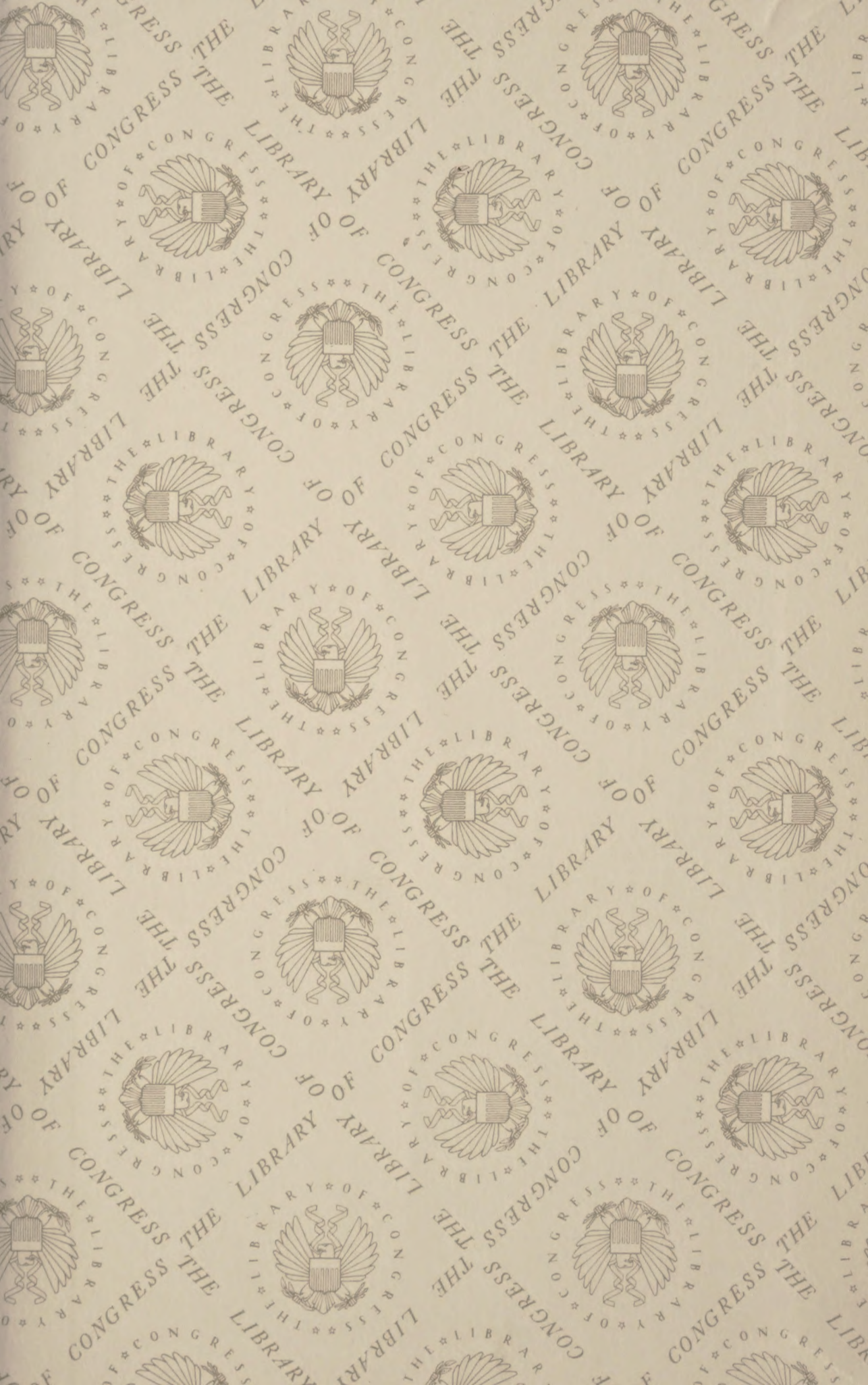


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# BETTY OF THE RECTORY

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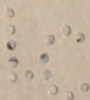
CHARLES  
HORRELL

