore itself out, and he slept.

“Do you think his head really aches, Williams?” she asked, wearily.

“No, ma’am.”

She sat down by the table.

“There’s no need for you to stay here, ma’am, now; he’ll sleep for a good bit.”

“He likes me to be here when he wakes, Williams.”

“Well, you might just as well sit in the next room where there’s more air, ma’am,” said Williams obstinately.

“Very well.”

She rose and went into the inner room, and sat, chiding her selfishness. Why not have applied the remedies

he wanted at once? They could not harm, and he wanted to have his joke. Why not? Why make a tragedy of it? This awful scene—all her fault—was rubbing his temples such a stupendous task? Her back ache?—she wanted to hurt herself. . . .

She heard a movement in the other room, and turned. Wingfield had risen, he was creeping stealthily across to the fireplace; she stood quiet, anxious not to worry him by disclosing her presence unless it became necessary: it was sufficiently obvious that he thought he was alone.

He reached the hearth, and slowly stooped. Prudence took a step forward, but paused again. Wingfield stood up, took his handkerchief from his sleeve, and wrapping it round his hand, once more stooped over the coal box. This time he put his hand in, and groped amongst the coal; then he straightened himself, and Prudence saw that he held a little toy horse. He glanced furtively round, then dropped it stealthily into his coat pocket, and returned to his chair. The exertion had tired him, and he sat breathing heavily, then he took the toy from his pocket, and sat staring at it in his hand. . . .

Prudence hid her eyes. . . .

CHAPTER XL

WINGFIELD greeted Ridgeway cheerfully when he came to see him that same evening.

“Jolly little chap—that boy of mine,” he said. “Turning out much better than I expected.”

Ridgeway was surprised, and glancing at Prudence was troubled because he could not read her expression. It was the first time he had seen her since he had found her sleeping with her head buried in his coat. That was four days ago, and hitherto she had managed to elude him. But he had told himself that he could wait now; he felt an infinite tenderness for her, so great a love that as he saw her coming to him, he almost feared to move towards her, feared to blunder ever so little, and hurt her. . . .

But to-night, looking again into her face, his love surged within him, and he forgot all fear, and forgot that he had thought he could wait. . . .

Perhaps she read something of it in his face; she made the unusual excuse of not feeling well, and asked Wingfield if he would mind her going to bed. He assured her in his most gallant manner that he would not have her stay with him a moment longer, and she withdrew. Wingfield returned to the subject of André.

“Turning out much better than one could have expected. Coddled, you know, and all that. Great pity. Rides well too for his age, only the green circles worried him a bit. Used to be jealous of him. Ha,

ha, ha! Funny thing, but a fact, I assure you. Eh? What? What? What?"

Ridgeway roused himself with an effort.

"Quite so," he said.

"Eh, what? What d'you know about it? Lord, but I was jealous! Vera Gascoigne—know her, old man? No? Deuced fine woman in those days—head over heels in love with me—pretty a pair of shoulders as I ever saw—remember her one night—red circles and green squares with blue dots—there they are," he put his hand up to his eyes in a troubled way.

"I've seen her act," Ridgeway said, recalling the name. "She dances too, doesn't she?"

"Rather! Little feet—as supple as silk, and she used to tease me because I was in love with my own wife, you know. Deuced silly sort of thing, but there it was, don't you know!"

Ridgeway moved forward and sat down.

"Your wife?" he said.

"Rather! A little bit of a baby—that's all she was. Lord, you'd never believe a girl could be such a baby! And there was I at my age, jealous of the boy! Fact, I assure you! Came in—returned unexpectedly—welcome home? By God, no! Dismay! Lord, I saw red! Playing with that infernal baby as usual—hugged him up and turned on me—shrank away from me! I believe I'd have done murder that night if it hadn't been for Vera Gascoigne. A wit that woman had! Lord, didn't her eyes snap—— "Resurrect that dead wife of yours, Evie, that'd bring her to heel!" Ha, ha, ha! That was her advice. Devilish fine woman. Remember her ankles? Prettiest ankles in the world. Pink roses were her favourite flower, and red circles with green dots——"

Ridgeway let him wander on about circles and squares; he wondered what was the matter with himself, something in his head was racing and whirling—he knew that there was a particular reason for his wanting to think clearly, only it eluded him. . . .

What was it? He groped after it painfully, feeling oddly sick. . . . it was something that Wingfield had said. . . . What had he said? . . . ‘He came back unexpectedly—he looked dreadfully flushed and upset—and he just blurted it out—and fell on to a lounge.’ . . . No—that was Prudence’s voice—it echoed and thundered in his ears till it drowned what Wingfield had said. What was it he had said? ‘Green circles and red squares’—no, that wasn’t it. He went on groping—“He came back unexpectedly—he just blurted it out. . . .” That was Prudence’s voice. . . . Wingfield had said something about a baby—was that it? . . . Playing with a baby. . . . “He came back unexpectedly—he just blurted it out”—blurted what out? That his first wife was still alive—that was it. He had told Prudence he had found out that his first wife was still alive. And now—Ridgeway sat erect—that woman—Vera Gascoigne had made a stupid joke: she had said: “Resurrect that dead wife of yours, Evie, that’d bring her to heel!” He faced the words, his brain clear again: he pushed the vague horror that had gripped him, away. He thought it out. If Wingfield was speaking of actual facts—of things that had really occurred—there was here a ghastly coincidence—that was all. The dead wife had resurrected herself. . . .

“I believe I’d have done murder that night if it hadn’t been for Vera Gascoigne” . . . What night?

. . . "He came back unexpectedly—" and again:
"Came in—returned unexpectedly—murder that night
if it hadn't been for Vera Gascoigne ——"

Vera Gascoigne—oh, God, damn that woman——

He spoke:

"What did Vera Gascoigne mean when she said
that?"

"Eh? Eh, what? Vera Gascoigne—fine woman
—dark eyes—yellow hair——"

"What did she mean when she said: 'Resurrect
that dead wife of yours'?"

"Blue squares—ha, ha, ha! Curious thing, but a
fact, I assure you! Eh? What? What?"

"What did Vera Gascoigne mean when she said that
to you?"

"My dear fellow, you're never asking me what a
woman means! I've had a pretty wide experience,
but all I can tell you is that she usually means the
direct opposite of what she says! There was a chestnut
I rode a good bit one winter, had a mouth like a stirrup
leather——"

"You've got to listen, and answer me," Ridgeway
interrupted, and his voice now was so stern that it held
Wingfield's wandering attention. "What did Vera
Gascoigne mean when she said, 'Resurrect that dead
wife of yours'?"

"Oh, that! Why, don't you see—jolly good idea.
It worked splendidly! There she was—dismayed
at my return—wanting only that confounded baby—
yes, that was it—no room for me. But I'm glad she's
forgotten all about it. Hate quarrelling with a woman.
Shouldn't like to hurt her. Don't you remind her of
it, my dear boy. It would never do——"

"Remind who of what?"

“ That little chap sat on my knee and chattered away——”

“ Have you been married twice ? ”

“ Lord, yes ! First one was a great, strapping wench—red cheeks—farmer’s daughter, don’t you know, and all that sort of thing—older than I was—Don’t like ’em like that now—prefer different kind. What’s your particular fancy, my boy ? Eh ? Oh, you’re a deep dog. I found out a lot about you when you were buried under the floor over there—kept on sticking out your leg—you know—good riding leg——”

Ridgeway had risen and gone over to the window ; he felt as if he were being stifled ; a question burned on his lips : “ When did your first wife die ? ” But he knew it was an absurd question, because of course she had never died. That was the trouble. She was in Paris. . . .

He was conscious chiefly of fighting an almost overpowering desire to kill the horrible, grinning, mad creature sitting in the large chair, wagging its head at him. . . .

He threw up the window and leant out : Wingfield objected peevishly, but Ridgeway ignored him.

“ I shall die—one foot has turned into ice—I’m frost-bitten—I tell you, my feet are frost-bitten already, and if it reaches the heart you die. Lord, circles and squares ! Red and green ! Heaps of ’em. Curious thing, but a fact, I assure you ! ”

Mad !

The word seemed to breathe out its re-assurance to him from the trees ; the breeze cooled his forehead. He regained control of his mind, and it worked rapidly over all that Wingfield had said. Of course he was mad ; he put the panic away from him ; he said to

himself over and over again: "Life is full of strange coincidences," and still thinking the platitude turned to Wingfield and said:

"When did your first wife die?"