“DID SHE WANT YOU NOT TO MARRY ME?” Page 110

# Betty of the Rectory

By *Smith*

MRS. L. T. MEADE



GROSSET & DUNLAP

PUBLISHERS : : NEW YORK

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*Betty of the Rectory*

# BETTY OF THE RECTORY

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## CHAPTER I

BETTY ROSS was standing in her beautiful bedroom looking out across the broad meadows and bright flower garden of the old Rectory grounds of Deep Dale. The room was in that state of confusion which meant departure. Dresses of all sorts and descriptions, blouses, hats, bodices, the varied clothing which constitutes a girl's wardrobe, was lying about on chairs, and some of it was piled up on a little white bed. The girl to whom all these things belonged was standing motionless by the window, her hands folded together, her eyes gazing straight out on to the landscape. She looked like one whose heart was too full for speech, who was too much absorbed in a silent vision of happiness even to remember where she was.

A gay little voice called out behind her :

“Betty! Div’ I a penny for oo thoughts!” and a charming little girl of five years of age, who had

first peeped almost timidly into the room, now sprang forward and clasped Betty round the waist. "Geoff is down'tairs," said the child, "and wants to see oo; and oh—isn't it insiting and isn't oo glad oo's going to be bwide? I wonder, I do wonder, Betty, when I'll be mawwied!"

"O Rachel—what a silly little mite you are!" said Betty. "Why, Baby, you do talk nonsense."

The elder sister stooped, pushed the hair back from the pretty brow of the little one and kissed her on her full rosy lips.

"I is going to mawwy vezzy vezzy soon," said Rachel; "and I'll tell oo why, Betty. 'Cause I want all the be-eautiful pwesents—boxes and boxes more have come for oo. Isn't oo just a *wee* bit tired of opening 'em? Wouldn't oo like me to do it for oo?"

"No, Rachel," replied Betty. "I must do it myself, and send letters to all the kind people. Now don't keep me, darling, for I want to go and see Geoffrey. I didn't know he would return from London so early."

The girl moved slowly across the room. All her movements were slow, and somewhat stately. The little sister watched her, her own eyes bright and happy as those of an absolutely contented and healthy child ought to be. The excitement and fuss of the wedding delighted little Rachel Ross, and she

gave no present thought to the fact that Betty, her elder sister and the darling of her heart, would have left home by that time to-morrow.

“Come, Ray,” said Betty. She held out her hand to the child.

“O Betty!” said little Rachel. “I love oo just awful much! I am *so* glad you are going to have a beautiful wedding!”

“Darling,” said Betty, “I shall miss you very much.”

Ray’s deep blue eyes grew round with a sort of wonder.

“Miss me?” she said, a thoughtful expression coming into her baby face; “but there’s so much to think of afore the missing time begins. Firstly, there’s the looking at the pwesents, and to-morrow there’ll be the beautiful, beautiful dwesses, and the time in church and me holding up your twain, and then there’ll be the cutting of the cake and the thwowing of the wice at you and Geoff: and oh, Betty, what do you think? Nurse has got me a lot of old slippers, and I’ll see that some of them pitch on the top of the cawwidge, that I will. Oh, there’s no time to think of missing to-day, there’s such a lot to do first.”

“So there is; you’re quite right,” said Betty.

They reached the hall. Betty dropped the child’s

hand, and, still walking slowly, entered the little boudoir where she knew her lover would be waiting for her.

Geoffrey Pevensey, a man of about thirty years of age, was the rector of a large parish in a distant part of England. Betty herself was a clergyman's daughter. Betty was twenty-two years old. She had lost her mother when quite a little child. Rachel was her step-sister.

The second Mrs. Ross was a good-looking and excellent woman. Betty adored her. She also adored little Rachel; but her strongest love was given to her father, the Rev. Michael Ross, who was one of the best and most conscientious men of his time; one whose sympathy was so rare and whose tact was so perfect, that people of all sorts and degrees, and of many shades of opinion, came to him for advice, and treasured and acted upon the brave, strong words with which he counselled them.

Of his two children, Mr. Ross loved Betty the most. She was the daughter of his first wife, and his first wife had been to him that absolutely ideal creature whom a man is sometimes, but not often, fortunate enough to win.

Betty in many respects resembled her mother, while at the same time she had her father's sturdy and firm character. Now she was to find her own



home, and no one could for a moment doubt the deep love which filled her heart, as she raised her eyes to the face of Pevensey, when he came eagerly forward to greet her.

The Rev. Geoffrey Pevensey was a fine type of the best sort of Englishman. His face was somewhat thin and much bronzed from exposure to the weather. He had dark and very beautiful grey eyes and a firm mouth. He was the sort of man whom any girl could easily learn to love, and he was the first who had ever touched the heart of Betty Ross.

She entered the room now, her face full of brightness and her heart singing a song of absolute content. But when she looked full at her lover, the content vanished from her radiant face and the song died away. Pevensey took both her hands, drew her close to him, and said in a quick, eager voice, with a sort of trembling in it—a voice absolutely unlike his own:

“I want to speak to you, Betty: I have something I ought to say before we are married. I only knew about it myself last night. I hurried down from London by an earlier train to tell you everything, to ask your advice—to, if necessary, and it may be necessary, Betty—to give you back your freedom. We are close to our wedding, but it has not taken place yet. Were this thing told to me

twenty-four hours later, I would never breathe it to you, my darling; but as it is, you ought—yes, you ought to know.

While Pevensey was speaking, Betty's whole face altered. The resolution of character which she had inherited from her father came into it to a marked degree. It lost much of its tenderness, but it gained in strength and power.

"Stop a minute," she said. "You came down early on purpose? Something has frightened you."

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Yes, my darling, it is true."

"You think, Geoffrey, that it may part us?"

"It may," he replied.

She clasped his hand in both of hers. He held it tightly, then she said in a low tone:

"You heard of this thing, whatever it is, last night. Did the information come to you immediately after our marriage you would never tell me?"

"Never, never—so help me, God! It would be too late then."

Now she raised one of her hands and laid it on his shoulder. Then she stole her arm round his neck and pressed her soft lips to his cheek.

"You will do what I wish?" she said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I wish not to know. I wish whatever is troub-

ling you to remain a secret. Let it be as though you had heard it after our marriage. That is what I wish. If it concerns me and I so decide, I have a right to my decision. Keep your secret, Geoffrey; don't tell me."

"But that is not right," he said. "We must discuss the whole thing. You must decide *after* you know."

"Does it concern you personally?" she asked.

"In a measure, yes; in a measure, no."

"You have never done anything really, really wrong in your life?" she said, looking him full in the face.

"I have had many faults, Betty," answered her lover; "and the sins of discontent and slothfulness in the cause of God's work have been, alas! abundantly mine. At the present moment you are tempting me, my own Betty, to commit a further sin—the sin of selfishness. Don't try me too far."

"I will," she answered, with a joyful note in her voice. "This is some trouble which has come to you, and I am to part from you because you are in trouble, Geoffrey? A thousand times, no. If you could live after our wedding without telling me, so you can live now. Bury the secret, darling; let it be as though it did not exist."

He turned from her and walked to the window.

The temptation she was presenting to him was very fierce; it smote on his heart with almost irresistible power. He clenched his right hand. He said to himself, "Need she know? Were I told what was confided to me last night twenty-four hours after our marriage, I should never have troubled her. Need I—need I trouble her now?"

Betty came up and touched him on the shoulder.

"I will not part from you," she said, "and I will not hear what you have come down in such a hurry to tell me."

"You are not afraid?" he said, then.

"I have no fear when I am with you," was her answer.

He kissed her silently, looking at her in that tender way which drew her very heart from her. Suddenly he said:

"Oh, Betty! you ought to give me strength to do my duty."

"As your wife, I will give you all strength," she answered; "but I must have you for my very own. There! I have decided absolutely. You have done your duty by coming here for the express purpose of telling me something which gives you pain, something which you imagine would divide us. Whatever it is, it would never do that. I would marry you, whatever happened. But I would prefer to

marry you, Geoffrey, not knowing the secret which we will both decide to bury from this moment forward."