"Eh? Oh; it's cruel—cruel—to remind me of that." He began to whimper, "Pale face—all the red had left her cheeks—poor girl—poor girl—a good girl, but selfish. . . . She wouldn't let me go—and her hand grew cold—ugh, it was as cold as ice at the last—poor girl—poor girl," he began to cry, muttering pitifully, "poor girl—poor girl—made me promise to see her buried—good girl, but selfish—beastly to see 'em throwing down the earth on her—poor girl—poor girl——"

There had been a moment when Ridgeway had taken a step towards him, with murder in his face, and his hands clenched. . . . That moment had been a lurid one—crowded with the thought of Prudence's long agony. . . . Then the thing in the chair (so Ridgeway thought of him) had begun to cry——

Ridgeway had gone out into the night then. . . .

In the morning he entered his studio, and shaved. He was going to Cherry Cross, he might see Prudence—he made himself look as normal as possible. He did not realise that no bathing and shaving could make him look as usual just then.

Prudence cried out when she saw him. He said curtly:

"Bad night. Can I see Wingfield alone?"

She asked no questions, but called Williams from Wingfield's room, and left Ridgeway there.

Wingfield was sitting back in his chair, very quiet.

"Hush," he said, "walk softly. I don't mind telling

you—but in the night I had no legs. Fact, I assure you. They've come back now, but——”

“I want to ask you about your first wife,” Ridgeway said. “Did you see her die? Are you sure she is dead?”

“Dead? Not a bit of it! Who thought of saying such a thing? Great Scott, man, you should be more careful what you say! It's an exceedingly painful subject——”

Ridgeway's legs grew suddenly queerly soft; he sat down, and stared at Wingfield, who was wandering on in an indignant voice about its being an exceedingly painful subject. . . . Suddenly Ridgeway's anger rose, strong, uncontrollable—it burst in a storm of words; it stopped as suddenly as it had begun, stopped in a cold horror, as he saw Wingfield's head fall helplessly over his left shoulder, and his face grow a terrible leaden colour. He thought he had killed him. He went to him and bent over him; Wingfield opened bleared, scared eyes, and cowered down in his chair.

“Don't kill me,” he moaned. “Please don't hurt me!”

“I won't hurt you,” Ridgeway said gently. “I didn't mean to frighten you.”

He was conscious of such a heavy sense of self-despise as he had never in his life known before.

“I was afraid you were going to hit me. You seemed so cross with me.”

“No, I'm not cross with you.”

He rang the bell, twice, for Williams.

“Nearly fainted,” he said curtly.

Williams administered some drops from a bottle. The colour had returned to Wingfield's face; when

Ridgeway would have gone he besought him pathetically to stay.

“If you go away I shall think you are still cross with me,” he said, speaking like a child.

Ridgeway sat down again. Wingfield meandered on :

“You look very cross, and you said my legs were dead. It was a very unkind thing to say. It’s an exceedingly painful subject. They went away in the night, but they didn’t die. They’ve come back now, but I have to be extremely careful, because they are as yet only fixed on very lightly——”

Ridgeway interrupted him, but his voice was so husky that Wingfield did not hear him ; he went wandering on about its being an exceedingly painful subject.

Ridgeway felt battered, bruised : a thought crossed his mind that so must men have felt when they had been put to the torture : he tried to interrupt in a louder voice, and at last succeeded :

“I was speaking of your wife, not of your legs.”

Somewhere at the back of his mind he thought it sounded rather absurd. . . .

“Always had a good pair of legs—good riding legs, don’t you know——”

“Is your first wife dead ? ”

That was it ; he experienced a sense of relief that he had got it out at last—what he wanted to say.

“Green squares and blue circles—hundreds of ’em—millions of ’em—and red dots, my dear fellow. Ha, ha, ha ! Curious thing, but a fact, I assure you.”

Ridgeway had pulled himself together ; he realised that what he had to do now was to try to gain Wingfield’s wandering attention.

He tried over and over again—with mention of his wife, then he tried with the actress’s name.

“ Vera Gascoigne—you remember Vera Gascoigne ? ”

Wingfield looked at him blankly.

“ Never heard the lady’s name in my life, my dear boy ! Fact, I assure you. I never forget a lady’s name, ’pon honour I don’t—wouldn’t be so ungallant.”

“ She danced—little feet as supple as silk,” Ridgeway said grimly.

“ Oh—yes—Maudie Manders—of course I remember her—jolly good little dancer too—never had much to do with her—her hair was too near red for my taste——”

“ Pretty shoulders and ankles,” said Ridgeway.

“ Ha, ha, ha ! By Jove, yes ! But a bit thin—remember you could see her shoulder blades——”

“ A wit——” said Ridgeway.

“ No, no, dull—quite dull. A wit ? Oh, you mean—what’s her name now——”

“ Vera Gascoigne.”

“ No, no, no ! Damn it, where’s my memory ? Elizabeth Murray, that’s the name—Elizabeth Murray ——”

“ Brown eyes—yellow hair,” Ridgeway said.

“ Green circles, old man, that’s it—round my legs—twined round and round—Hush, keep quiet—legs will go away again if we make a noise.”

“ Vera Gascoigne—she said : ‘ Resurrect your first wife, that’d bring her to heel ! ’ ”

Wingfield was stretching out a shaking hand, and touching his legs, first one and then the other.

“ Hush ! We must be very quiet. The green circles are closing round them——”

“ Vera Gascoigne. You were jealous of your boy—your boy—the baby.’

“ Boy ? Yes. Hush, must keep my legs to take him for a ride. Promised him, don’t you know.”

“ You came home unexpectedly—don’t you remember

Vera Gascoigne had told you to 'Resurrect your first wife.' "

"Hush! I wish you would go away! I must really refuse to speak to you. My legs require quiet."

"Is your first wife dead?"

"First wife! What curious things you say, my dear fellow! I never had a first wife—I have *a* wife—*one* wife, you understand. I wish you would go away."

And to all Ridgeway's further questions he refused response—till at last he fell asleep, muttering still about his legs.

CHAPTER XLI

RIDGEWAY left him and walked to the station. Folk passing him made remarks on the heat ; he assented without being conscious of feeling hot ; it was a long three miles, mostly slightly uphill. At the station he found that he would have to wait for the 4.10 London train ; he counted the hours—three, all but five minutes. He got into a train that was going to Tunbridge ; the station-master told him that he would catch no earlier London train there, merely the same one ; he thanked him and got in. He knew that he could not wait for three hours on that platform. In the train he tried to make plans ; he had no definite idea how to set about finding an obscure actress ; he was only sure that he must start the search in London. He had got to find out if all this was a mad fabrication of Wingfield's brain, and the surest way seemed to him to ask Vera Gascoigne if she had ever said " Resurrect your dead wife " to him. If she had then the whole story was true, and Prudence was Wingfield's wife, and Dickon was legitimate. His dream would be gone. . . . He turned his mind fiercely from that, he dared not let it dwell on the inner meaning of all this now. Last night—the long night he had passed, on the sweet wet ground—he had faced all that, even to the bitter agony of the wonder whether Prudence would be glad—for Dickon's sake. . . . He had seen Vera Gascoigne once—it was in Liverpool—he had seen her dance ; he remembered the name, no

more. It seemed curious and unreal that he should be looking for her now. He searched his memory for further detail about her ; it was four years ago ; he had been excessively bored—yes—surely it was Vera Gascoigne's hair that came down when she was dancing ? And the lady he was with remarked laughingly that, in spite of the fair Vera's confusion at such a mishap, it had happened before ! It was beautiful hair—a shower of gold—“ dark eyes—yellow hair ”—yes, it was Vera Gascoigne's hair that came down. He felt pleased that he had remembered this, and went on searching his memory. He had been painting the portrait of the lady's son—jolly little chap—on a pony—he remembered that. It was his first commission, and he had been tremendously pleased about it, and eager to do his best. The play was an idiotic musical comedy—lot of women—too fat or too thin—some awful bounders of men—horrible voices—yes—and one funny man who kept on coming on and saying : “ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun,” and each time every one roared, including his hostess, and he wished he could laugh like that. It kept on to the noise of the train—over and over again—“ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun ”—“ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun.”

He bought a newspaper, and the first thing that caught his eye was an advertisement of Wilson's currant buns and cakes. It went on and on—“ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun ” ; “ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun ” ; till he forgot it for a little while in a sudden memory of the way he had painted the little chap's coat. He muttered, frowning ; “ It was painty—very. I ought to have done it—so——” he painted in the air with his thumb. Then the train shouted : “ A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun,” and it seemed to him that that

was the biggest tragedy life could hold for him—that the train should go on shouting that thing in his ears.