"I have done my duty," thought Geoffrey Pevensey. "She is right. The responsibility of her not knowing rests on her, and her alone. The story is terrible, but it need never affect her. Its consequences may never extend to the future. It relates to no crime of mine. It is the bitter consequence of the sin of another. Why should I fear it? My little girl is right; she need never know. Oh, how beautiful she is and how deeply I love her!"

"I say—Geoff and Betty!" called Rachel's cheerful voice. "Mummy says that more and more pwittys pwesents have come, and that you mustn't talk secwets any longer. You've got to come with me and see the new pwesents. How I do wish I was being mawwied my own self!"

"You silly little darling!" said Betty, relieved by the child's presence, and catching her hand. "Come, Geoff," she said, turning to her lover; and the young man followed her into a room where the presents were being arranged for public display on the morrow.

The following day there was a gay wedding at Deep Dale Church. It was recorded fully in all the local newspapers. The decorations of the church

were described, also the dresses of the bridesmaids. Betty had chosen six little girls to follow her to the altar. The lovely face of little Rachel was much discussed, but of course the crowning figure in the gay and yet solemn scene was the young and stately bride, who, on her father's arm, moved so slowly up the aisle, her bright face lightly hidden by the beautiful veil of Honiton lace which she wore.

Her whole appearance seemed to radiate happiness and content. The bridegroom is more or less a secondary figure in a wedding—at least, so he seems to the majority of spectators. But no one could fail to admire the stalwart figure of Geoffrey Pevensey as he and his young bride stood together, and in the presence of God and a great congregation took solemn vows to be true to each other until death.

The marriage over, the guests returned to the Rectory, and shortly afterwards, as though it were in a dream, Betty left the old home; kissed her father and stepmother and her little sister; looked with a feeling almost of bewilderment round at the old gardens and the old house, and then stepped into the carriage by her husband's side. Cheer after cheer greeted the bridal pair as they drove to the nearest railway station. The marriage was over, and Betty was now Geoffrey Pevensey's wife.

When they found themselves alone in the railway carriage which was to convey them to the house of a friend, where they were to spend the honeymoon, Betty, clasping her husband's hand in hers, said:

"Now I am safe and don't fear anything; but you gave me an awful time yesterday."

He did not reply, but the color suddenly left his face. She gazed at him steadily; then she said in a low voice:

"I want you to make me a very solemn promise."

"What is it, Betty?" he asked.

"I want you to say this to me: 'We will never talk of that which you feared might divide us yesterday. We will keep it in the dark and forget it.'"

"I will make you the promise conditionally," was his answer.

"Conditionally?" she replied.

"Yes."

"What are the conditions?"

"As far as lies within me," he said at once, "I will do what you wish. As far as is in the power of man, I will keep the secret which has come to my knowledge to myself. If I fail, it will only be because fate will be too strong for me."

"There can be nothing too strong, there can be no circumstance too bitter, for God not to help us through," said the wife. She sat very still and

thoughtful for a few minutes; then she said, in her somewhat slow way: "I mean to ask you for a second promise which may, if necessary, override the first."

"Yes," he said again.

"If," she said, "the matter which you *nearly* told me yesterday becomes at any time or in any way a burden too heavy for you to carry, then tell me all, ask for my counsel, depend upon my sympathy as your wife; nothing can really divide us. What I dreaded yesterday and could not face was separation. We are safe from that."

"Yes; we are safe from that," he replied; "but I will be true to myself, Betty. The only time when the telling of my secret could have helped you was yesterday. The time is over. I will not be a coward; it may never affect either of us. This is our wedding day, darling; let us be happy."

He kissed her and she kissed him.



## CHAPTER II

PEVENSEY'S Rectory was situated on the outskirts of a large manufacturing town. In itself it was pretty and commodious. It had large sitting-rooms and tastefully laid out grounds. It is true, the smoke from the great chimneys of the huge manufacturing town of Dartminster spread its pernicious effects on the flowers and grass and the tall trees, which made shade in the leafy garden.

Betty Pevensey, three months after her marriage, thought of the difference between the trees at the Hillside Rectory and the trees at Deep Dale. But her comparisons were all in favor of Hillside Rectory. If she had looked happy before her marriage, she looked ten times happier now. Her life was full; she had every blessing that could be given to a woman—the love of her husband's heart, a deep and ever growing respect for him, for his noble character and his power of influencing others.

She was keenly interested, too, in his work, which, as far as possible, she participated in. Few people would have recognized in the active young matron, the girl who spent her time in the garden at Deep

Dale, playing with Rachel or reading quietly to herself. Now Betty was busy always. She was sympathetic with her poorer neighbors, and was liked by them all.

The Rectory was an old house. It was very cool and shady in summer and warm in winter, owing to the thickness of its walls. Betty made it look as bright and gay as possible. She fought vigorously against the smuts, and instructed her young servants to follow her example. She was particularly active on this special day, for Lady Pevensey, her husband's mother, was coming to stay with her.

She had hardly ever met this lady, and felt a slight degree of nervousness at meeting her. Lady Pevensey was unlike her son. She had never approved of his taking Holy Orders, and was herself a worldly-minded woman. She was coming to visit Betty, accompanied by her daughter Laura, and the young wife was anxious to do all in her power to make things pleasant for them both.

Pevensey came in suddenly. He had been visiting his parishioners for some hours, and was disturbed by a bad accident which had taken place in one of the factories. In consequence, two men had died, and another, whom Pevensey especially cared for—a young fellow of twenty, and his mother's only son—could not live until the morning.

“They’ve taken poor Jack Hinton to the hospital,” he said, “and I am going to see him at once. The doctors think he may recover consciousness before he passes away. Poor Mrs. Hinton knows nothing about it. I wonder”—he looked full at Betty.

“You want me to tell her,” said the girl, shrinking a little into herself at the ordeal which was presented to her.

“No one could do it so tenderly, darling.”

“Then I will—I certainly will,” she replied. “I will go at once.”

“Yes, Betty; you ought to go at once, for the poor woman must be prepared. She ought to be with Jack when he recovers consciousness. He is in the western division of the hospital, Ward B. You might bring her to the hospital if you can, Betty. Take a cab; do all in your power for her. Now I must hurry off.”

He kissed his wife, and then strode down the avenue. She watched him until he was out of sight. Then she turned quickly, pressing her hands together.

Lady Pevensey and Laura might arrive any minute. Betty had intended to go to the railway station to meet them; but now this could not be managed. She rang a bell. The neat parlor maid appeared.

“Helen,” said Mrs. Pevensey, “I must go out suddenly; I have to see poor Mrs. Hinton. She has not yet been told of the accident.”

“Oh, ma’am,” said Helen, a most affectionate girl and warmly attached to Betty; “isn’t it just too awful! There wasn’t a young fellow in the whole of Dartminster like Jack—and such a son to his mother, too! You are looking quite white, ma’am. May I get you a cup of tea before you go out?”

“No, I am all right,” said Betty; “and there isn’t a minute to spare. Helen, you must be ready to meet Lady Pevensey when she arrives, and take her and Miss Pevensey to their rooms, and get them tea, and do everything you can for them. You must explain to them why I am out, and that I will be back as soon as ever I can.”

“Yes, of course, ma’am; I will do my very best.”

The girl withdrew. Betty rushed to her room, put on her outdoor things and ran downstairs. Her quick steps almost flew down the avenue. Helen watched her until she was out of sight. As she did so, she said to herself:

“There’s no one like our young missis, unless perhaps it’s the Rector himself. She don’t have a thought in her heart, but just to love the Rector and to help every living soul who is in any sort of trouble in the world. Oh, don’t I love her just! I wonder

what sort Lady Pevensey is; but she must be nice to be my master's mother."

Meanwhile, Betty had hailed a passing tram, and, getting into it, quickly found herself in the neighborhood of that poor part of Dartminster where the Hintons lived.

Jack was foreman in a great iron factory, and kept his mother and himself in considerable comfort. Mrs. Hinton was a sour-faced woman of middle age. She was very reserved and distant to her neighbors, lavishing all the love of her heart on her son. He was her darling, her idol. The great fear she had was that some day he would bring a wife home to her. Mrs. Hinton was by no means unselfish in her devotion. That she could be deprived of the sunshine of her life in any way except by marriage had never entered her head. The great separation caused by Death had never occurred to her. It, of course, was possible, just possible, that she might die, but that Jack, her darling, the bonniest boy in the town—the gayest, the brightest, the best—could lose his life before she lost hers was a condition of things which had never yet intruded itself on her mind.