He fought it all the way to Tunbridge; when he got out there he felt dizzy with the worry of it. He was anxious to get away from trains, which might go on saying that same thing. He went out of the station, and pausing to look about him, stood in front of a hoarding; he was not surprised when he saw the name "Vera Gascoigne" on it. It was all so unreal, that this touch of unreality seemed quite natural. He went up close and read the announcement; she was advertised to appear in Tunbridge on July 21st, and nightly for a week. It was now August 25th. The advertisement was an old one; she would not be in Tunbridge now. He made his way to the theatre where she had acted last month. Oh, yes, certainly, the company was touring the south coast, they had gone on to Herne Bay—yes—now—well, the clerk couldn't be sure, but he thought they would be in Bournemouth this week. Oh yes, he could find out for certain—pleased—the clerk looked knowing, and his manner was very confidential—there were some very pretty girls in the company—all sorts. He went to the telephone, swaggering, and found out that the company had arrived in Bournemouth two days ago.

Ridgeway reached Bournemouth at eight o'clock the next morning; the box office would not be open till ten. He walked about the streets; it was very hot, and he wondered why he could not smell the pines. He followed a watering-cart, because the water looked cool. He walked down old Christchurch road, and stared in at the shop windows, watching some of them being dressed. He studied some pictures offered for sale, and when he had walked on went back to the window frowning, because

it had suddenly struck him that he couldn't remember anything about them. He walked away again muttering. "Sea scape—like blue and white china—Hunting scene—sort of Noah's Ark thing—horse galloping with all his legs off the ground at once—Portrait of a girl—dirty face."

Then they slipped his brain again, and an electric car grinding up the hill shouted at him: "A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun."

He stopped and stared after it; another car came tearing down the hill towards him; a man on a bicycle had a sideslip and the car just missed him; it was screaming: "A halfpenny bun isn't a penny bun." Ridgeway helped the man to pick up his bicycle: "Fiendish things," he said. The man was very muddy; he shrugged his shoulders and rode on. Ridgeway said again: "Fiendish things." There were several of them down there in the square. Ridgeway stood looking at them; one started up the hill, and suddenly it screamed at him: "Resurrect your dead wife!" Ridgeway took off his hat and passed his hand across his tired eyes.

"I'm a fool—I've let the food go," he said. "The Cadena" caught his eye over the way, glittering in gold letters; there were cakes in the window. He went in and asked for coffee. No one was there yet. "If you'd like to go upstairs, sir, its cooler there," a waitress told him. He went upstairs, and sat at a little green tiled table in an open window. He looked out across the square to the gardens, and longed for a rustle amongst the still trees. A curious fancy came to him that they too were keeping something at bay; they too dared not let themselves go. . . . That was why they were so tense and still.

"I'm afraid there's no breeze, sir," the waitress said. "Would you like anything with the coffee?"

"Eggs," he said. "A couple of eggs, please."

When she brought the eggs she said it felt like thunder. She had a sensible face, he wished she would stay and talk; it would make it easier to keep thought at bay. He said the shops looked quite decent; she gave him a short history of the progress of Bourne-mouth, and halfway through he felt irritatedly that he could not bear her presence. He gulped down his coffee and rose, and fled from her. At five minutes to ten he was waiting outside the theatre. At ten o'clock the attendant in the box office, yawning, a hat pin in one hand, thrust an almost empty plan of the theatre at him, and reeled off the prices of seats. "We usually raise them for anything as good as this," she said, "but we haven't this time." When she found that seats were not required she "was sure she couldn't say" to everything he asked, and shut down the slide of the window. A programme girl standing by removing her hat observed: "Miss Gascoigne's lodging at No. 23, Rose View Terrace sir."

Ridgeway went to Rose View Terrace; it was rather like working out a puzzle to find it, but he found it at last, and rang the bell at No. 23. He had to ring twice before it was answered, and then the door was opened by a hot and untidy servant girl, whose eyes didn't match; Ridgeway noticed that they didn't match with a feeling of irritation.

Miss Gascoigne was in; would he step this way? He found himself in a little stuffy room crowded with stamped red velvet, and sticky brown backs and legs and arms of chairs and sofas. He wondered why people would choose carpets with such immense patterns for

small rooms. The servant girl returned bearing an album. Miss Gascoigne would not be a minute, and perhaps the gentleman would like to look at the album? Ridgeway opened the book, and was met with rows and rows of teeth glittering up at him: he recognised it was a book of actress's photographs, and turned the pages in search of Vera Gascoigne. It was not difficult to find her; she posed on almost every page, in various stages of dress and undress. He could not remember her face; to him she was just a musical comedy actress; they were ridiculously alike, he thought. She had large eyes and a lot of hair, and in some of the photographs she was decidedly plump. The door opened, and she came in with a whiff of perfume and a jingle of chains.

"I'm *so* sorry to keep you waiting—oh, will you sit down?"

He wondered what caused the change of tone between the two sentences. She told him when she said:

"I thought you were from the "Daily Bits" office."

"No," he said. "I merely want to trouble you to try and remember a conversation of six years ago."

"Good gracious! What a ghastly thing to want! And for heaven's sake, don't look so solemn or I shall have a fit here on the carpet!" He looked at her with a passing wonder as to the attraction she had had for Wingfield. It was quite a nice face, in a commonplace sort of way; the large brown eyes were rather prominent the lips badly cut, but the nose was small and straight, although too thick; the teeth of course were large and dazzling. He wondered if all actresses had false teeth, or if the profession was particularly good for teeth.

Miss Gascoigne was surreptitiously dabbing at her nose; she was shrewd enough to guess that this sort of man would hate a lot of powder. She was disappointed

he wasn't from "Daily Bits," but he was a gentleman, and she smiled on him amiably enough.

"I'm not going to help hang some one, or anything of that sort with my evidence, am I?" she said.

"No. Do you remember a man named Wingfield?" She shook her head.

"Try," he said hoarsely.

He moved restlessly, trying to stop the sudden rapid beating of his heart.

She bent forward, and gazed up at the ceiling, but she was so occupied in hoping he was looking at the contour of her chin that she forgot to try to remember the name of Wingfield.

He broke the silence at last, unable to bear it any longer.

"Evelyn Wingfield," he said. "He had supper with you——"

"What did we have for supper?" she asked, dropping her chin, and suddenly looking natural and keenly interested.

"I don't know—except champagne."

She smacked her lips openly.

"And oysters, I expect. Lord, how I love oysters! And perhaps lobster mayonnaise, eh? And pâté de fois gras, and strawberries and cream, and ices! I daren't do that sort of thing nowadays. My figure, you know," she added in an explanatory tone, and glancing coyly at him saw that he was not really aware of her at all. She yawned, and studied her plump hands.

"Are you sure you never knew a man named Wingfield—Evelyn Wingfield?" he said.

"I don't remember him," she was interested in pushing down the flesh round one of her finger nails. "There was a girl named Wingley—Eleanor—no—what was her name

now? Helen—that's it—Helen Wingley—awfully rum sort of girl—used to go into trances and that sort of thing, and have chats with spirits. Indigestion, I expect it was really. All that sort of thing is indigestion."

Ridgeway rose and went to the window; he thought he could not stand that picking at her quicks any longer. "Will you try to remember him?" he said.

"What for?" she started on the nails of her other hand.

"It is very important to me."

"All right," she said good-naturedly. "What was he like?"

"Good-looking man—sportsman——"

"Married or single?"

"Married—recently."

"Admirer of mine?"

"Yes."

She looked at him curiously, wondering apathetically why he hadn't said "of course"; instead of just "yes." "Six years ago—let me see—was that the year—no—wait a bit—wasn't that the year I was dancing in—no—longer ago than that—Can you smell onions? That means steak and onions for dinner—it's a good smell, isn't it? Why—yes—of course, I've got him now! I remember him teasing me about onions! What a funny thing now. Evelyn Wingfield—Evie, I used to call him—oh, yes, I remember him—he wasn't a young man, but awfully handsome—a fine man—Lord, yes, I was awfully gone on him at one time. It was a sort of fashion to be gone on Evie Wingfield, and then he got married and grew deadly uninteresting. Used to give heavenly suppers—you don't seem to come across his sort nowadays. Is he all right? Got any more kids? Or has he murdered that baby he was so jealous of?"

Ridgeway stood in the window staring at her kindly, amused face ; it seemed odd that she should look like that ; he felt as if he were in a nightmare.

“ You advised him—you told him to resurrect his dead wife,” he said in a dull voice.