It is an old saying that it's invariably the unexpected that happens, and poor Mrs. Hinton as she laid the table for tea little guessed the heavy blow which was awaiting her. Jack invariably came in

for that meal, even though he had generally to return to the works for an hour or two afterwards.

She was putting the home-made brown loaf on the table, on which she had first spread a clean white cloth, and was just lifting the kettle to pour boiling water into the teapot, when Mrs. Pevensey's tap at the door caused her to start.

"Whoever can it be now?" thought Mrs. Hinton. "I do dislike the way the neighbors peep and pry on one, and come round when they'd be much better out of the way. I am sort o' wore out with them; and I am sure no one can accuse *me* of encouraging them."

The knock came again. Mrs. Hinton put down her kettle on the little hob and walked to the door. She flung it wide.

"You'll excuse me," she began, "I'm expecting of my son." Then she saw Mrs. Pevensey and started back.

Betty had been to see her once or twice before, and even cross Mrs. Hinton was not proof against that bright presence, those clear and sweet eyes, and that radiant smile. Instantly the cloud disappeared from her face.

"Oh, come in, ma'am," she said; "come in. Whoever would have thought it was you! I was just in the act of wetting the tea for Jack, poor boy; he

always likes it ready drawn when he comes in from the works, and I am expecting him in a couple of minutes; not that you'd be in the way, ma'am—far from that. Will you do me the honor to take a seat, and if I could persuade you, Mrs. Pevensey, to have a cup of tea, I should be proud. I have got this tea I am using now from my sister in London, and it's very good of its kind. It's a mixture that she has specially prepared for her."

Mrs. Pevensey was glad that Mrs. Hinton talked on. She accepted the proffered seat, but said quietly:

"I don't want the tea, thank you so very much."

"Well, ma'am, that's as you like; but it's not that strong, coarse Ceylon stuff that most poor folks drink. Jack and me, we can't abear it. I am noted for the fine flavor of my tea."

Betty struggled with a lump in her throat. The little room was the picture of neatness. All preparations had already been made for Jack's return in the evening. There was a special chair—an easy one, made of wicker work, drawn up not far from the highly polished little stove. There were the slippers to put on his feet, and a pile of books—for the young fellow was an ardent reader—already placed on a small table near.

"Ah, ma'am!" said Mrs. Hinton, "you may well

look at those things and wonder. There never was such a scholar as my boy. He's reading *Butler's Analogy* now. I can't make head nor tail of it myself; but Jack, he loves it, he do. He says nothing pleases him so much as to speculate things out and guess at meanings. He has a great turn for religion, ma'am—wonderful, I call it, in so young a boy."

The clock ticked on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Hinton looked at it.

"He ought to be coming in. You know my Jack, don't you, ma'am?"

"Yes, I know him," said Betty. That lump in her throat must not prevent her speaking. "I—I have come here on purpose——"

"To see him, ma'am. Well, I am sure, he'll be that proud! He has talked to me over and over of our dear young lady at the Rectory. He is took with you like anything, ma'am; and when you proposed having a class for young men on Sunday afternoons, my Jack was the first who said he'd join."

"I know," said Betty; and then she did just perhaps the best thing of all under the circumstances; she did what she could not help doing, she burst into a torrent of weeping. Much alarmed, and fearing something had happened to the dear young lady



herself, Mrs. Hinton went on her knees by Betty's side.

When people cry, distinction and mere rank are apt to disappear.

"Now, don't ye, don't ye, my dear pretty lady," said poor Mrs. Hinton. "What can I do for you, my dear? Is it in trouble you be? But I can scarcely think it, you, who have every one of the blessings of God showered on your head."

"Oh, it is *you* I am thinking of!" said Betty, then. She struggled with her emotion, rose, and clasped the widow's two hands. "Mrs. Hinton, you must listen, and for the sake of another you must be brave—yes, brave. He—your Jack, I mean—*isn't* coming in. Well, he—he *can't*. Mrs. Hinton—bear up, even if it is only for a little. Come with me, dear; come with me. He is hurt, your Jack is, *badly*. He is in the hospital. I have come to—to fetch you. Dear Mrs. Hinton, come; let me take you to him."

Mrs. Hinton stared hard at Betty. As the girl went on speaking, the sympathetic look left the old woman's face. It seemed to harden—to freeze. There came a queer expression into her eyes, she dropped Betty's two hands, and, turning slowly, put out the little gas stove on which the kettle was boiling. She then went straight to her bedroom, stayed

there for a minute or two, and reappeared in her bonnet and neat shawl.

"I am ready," she said. Then she added, slowly: "You understand, ma'am, perhaps, that he is all I have in the world. Without him I am homeless, penniless, and, above all things, I have no one to love. You understand, ma'am?"

"Yes—oh yes—oh yes!" said Betty.

She clasped the poor woman's cold hand.

"But come," she added, "you would like to be with him."

They went downstairs and reached the street. Betty called a passing hansom. She motioned to Mrs. Hinton to get in. She followed her.

"To the west wing of the hospital," she said to the man, "and be as quick as you can."

The driver of the hansom looked at the young lady as though he knew what she meant. All over Dartminster the news of that terrible accident which had caused the deaths of two men and the mortal injuries of another was already known. Only Mrs. Hinton, who kept herself so much to herself, had heard nothing. The hansom driver whipped up his horse; and to her dying day Betty always remembered how they dashed through obstacles, and their hair-breadth escapes in turning corners—in short, they seemed almost to fly over the ground on their

way to the hospital. Mrs. Hinton did not speak a single word until, as they were quickly entering the great square in front of the building, she turned and looked full at the girl.

"There is no hope; he is dying," she said.

Betty's face went white. She nodded, but did not speak. Mrs. Hinton drew herself up very erect. Just as the hansom approached the west entrance, she said again:

"You understand, young lady, that you are bringing me to the deathbed of my only son. I am homeless and penniless henceforth—and without love; that is the worst."

"Come," said Betty, "come; think of him now, poor mother: think of him and take courage."

They were shown up at once to the ward. Betty parted from Mrs. Hinton at the door. She did not go in. She wanted to say to her:

"I will be with you to-night; I will come to you again to-morrow; there is nothing in the way of my love and sympathy and consolation which I will not give you."

But there was no time for words, and no place for them. She went slowly downstairs and, entering the hansom, desired the man to drive her back to the Rectory.

What she had just gone through had strained her

every nerve. Her sympathy with the broken-down woman was intense. Betty could always give immense sympathy; it was her strongest and richest possession. Since she was a tiny child, children smaller than herself had come to her in their troubles, and all during her childhood and girlhood things had been like that. Sick dogs were nursed by her, forsaken animals rescued by her; and young and old, rich and poor, had learned to look for her smile of joy in times of happiness, and for her gentleness and loving words in times of trouble.

Now she entered the house, feeling fagged and unlike herself. She had forgotten the visit of Lady Pevensey and her daughter, and when a gay, somewhat strident voice called out her name, and a girl with a look of Geoffrey Pevensey came into the hall to greet her, she gave a quick gasp.

Laura Pevensey and her mother had been out of England at the time of Betty's marriage. Betty had consequently only seen very little of them. Now Laura, a handsome girl, fashionably dressed, and with the quick manner and stride of a very athletic young woman, said eagerly:

"Oh, there you are at last, Betty. I hope you are glad to see us. I have been roaming about the house trying to amuse myself. Mother's up in her room.

She is just a wee bit offended; she thought you might have been here."

"How are you, Laura? I am delighted to see you, of course," said Betty. "I had to go out—there has been an accident—horrible! didn't Helen tell you?"