“ Did I ? Oh, yes, of course, he had been married before. I’d forgotten that. She died before I met him. He told me about her death once when he was drunk, poor chap. He was an awfully sensitive sort of man, and she wouldn’t let him leave her when she was dying. I remember. That was years before my time, and then when he was quite middle-aged he married a child—a most amusing little ingenue, I believe—and got maudlin over her. What did you want to know if I remembered him for ? Has he died and left me a million ? ”

“ He is ill. He spoke of you——”

“ Oh, he’s forgotten all about me long before this,” she said hastily, afraid he wanted to drag her off to a sick bed. “ You’re making a mistake, honest Ingin. I’d come if I thought I’d be any good—if he called for me it was delirium—they always go back like that, you know——”

“ You said, ‘ Resurrect your dead wife, that’d bring her to heel.’ ”

“ Did I ? Very likely. Oh, yes, I remember. He was drunk, and got fearfully depressed,—he’d been ill—an accident in the hunting field—and he confided in me that his wife didn’t care a hang for him, but was wrapped up in the kid. I remember. I teased him to death ! I asked him why he didn’t frighten her by bringing his first wife to life. Oh, yes—I loved a joke—so did he. So he’s remembered that old joke all these years ? Poor old Evie ! I believe that was the last

time I saw him. It cheered him up then—he'd really seemed awfully bad—kept complaining of his head, and his face was as red as fire. So he's ill now? But he's forgotten all about me ages ago. Dinner'll be ready soon. She let me have the rooms cheaper on condition I had dinner rather early, when her husband does. Will you have some with me? She's not half a bad cook."

When he stood outside on the pavement he was chiefly conscious of an acute sense of irritation, because the smell of onions still pursued him. He hailed a cab that was jogging past.

"Where to, sir?" the man asked.

"Away from those onions," Ridgeway said seriously.

The man sniffed the air, and laughed. "Rather 'ot weather for onions, sir," he said sympathetically. "I'll take you down to the front."

Ridgeway stared out at a moving, noisy mass of colour. "What a lot of arms," he thought as girl after girl went by, bare-armed. "What large arms. How ugly." He decided he had better eat; he knew that he had got to face it now, and he hoped food might get rid of the pain in his head. But not eggs, he shuddered at the thought of eggs. Nor onions.

When he had eaten and drunk he went down to the shore. In the continual noise he heard again and again the word "storm." Overhead the sky was darkening to a wonderful violet, the sea looked almost black along the horizon. Amongst people and tents and vendors of drinks and ices and bananas, a movement began, shouts to children to come and have their shoes on, cries for coats. The rain came down, it fell straight and heavy and cold. Ridgeway threw off his hat and lifted his hot head to it. A strenuous thought came to him, filled him:

“ She must never know.”

Slack sinews, tense nerves leapt to meet it; he thrilled with exultation. Up the sands—running, screaming—dots of colour fled, leaving the wide yellow shore, the great sea, to him. He turned and laughed aloud at the hurrying, scurrying dots. What fools they were! His the sea, the rain, the shore! He walked by the edge of the wonderful grey waves, he looked down into the inner green light of them, and his heart and soul exulted. His the burden of the deceit! Gladly! gladly! . . . She must never know. God, what a glorious thing to bear—for her! Out here in the rain and the spray, how absurd the conventional scruples! The torturing fear of thought had gone for ever. Exulting, he beat down objections—one by one—what were they, these objections of an over-civilized conscience? There—in the roar of the storm and the sea—marshal them out—one by one—put him aside—take her happiness only—yes—Dickon . . . he faced it squarely—Dickon’s legitimacy. He must see clear. . . . There was a clap of thunder overhead, and a girl’s hysterical scream. He lifted his head to the angry skies and laughed. What fools! The screams receded into the distance. His the sands, the sea, the storm. He was wet to the skin, full of the glory of fight—the primeval fight for a woman. . . .

Well, Dickon’s legitimacy—there it was. Joy to her—yes—but would that joy be enough now? He flung his arms wide and drew to him the sweetness of her sleeping with her cheek buried in his coat. . . . She should sleep so again—his love . . . her head in his shoulder. . . .

Dare he push her away now? His brave little love who had fought so hard—push her away to be a mad-

man's nurse till death should set her free? Dare he do it? Could even the moralists tell him that was his duty? She was coming to him at last, with her beautiful love, and his the joy of caring for her for ever. Wasn't his love strong enough to kill that old grief of Dickon's illegitimacy? He would take his name. Ah, God, she would forget. . . . He would make her forget—he could!

His heart cried it to the storm—he could make her happy!

He walked miles, buffeted by the wind, lashed by the rain. Now and then his exaltation admitted bits of common-sense, such as, "If Wingfield dies, another marriage—some legal reason—it could be managed."

And again, sternly: "No sophistry. You are deceiving her, tricking her." "I take the burden," was his answer to that; a glad cry, a fierce cry. And again: "Reason, not feeling, must decide."

And at the last a cry to the great seas, truth wringing out truth, after hours of battle:

"I can never give her up!"

CHAPTER XLII

LOOKING upon Wingfield, he thought: "It is just as wrong for her to continue to live with you as it was before. You tricked her in your drunken jealousy. You have no claim to her. I claim her."

"Glad to see you, my boy," so Wingfield was speaking. "Get sick of women, don't you know. Had Lord Topham here—Billy Topham—last night. Looked as fit as a hunter, except that he's lost his head, you know. Not much loss, really—always was an ugly brute—came a cropper over a water jump, you know, broke his neck—wonderful thing surgery nowadays—they cut off his head, and he's as fit as a hunter! Fact, I assure you! And he's got over his jealousy—we fought once, you know, over that—what was her name now——?"

Ridgeway thought again:

"You have forfeited all claim to her. You gave long years of pain to her with a loathsome lie."

And a thought nagged:

"A man's wife——"

He flung it from him, scoffing at old-world traditions. But he left Wingfield.

Prudence he saw down in the hall.

"Prudence," he said yearningly, "Prudence," and something caught at his throat; he looked at her with tired eyes that were deep with love.

She breathed out an involuntary cry:

“ Don't go away again ! ”

And fled, ashamed, to call back : “ I didn't mean it—oh, don't listen.”

That night, lying in the doorway of his studio, he dreamed.

He dreamt that it was dawn, and coming to him across the meadow, he saw the Sistine Madonna, with Christ in her arms. And as she drew near he saw that it was not the Madonna, but Prudence, and the pale light glimmered upon her face, and he saw that it was alight with such a wonderful joy that he held his breath, and was unable to move to meet her. He saw that the wistful anxiety was trembling into a radiant smile, and his heart leapt to meet her. But something held him back, his feet were heavy and stubborn. He looked again, and he saw that it was not Christ she held in her arms, but a young child—his child—his and hers—and he dared not go to meet her. . . . A great horror seized him ; he struggled and fought but he felt himself shrinking back as she drew nearer. He saw the exquisite radiance in her face beginning to shadow. . . . Words leapt madly to his lips—cruel words that should shatter her joy and bring horror and despair upon her—but they came to his lips fighting for utterance, leaping to meet the truth of her eyes. . . .

And he woke. Trembling and sweating, he woke, and crawling out on to the wet grass, he buried his face in the earth. . . .

CHAPTER XLIII

HE went to Prudence the next morning and told her ; he was very gentle, very quiet ; he made no sign when her incredulous joy was striking, with every tremulous word, at his heart. He received the final revelation of her unalterable purpose without a murmur. He faced the realization that her joy was untainted by any secondary thought, and knew that he had been wrong when he had thought she was coming to him. She would never have come. He seemed to have known it for years : his struggle with the temptation to withhold the truth from her seemed dim, an outrageous thing, a ghastly thing with no meaning, no motive or object. He felt very old, and possessed of an endless patience to answer her questionings. He turned away his head when she hid her quivering face in her hands ; he caught the awed murmur : “ Richard Wingfield ; Dickon Wingfield,” and again, “ Richard Baldingham Wingfield,” and a little shaking laugh, a laugh halted midway by the fear that found such joy too wonderful to be true, and the question—for the third time :

“ You are sure there can be no mistake ? ”

“ No,” he said, “ there is no mistake.”

“ I think—now—I might be able to bear it, but—later—I don’t think I could bear it afterwards ! ”

It was an unusual cry from her ; he reassured her gently.

“ I want him here—now ! ” she cried.

"I will fetch him for you," he said.

But she would not have him disappointed of his day at Elm Hill.

"I owe it all to you," she whispered, and suddenly the tears came. "If I could repay you!" she whispered.

Even that left him calm and quiet; it was as if this final revelation of her had taken, by its torturing of him, all power to feel any lesser pain.

She said presently:

"Mark, I am afraid!"

"What of, Prudence?"

She looked at him, shivering.

"I feel I cannot go near him!" she whispered, and suddenly her face was white with passion. "I have borne everything else, but this—must I bear this, too, without a sign? These long years—a vulgar joke with a vulgar woman—and my agony! And the shadow on Dickon—It's that—that I cannot forgive him! A drunken jest—an insult to his first wife and to me. Can I go to him now, Mark, and show nothing?"

"Leave him—get him a good nurse," he heard himself saying it, with an odd feeling of surprise; the words rang cold, with a hot and passionate echo behind them.

She gave him a quick look; she shivered and dismissed the subject of her wild outburst with a quiet: "I can bear it. He was ill even then."

And then again:

"You are quite sure there *could* be no mistake? It is true that he is Richard Wingfield—not a nameless little boy—Richard Wingfield, Sir John Wingfield's heir! That too!" Her voice rang and thrilled, the colour leapt to her cheeks. "He could marry Muriel Latimer's daughter," she said softly, and hugged it to her.

“ I am sure,” Ridgeway said steadily, “ I am sure you are his legal wife, and Dick his legal son.”

Tears leapt suddenly to her eyes—she quavered: “ You are glad, too, Mark ? ” and wept uncontrollably, and weeping, hurried from the room.

It was the last enlightening word in the revelation of her soul to him ; she had no idea that he could have any reason for not rejoicing with her.

CHAPTER XLIV

UP in her room she lay and wept ; wept, she said, for joy. And she said that the longing and pain were for Dickon—that she might hold him close—her little Richard Wingfield. The name rang like music in her ears—Richard Wingfield, Dickon Wingfield—her baby—her little son—all these years Dickon Wingfield. . . . A name of music surely—once, long ago, it had been a glorious name ; it should be glorious again ! . . . Could Mark be angry with her ?—She stretched out longing arms ; in this joy she wanted him—And she wept again, while the song of the name—Dickon Wingfield, Dickon Wingfield was the song—grew mechanical, although she did not know it. She clung to it, her pale lips murmuring it ; over and over again she sang it : “ Dickon Wingfield, Dickon Wingfield,” and behind it vibrated a thought : “ He was cold,” and again another thought : “ He has ceased to care.”

And at last with that a burning agony and shame :
“ If he has, I am glad, glad ! ”
And the song ceased. . . .

To Dickon, asleep that night, she cried in her anguish :
“ Once it would have filled my life. I could have borne anything, knowing that. You would have been enough, my little Dickon Wingfield. I am wicked—bad—I cannot bear it ! ”

Wildly she woke him, she kissed him, she promised him a pony, a cart, all things—all that he asked for; she laughed with him, shared his excitement, kissed him again and again—Dickon Wingfield,” she cried, laughing. “Dickon Wingfield, you shall have the things you want at last!”

He felt the tears running down her cheeks as she kissed him; he tried to be heroic:

“It doesn’t matter about the pony if you don’t want—yes, it does!”

Oh, the precious! Her precious Dickon Wingfield, of course, it mattered, and she did want, oh, yes, Dickon Wingfield, she wanted it very much.

“Why do you keep callin’ me Dickon Wingfield, mother?”

“Because it’s your name, my sweet, your own name, Dickon Wingfield.”

“But you never did keep callin’ it me.”

“No; I never did, except many years ago when you were a tiny baby, my darling, my Dickon Wingfield.”

He protested.

“I don’t like it, mother.”

She laughed again and again.

“I can’t help it, Dickon, I’m so happy—do you hear?—so happy—happy—*happy*.”

She was so unlike herself, he grew frightened.

Then suddenly her laughter ceased, she lifted her head and looked into his worried face.

“My dear one, go to sleep,” she said gently. “Dream happy dreams of the pony, darling.”

He lay down with a sigh of relief, and fell asleep.

She knelt there beside the bed for a long while, till

the moonlight came in at the window and lay across him.

Then she bent and gently kissed his forehead.

"Thank God, my little Dickon," she whispered solemnly.

CHAPTER XLV

RIDGEWAY went away. He said simply to Prudence :

“ I must go now.”

She said quietly :

“ Yes, Mark.”

She added :

“ I am glad you are going away,” and looked at him with dim, agonised eyes, as if she were facing a dreaded death.

He caught his breath, and a tremor passed through him ; he tried to go without more words, but a few broke from him.

“ Pray that I may die soon, Prudence ! ”

Hoarse, shaking words, regretted as they were uttered, and from her a wild, weak cry :

“ Why do you go then ? ” regretted more bitterly than his.

The truth then from him, rough, bare truth :

“ If I came here I should come hoping to win you from him. I couldn't help it. I should try.”

“ But—before——”

“ You weren't his wife. I hoped to win you for mine ! ”

She stood, receiving the light breaking upon her mind ; she understood at last.

He went on ; he told her that there had been a time when he thought to keep the truth from her. He told

it cruelly for himself, striking at himself. A great tenderness shone in her face ; she whispered brokenly :

“ You have—hoped—like that—all this time ? ”

She broke into bitter, terrible self-reproach ; she should have *made* him see, made him understand ; she took it all upon herself ; her grief was terrible.

“ To help you—to help you——” she sobbed it out wildly. “ I cannot live—with your sorrow on my heart. Mark, what can I do ? ”

He stared a minute into her quivering face, where her soul lay bared in its agony ; he saw the martyr's madness of renunciation shining in her eyes. . . .

He left her standing there. . . .

CHAPTER XLVI

HE got it back at last ; the acquiescent dullness and quiet, and he went to Elm Hill to tell Elizabeth. People were there—that seemed queer to him somehow—but he handed tea to them, and cake, and he talked to Eleanor Browne on Woman's Suffrage : he talked very sensibly and kindly. He did not find it difficult ; he would as soon do that as anything else. He sympathised with Mrs. Dormer-Jones over the difficulty of procuring a suitable governess for Lilian, who was so high-spirited she refused to be dictated to. He said that he had quite understood, when she rambled agitatedly into the old, worrying subject of Mrs. Darlington's queer conduct at Cherry Cross ; oh, yes, he had quite understood she had meant no harm, and, of course, a friend is a friend, and doubtless it was a very good thing Mrs. Darlington was joining her husband in India, he quite agreed with her. He assured Nancy Trevor he had not been overworking, and met the look in her kind young eyes without flinching.

Then somehow they had all gone, and he said to Elizabeth :

“ I came to tell you I am going away. It was all a mistake—Prudence is his wife. I want to ask you to write to me, and tell me how she is.”

He was very patient when she wanted more than that ; very concerned when she broke down into tears ; he

was filled with a detached sort of wonder at his past self when she cried out: "I wish you had never told her, and married her just the same!"

He lent her his handkerchief when he saw the inadequate bit of lace with which she was trying to wipe away her tears.

"I wanted to ask you, too," he said, "if you'd ask Latimer to go and see him sometimes. I don't want to go up to the Hall now—do you mind?"

He went to the door, paused and added hesitatingly: "I know—you'll do all you can—for her."

"She has her child—with a name!" Elizabeth cried bitterly.

"You will, won't you?" he said.

"I suppose I shall have to!" And then she was calling: "Mark! But Mark—oh, Mark—that can't be all——"

CHAPTER XLVII

HE stayed away for four months. He went back then a few days after Christmas, because it was beyond his strength to go on facing life without seeing her. He went back to his studio, which he still rented from Dickson. He hoped to see her without her seeing him.

And in a forced sort of way he hoped the sight of the studio might perhaps re-awaken the ambition to paint. He had been painting, and painting hard, but he threw away all that he painted, and he knew no joy in his work. He went on, because he would not give in, but it was no solace, no help; it did not even soothe the restlessness that had got hold of him. He was disappointed, because he thought it showed that he would never really do much, and, once, he had hoped to do a great deal. His disappointment was a detached sort of thing, lacking sharpness, with no poignancy.

Now it chanced that on the evening when he reached his studio, Dr. Fielding was driving along the road in his car at a snail's pace when he remembered the studio in the meadow, and remembered having heard that artists sometimes clean their brushes in paraffin. His chauffeur was ill, his acetylene lamps had gone wrong, and the doctor, faced with a long drive home in the dark, had borrowed two hurricane lamps from a farm. They were inadequate, but he thought that at least he could not be run in for driving after dark without

lights. But he had not thought to make sure that the lamps were filled with oil, and just before he reached the road near Ridgeway's studio, one lamp gave out, and the other started flickering in an ominous manner. Thus it was that Ridgeway was discovered by the doctor, who, on trying to force an entrance through the window, was brought face to face with a man standing within.

Dr. Fielding was delighted.

"My dear fellow, this is a most fortunate occurrence! Are you making any stay? I sincerely hope so. You have been missed. And, let me tell you, you may be the means of preventing a bad breakdown! Our brave lady—Mrs. Wingfield—oh, shocking! One feels for her! He is really almost more than her strength can bear. But never a word of complaint! Oh, no, never a word. He has taken a violent antipathy to that excellent man, Williams! He takes antipathies now. He took one to Mr. Latimer, who was really most kind—won't have him near him now—says he doesn't like his nose. Childish, of course, but most regrettable——"

"Is she ill?"

It came harshly through the dusk, breaking out in agony at last.

"Who? Oh, Mrs. Wingfield. Well, not ill exactly—but the continual strain and anxiety—it is there night and day——"

"What do you want me for?"

Dr. Fielding peered up at him, turning the flickering light of his lantern on to his face.

"Are you very busy? Painting hard? Only come to fetch something? Ah, I'm sorry—very sorry. Our patient is tormented by a most painful hallucination connected with you—a most trying thing for his wife to bear——"

“ Same as last time ? ”

“ Well, not exactly the same. No, one might safely say not at all the same. In the first instance, if I remember rightly, he thought you——”

“ What does he think now ? ”

“ Er—oh—well, in this instance he has an idea you are hiding from justice, and he is aiding you. You see ? He calls upon his wife at all hours to come and help him hide you. As he very frequently imagines his legs have gone, he cannot rise to hide you himself. You are by turns a cushion, a book, a box, you have even been the poker. Very sad. Most trying for his wife——Dear me, my lamp’s gone out ! ”

Most trying for his wife——

Ridgeway turned away with almost a sob in his throat, as the gruesome tragedy of her days spread out before him. Trying for his wife—— And he had pitied himself ! Himself—with his freedom, his liberty to bear his pain as he could—to keep it sacred—for himself. . . . He, a great strong man—and that child—delicate—a woman. He bowed his face on his hands a moment in the dark, then returned to the babbling doctor.

“ Is he settled for the night ? ”

“ Oh, yes, yes ! We cannot have him disturbed now——”

“ I’ll come to him to-morrow morning, then.”

“ Certainly ! Splendid ! A most fortunate occurrence——”

“ You’ll tell Mrs. Wingfield to-night that I am coming.”

“ Oh, no need for that, my dear fellow, no need at all ! And I am not going that way——”

“ It will take very little time ; you seem to have plenty to spare.”

“ Oh, as for that—I never have time to spare. Busy from morning till night. You artists have no idea of the value of time——”

“ You’ll just tell her to-night,” Ridgeway said.

“ I assure you there is no need. There would be no shock. Why should there be? And even so, we can arrange it that I see her first to-morrow——”

“ She may sleep better if her mind is at rest about this obsession of his.”

“ Oh, well—hardly—and in any case she may have retired for the night. I might just rouse her from——”

“ I’ll risk that.”

Dr. Fielding, his lamps overflowing with rapidly and furiously poured in oil by Ridgeway, went off grumbling in his car to Cherry Cross.

CHAPTER XLVIII

“**P**RUE, quick—hush—he’s over there, cowering behind that chair—can’t you *see* him? They’re coming in a minute. I can hear their bridles clinking. Hide him! Quick! There, behind that door! They’ll never find him there——”

She tried once more, because she knew that he was coming soon now——

“That is only the coal scuttle, Evelyn. Mr. Ridgeway is coming to see you soon.”

“Fool! Are you mad? God, if only I could find my legs! I liked the poor chap——” he began to whimper. “Now they’ll get him—they’ll bring it in murder, although that brute deserved his death—I liked him—I—I l-liked—him——”

She picked up the coal scuttle hastily, and hid it behind the door.

“Evelyn—oh, Evelyn—there——”

His face broke into smiles.

“They’ll never find him there, Prue. Can’t desert the poor chap, because the law’s after him, you know, and I sympathise, don’t you know—sort of mess I might have got into myself in the old days—pair of pretty eyes—a kiss or two—he’s that sort of chap, you know—told you so all along. I can always tell—blue eyes to-day—brown eyes to-morrow—that’s the sort he is—go and tell him he’s safe enough there, Prue.”

“I have told him, Evelyn,” she said faintly.

"I didn't hear you. You mumble so. Tell him again. Go on. I want to be sure he knows he's safe."

She dragged trembling limbs over to the door.

'I can't hear! Eh, what? What? Lord, how you mumble! Speak out! Let me hear you say it. I *insist* on hearing you say it. Damn it all, am I master in my own house, or not?'

She looked back at him over her shoulder; his face was convulsed, his fingers plucked furiously at the arms of his chair. "You are quite safe, Mr. Ridgeway," she said at the door.

"Louder! Damnation! *Louder! Louder!*" he screamed. "Tell him to stay there, and we'll bring him food—and he'll be quite safe! Go on! Go on! Go on!"

"You must stay there, and we'll bring you food, and you'll be quite safe——"

"Mr. Ridgeway! D'you hear? *Mr. Ridgeway!* How will he know whom you're speaking to, eh? Oh, damn it, what it is to be surrounded by fools! Curse this helplessness! Oh, God, must I let a friend be caught in a trap like that? A rat in a trap——" he began to scream again and swear, plucking at the chair.

She clung to the door.

"You must stay there, and we'll bring you food, and you'll be quite safe, Mr. Ridgeway."

Lydia knocked on the other door.

"Mr. Ridgeway, ma'am."

"Ask him—to come up," Prudence said mechanically.

She went out into the corridor to greet him, her fingers clung to his hand, wild words broke from her white lips.

"Don't go—away—again——"

He saw fear in her eyes—fear of Wingfield.

“Never, Prudence,” he said steadily.

“I’m so frightened,” she moaned, “so frightened . . .,” she slackened, and he put his arm round her, and led her to a chair standing within the open door of her bedroom. She clung still to his hand, muttering :

“Don’t go—don’t go——”

“Prudence! Prudence! Damn it all, am I to be left to die alone? I will not have it——!”

She started up.

“I must go to him——”

“I’ll go. You stay here.”

He pushed her back into her chair.

“I had forgotten you were here, Mark,” she said, and a little smile lit her eyes. “We will both go.”

“No. You stay here. You’re not fit——”

“Prue! Damn that Williams! Send him away! One of his eyes squints! Prudence!”

“I want to come too. I want to be able to see you,” she said simply.

Wingfield’s bad temper vanished on Ridgeway’s entrance.

“Hulloa, done ’em in the eye, my boy?” he cried. “Ha, ha, ha! I thought we’d fix it up somehow! Lord, I love dodging the law! Was she worth it, that’s all? A woman—blue eyes—brown eyes—what’s the odds, after all? A horse, now, is a different thing.” His bleared eyes peered up into Ridgeway’s face wistfully. “Been hunting much this winter? What sort of a day is it? I’m shut up in this hell of a room—not a window open, from morning till night—I don’t even know if it’s a hunting day, or if there’s a devil of a frost—not allowed a breath of air——”

Ridgeway, feeling almost suffocated in the hot room, flung up a window and leant out.

“Mist,” he said, “ground soft—good morning for scent.”

Wingfield nodded.

“You wait a bit, my boy. Know what I’m doing?” His voice sank to a mysterious whisper. “I hope to be out with the hounds before this season’s out, after all. Ha, ha! Fact. It’s my legs that are the trouble, you know—soft as putty—couldn’t grip—not a grip in ’em. Little mare’d have me off as soon as look at me! Not that she’d do it for vice, bless her! Never played me false yet. Never would! Temper of an angel, too. But you can’t ride without legs, you know, can’t do it. Dick Christian himself couldn’t have done it, eh?”

Ridgeway assented, his eyes on Prudence, who was sitting in the chair he had pulled to the window for her. She sat, her head drooping; every now and then she lifted it to look up at him, a long look as if to reassure herself that he was really there.

She had grown thinner, he thought, there were lines in her face that were new—between her beautiful brows—as if they were often drawn together in pain. She was less like the Sistine Madonna in a way—yet like her—It came to him that now she was like the Madonna would have been a few years later. . . .

“I don’t know if you have noticed it,” Wingfield said, motioning with his delicate hand towards the rug across his knees. “But I have put away my legs, for the present. You understand. Hush, not a word! I’m not allowed to ride, to go out, to do anything I want to do. My poor wife is afflicted by a painful jealousy of me. It was always the same with all of ’em. Curious thing, but a fact, I assure you. So I keep quiet about my legs. I’m giving ’em a thorough rest. I hope the

grip will come back, eh? Soft as putty. Nothing like a thorough rest——”

He was wondering, curiously and with a pain at his heart, how the Madonna had looked when Christ turned to her and said: “Woman, what have I to do with thee?”

She had looked as Prudence looked now, sitting there, drooping, weary, wounded. . . .

“Wish they’d turn us out to grass when we’re ill—much better way than this infernal coddling and doctoring——”

And that other day when he had left her, to go away for four months, had the Sistine Madonna, when Christ hung on the crucifix, looked as she had then? God, to bring the look of his dream to her face. . . .

“Prudence!” it was wrung from his heart, low, breathless, yearning. . . .

Her eyes met his, looked for a moment into his—soul looking into soul—then drooped with wet lids. . . .

When he went away she said “Good-bye” in the room, but Ridgeway asked her to come downstairs with him. She came, shrinkingly. He knew that she was so tired, so physically worn out, that she shrank from the thought of emotion, of the need of calling upon her will, her self-control. His love for her at this moment was absolutely selfless; he thought of her, and of her only.

“I just wanted to tell you that I am going to stay in the studio for a bit, and paint some winter bits about here,” he said gently.

Even at that her lips trembled.

“For just a little while,” she said in a low voice, “perhaps—If I needn’t think of your going just yet, I—I feel I could rest then, Mark. I can’t sleep——”

“ I’m going to be there just as I used to be—always there if you want me, Prudence. I’m coming up here a lot. I shall be in and out. Now just tell me about Dickon, and I’ll go. How does he get on with his great-uncle, Sir John ? ”

She dared not give way to the longing she felt ; she said :

“ But—I—you mustn’t——”

He interrupted in a final tone :

“ Prudence, I’ve decided. I know what I want. I’m going to be your friend. It’s no good arguing about it. It’s taken out of your hands. Now tell me about Dick.”

“ He gets on splendidly with his great-uncle. He’s such a nice old man. He has been here twice, and Dickon spent a week with him. Muriel Latimer has been so good. She has—helped, Mark, and Elizabeth—André comes sometimes, and Evelyn plays games with him——”

He talked on these safe topics for a little while, then went away.

Prudence went up to her room, inexpressibly soothed ; a peaceful weariness had taken the place of that wild, unresting tiredness. She lay down on the bed, and fell in to a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XLIX

“**P**RUE, I can't hear the little mare this morning. Is she out?”

“I'll go and see, Evelyn.”

She went down to the stables, and asked Ferney to make more noise.

“Is his lordship any better, m'lady?”

She looked at the eager inquiry in his face, and answered gently:

“About the same, Ferney.”

The groom turned away with a gulped down ejaculation, and seizing a pail rattled it till the place rang and echoed with its noise.

“I beg pardon, m'lady, but there—I feel as if I shall burst some'ow this weather. Lord, the scent 'ud be as thick as peas in summer to-day! And 'im up there—and the mare eating 'er 'ead off that wistful—and the season nearly over—14th of March to-day——”

“He is very restless,” she said. “I must go back to him.”

“Of course, he is, m'lady, it's only nat'ral——” and then bursting out, as she went into the house, bursting with suppressed miserable fury. “Oh, Gawd, damn and blast! Damn and blast!”

Wingfield did not hear her come back into his room. He was sitting bent over the table, his face intent, his trembling hands busy. There was such an air of secrecy about him that she paused, till she saw that he was

jumping a little toy horse over hedges made of books. . . . She had seen it before ; she turned, and with eyes blurred, left the room.

When she re-entered it noisily a few minutes later to tell him that Dr. Fielding had come, he was sitting back in his chair, one hand buried in his pocket, his face defiant.

“What a long time you’ve been, Prue! I’ve just been sitting here doing nothing. Do you hear? What are you staring at? Don’t you believe me? Damn it, do you doubt my word——?”

“No, no, Evelyn, of course not!”

“Just sitting here as I am now. I have. What else should I be doing? I won’t have that fool of a doctor pawing me about! Lord, how I hate the sight of his ugly little pug’s face. One of these days I shall smack it. Wouldn’t it go squelch too? Ha, ha, ha! How d’you do, Puggy?”

“Genial this morning. It’s the lovely weather, eh? Gladdens your heart, doesn’t it?”——

“Oh, you damned fool,” Wingfield said in a terribly sane voice. “You damndest damned fool! I wonder some one of your patients hasn’t murdered you before this.”

Dr. Fielding tactfully ignored this ; he prided himself on his tact, as most tactless people do.

“You were laughing when I came in. Some joke, eh? There’s nothing like a good joke.”

“I was remarking that one of these days I shall smack your pug’s face, and hear it go squelch. I think,” he lifted his hand with sudden astonishing strength as the doctor bent over him to feel his pulse, “I may as well do it now.”

The doctor staggered back, putting up his hand to the

red mark on his cheek ; Prudence cried out ; Wingfield smiling and trembling, observed in a satisfied tone :

“ Yes, it did go squelch.”

The doctor gasped out :

“ If he gets violent he'll have to be——”

“ Be quiet ! ” Prudence's voice was at his ear, her hand on his arm.

He quieted down, ashamed.

Wingfield had suddenly shrunk back in his chair.

“ Have to be what ? ” he asked in a trembling voice.

“ What did he mean, Prue ? You won't let them take me away, and shut me up, will you, Prue ? ”

“ No, Evelyn, no ! ” she cried, a passion of pity shaking her voice. She nodded furiously to the doctor to go.

“ Well, I must be off,” he said tactfully. “ Who spoke of shutting you up, my dear sir ? Absurd ! Ridiculous ! You mustn't get these fancies into your head——”

“ I don't get fancies into my head, do I, Prue ? Tell them I don't get fancies into my head, my dear, or they'll be saying I'm mad next. I'm not mad, am I, Prue ? ”

“ No, of course you are not, Evelyn.”

The doctor dared disobey her eye no longer : he left the room.

“ Has he gone, Prue ? ” Wingfield asked weakly.

“ I'm very tired, my dear.”

“ Yes, he has gone. Try to sleep a little, Evelyn.”

“ I daren't, Prue, I'm so afraid they will come and take me away and shut me up. I couldn't bear being shut up, Prue.”

“ I will sit here—close by you, Evelyn.”

“ Will you hold my hand ? I don't feel so frightened if you hold my hand, my dear.”

She took his hand between hers, and held it closely.

“ Now try to sleep, Evelyn, I won't go away,” she said gently.

She moved one hand from his to adjust a cushion for his head, but he cried out at once :

“ Don't go away, Prue ! I'm frightened. Hold my hand, Prue ! ”

He slept, and whimpered of his fear in his sleep ; he woke with the tears running down his cheeks.

“ Prue, what did he mean ? Am I mad, Prue ? Will they come and take me away, and shut me up ? Away from the little mare, Prue ? Shan't I ever be able to ride her again ? Never see her ? Prue, don't let them take me away from the little mare ! I shall die if they take me away from Mirth ! Prue, hold my hand ! Lock the door. What did he mean, Prue ? ”

She tried to soothe him, to reassure him.

“ Perhaps the little mare's gone already ! ” A new fear, inextricably mixed with the other, tortured his poor brain. “ Prue, go and see if she's in the stable. Tell Ferney to watch over her. I won't have her shut up. She'd go mad if they shut her up. I'd sooner shoot her myself ! Go and see, Prue ! No, don't leave me—Yes, go—the little mare——”

“ I'll ring and send Williams, Evelyn. But she's all right—really, she is quite safe. Ferney is with her ; he is devoted to her——”

“ No, no, no ! Go yourself. I don't trust that Williams. Go yourself, Prue ! Or I'll go——”

She hurried from the room, sending Williams to watch

him, and when she returned she managed to reassure him.

"Hold my hand, my dear," he said, feebly, and fell asleep again.

When he woke he seemed to have forgotten his fear; he sat staring out of the window.

"Let's have it up, Prue, I want to smell the wet earth," he said, forgetting his horror of cool air. "Lord, what a hunting day! Light frost in the night, wasn't there? And sun dispersed it—earth wet, eh? Won't there be a bustle at the meet to-day—horses mad to be off—holding 'em in—a bit of kicking—and sweating—hounds'll look a picture in the sun—can't you see them? Won't their voices ring out—Lord, what music it is! That, and the thud of the horses' hoofs as they gallop on a hot scent—Prue, if I'm *very* careful, do you think I shall be able just to ride to one meet before the season's over?" he asked wistfully.

"I——" her voice choked.

"Just one—only to the meet, Prue," he pleaded, like a child.

"I—I hope so——"

"But do you *think* so, Prue? If I'm *very* careful, I'll take all the doctor's filthy stuff, my dear, and I won't get excited. Just one meet—not too far off, eh, Prue? The little mare'll go gently—she'll know right enough—just one, eh, Prue? Do you think I'll be able to manage just one?"

White, and infinitely tender, she turned and lied to him.

"Yes, Evelyn, if you are very careful."

He gave a little shaky laugh, believing her, as he always did.

" Oh, I'll be careful, my dear. Don't you fear. Shall I take my medicine now ? "

" Not just yet, Evelyn, it's not time."

" All right."

Presently :

" Do you think it will be soon ? You see, the season's getting on——"

" Right at the end, Evelyn, it must be right at the end."

" Very well, my dear. Of course. Don't you think I might have a little of that food stuff now ? "

" I wish you would," she said.

" Certainly, my dear, certainly."

He drank the food up, and presently fell asleep again. In the afternoon his old fear returned :

" Prue, they're going to separate us—me and the little mare—they're going to shut me up ! He said so, Prue ! I heard him. What did he mean, Prue ? He said they were going to take Mirth away and shut her up——"

" No, no, Evelyn. Would you like to see her ? "

" Yes, my dear, yes. Tell Ferney to bring her round. Saddle her up—I'll be ready in a few minutes."

" You are tired, Evelyn, just look at her to-day——"

He flew into one of his violent rages, and insisted on her ringing for Williams.

" Ring for that fool with the swollen face ! Ring at once ! D'you hear ? I *will* be obeyed ! I'm going for a gentle canter, before they separate us—— ! "

She rang, and Williams, his face swollen from toothache, appeared. It was all just as usual ; in a few minutes Wingfield was worn out.

Ferney brought the mare round, and Wingfield went feebly to the window and looked out.

“ There you are, my beauty ! ”

The mare lifted her head and called ; Ferney looked up eagerly.

“ Too tired to-day, Ferney—to-morrow perhaps.”

“ Yes, my lord.”

“ Anything wrong with that off hind leg ? She’s resting it a bit——”

“ No, my lord. Stand up ! ” The mare stood out, her coat gleaming in the sunshine, her little head up, her nostrils wide, sniffing the air.

“ She smells fox,” Wingfield said. “ Take her away, Ferney, poor little devil—take her away ! It’d be kinder to shoot her. I’ll never sell her.”

He went back wearily to his chair.

“ No strength even to go down and give her a bit of sugar now,” he said bitterly. “ Lord, what legs she’s got ! I’ve never seen a pair of forelegs to beat hers ! To feel them moving under me again. God, I’d give all I possess just to sit in the saddle again ! Shan’t I ever do it, Prue ? Prue, I’m weaker every day—I can’t go down to the stables now—weaker and weaker till I can’t get out of my damnable bed. Good God, what an end ! ”

“ Evelyn, surely these are rusty ? ”

“ What ? Eh, what ? What ? ”

“ These stirrups. Look.”

She brought them to him, dulled by herself.

“ What’s the odds ? ” he said bitterly. “ Shan’t ever need ’em again. Pretty little irons too—plenty of room for your foot,” he began to rub them. “ When did I last wear these—— ? ”

He wandered into a long story, and fell asleep in the middle.

Prudence slipped from the room, sent Williams up

to him, and went down to the stables. She wanted to send Ferney for Ridgeway ; she felt desperately that she must have him there, when Evelyn should wake. She feared this new terror that had come upon him, she feared her power to cope with it. She turned to Ridgeway—he would be able to help Evelyn.

Ferney was out ; she stood a minute hesitating, then ran upstairs, put on her hat and coat, and hurried out into the keen air. She knew that Wingfield always slept heavily now in the afternoon, once he fell asleep ; she would not be missed. She could think of no other way ; Williams was such a terribly bad walker, and Lydia was not to be trusted not to dawdle on the way. She was glad Dickon was at the Hall ; she felt that she could not have faced his questions. As she walked, her strained nerves steadied, the sharp little breeze blew into her face, bringing a hint of more frost with it. The sun shone ; she saw an early foal in a meadow, it eyed her haughtily, then kicked up its legs at her, and gambolled back to its mother. She remembered a plan of Evelyn's to breed horses—her eyes filled with tears ; for a moment she wished this glorious, life-giving day could be dull, freezing hard ; she realised afresh what it must mean to him to be shut up there in his sick room.

Ridgeway was cleaning his brushes ; till she was actually in the studio she had not dwelt enough on her own feelings to know what it would mean to them—to be there together again. . . .

She stood silent, then said very quietly :

“ Evelyn is so bad—I wanted you——”

He went on rubbing his brushes on an old piece of yellow soap, but his hand shook.

“ I'll come at once,” he said.

He turned from his brushes, and looked at her ; she said trembling :

“ Evelyn—is so bad——”

“ I’ll come at once,” he said.

They went out into the meadow.

“ There was thin ice on that puddle this morning,” he said.

“ It’s very blue now,” she answered.

They went on in silence, along the road, where the afternoon shadows were darkening. She told him of Wingfield’s day. He abused the doctor. Then they said no more.

“ I hope he will have forgotten when he wakes,” she said as they entered the hall.

Lydia came out of the kitchen.

“ That poor feller, Mr. Williams, he come down to me for pepper for his tooth, and he’s wore out—never a wink of sleep night after night, and never a word of complaint, and I turn round to look for the pepper, and off he’s to sleep in a moment ! I hadn’t the heart to wake him, ma’am, but master’s all right. I went up just now and listened outside his door, and never a sound——”

Prudence hurried up the stairs, followed by Ridgeway.

“ I hope he’s still asleep—you stay here in case you wake him.”

He waited in the corridor. She came back to him, and spoke, white-lipped :

“ He isn’t there.”

“ Some game he’s playing,” Ridgeway said cheerfully. “ Have you looked in that cupboard ? ”

“ No ; he’s so weak lately—he hardly eats——”

Ridgeway went into the room and searched.

She watched him, then spoke her thought :

" He has tried to go to Mirth."

" Could he manage it ? "

" I—don't know. He has queer bursts of strength—"

She was down the stairs.

" Ferney is out," she added.

" Let me go alone——"

" No ! "

They went out into the yard ; her eye fell on the pail brought round there so that Wingfield might be able to hear it rattle. . . .

She shivered ; the mare called from the loose box. For a moment she halted, then went on. She saw Ferney coming back, along the lane.

They went into the loose box ; the late sun was streaming in at the window and dazzled their eyes for a moment, it gleamed on the straw, and across the mare's shining quarters ; she remembered Evelyn's admiration of them one afternoon last year. . . .

He was there, on the mare's back—he had fallen forward on her neck. The mare stood quite still, her head up, listening, her beautiful eyes wide with fear ; she was trembling. . . .

Ridgeway thought : " Never played me false yet ! Never would ! . . ." No she never would—it was true. . . .

He lifted him down gently.

" He has had his wish," he said huskily.

Prudence's foot touched something in the straw by the overturned chair ; she stooped and picked it up—it was a little toy horse. . . .

With a quick movement she hid it in the bosom of her gown. . . .

" Is—he——" she said.

" Yes," Ridgeway said, and again :

“ He has had his wish.”

She hid her face in the mare's neck. . . .

The stillness was intense ; Ridgeway bent to lift the body from where he had rested it in the straw.

“ Leave him—just a moment——” she whispered.

In her mind echoed words of his :

“ To sleep in a loose box—I ask no better bed ! ”

He should sleep there—just a little while.

She knelt beside him, and her tears fell on to his beautiful hand ; she took it in hers, held it close.

“ You are not frightened now,” she whispered.

In his face was a great peace—a nobility. . . .

A sound broke the stillness—it was Ferney sobbing in the next loose box. . . .

She lifted her quivering face to Ridgeway.

“ He—he——” she said, and her eyes besought him.

He knelt beside her in the straw, the mare stood behind them, quite quiet. A ray of sunshine shone across Wingfield's face.

Ridgeway said gently :

“ We must try to make Dickon as brave a man as his father.”

She gave a little cry . . . the tears rained down ; she bent and kissed the peaceful brow.

“ As brave a man as his father,” she whispered.

Ridgeway had answered her appeal.

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