"Oh, your maid gave us some garbled account of a poor boy who has been injured in the machinery at one of the factories; but mother did think that even such an accident should not have prevented your staying here just to receive us. However, I am not going to scold. Come in, Betty; how nice you look. You are very pretty indeed: you don't mind my talking frankly, do you? I am nothing if not frank. When I dislike anyone, I say so plainly, and I say the reverse when I am pleased: only for goodness' sake, my dear child, don't keep that woe-begone face on. You must smile and be cheerful with mother; she simply won't endure it if you are gloomy. And there's another thing, Betty. Don't talk about that horrid accident to her, for she positively hates painful subjects. She has nerves, you know—neurasthenia, or something of that kind—she calls it; I, myself, believe it's fancy, but she likes to have it—it's somewhat distinguished, you know—I mean, fashionable. Anyhow, she goes in for all those new electric treatments. If you want to please her, you will talk to her about her complaints; she

can describe to you what her various doctors have said by the yard! Now then, where are you going?"

"Up to see your mother, of course, Laura."

"But you can't; it is impossible. She is in the hands of her maid. She is having a new transformation put on her head, and she is getting into a very becoming gown. She will come downstairs presently to your drawing-room, and then you must sit by her and entertain her. I only trust you have some little scandals to tell her! There must be heaps of that sort of thing to talk about in a great parish like this."

"I haven't any; I don't know of any," said Betty.

"Oh, good gracious!" cried Laura. "How frightfully dull we shall be! Well, let me see the house. You must go upstairs afterwards, and put on one of your own prettiest dresses. Mother's fearfully conventional, you understand. Everything must be 'just so' with mother. Now, I hate conventionality, and don't care twopence what anyone wears! Do lead the way, Betty; I want to see all over the house."

Betty took her young sister-in-law from room to room. Laura remarked on the furniture, and was shocked with many of the arrangements.

"Very old-fashioned!" she said, "and not a scrap of art taste anywhere. Whom did you get to fur-

nish your rooms? Waring is fairly good, and he is so new just at present. I myself think Liberty the only person whose style in the decoration of a house is enduring, but some people hate him. Mother prefers Maple. Horrid of her, isn't it! Now, how many horses have you? and dogs? You ought to keep almost a kennel full of dogs here. You might take me to the stables, and show me the horses, Betty."

### CHAPTER III

LADY PEVENSEY, a fashionably-dressed woman with much elegance of deportment and a face which still looked comparatively young, waited in the pretty drawing-room of Betty's house. Neither Laura nor Betty was anywhere to be seen. Lady Pevensey, in a pale lilac silk, with some good lace round her neck and at her wrists, felt impatient. She was the sort of woman whom others make a fuss about. She was accustomed to admiration from her earliest days.

She had not been too eager to accept Geoffrey's invitation to Hillside Rectory. But then it was difficult to refuse the dear boy. He was her only son, too, and she was really—well, on the whole, fond of him. He had none of her tastes, it is true; he was always a queer fellow. She reflected somewhat restlessly as she thought of that.

"Geoff, from his earliest days," she commented, "was unlike others—obstinate to a fault, and so strangely, unnaturally devoid of all worldly instincts. If ever a boy had the golden bowl of success at his feet, my Geoff had. He took such high honors at



Oxford, and is so good-looking. He'd have done well, very well, in the Diplomatic Service, and Lord Arrowsmith, my dear husband's uncle, could easily have got him an appointment. But no; Geoff chose the Church. 'The Church in its poverty, mother,' he said to me. They were such strange words. I said something with regard to lay interest and a good living, which I knew was in Lord Arrowsmith's gift, but Geoff said he didn't want a good living in that sense, he wanted his living to be rich in human beings; and so he came here, and so, too, he married Elizabeth Ross, the daughter of a country parson, with little or no money of her own, and with no sort of distinction about her. What Geoff could see in her always puzzled me. Not that she is unladylike—oh, by no means—but what she lacks is knowledge, knowledge of the world. She has no style, and she really, poor girl, doesn't know how to behave. The bare idea of allowing her husband's mother and sister to arrive here on their first visit without any one to welcome them is *gauche*, and wrong in the extreme. Of course I do not blame her, poor child! for she knows no better; but it is sad for Geoff."

Lady Pevensey walked about the room, taking up one little ornament after another, and commenting on the arrangement of the old-fashioned furniture.

“It’s exactly like Geoff to have a house of this kind,” she thought, “and a room furnished like this. What an ugly and terribly *wearable* carpet! It will last practically for both their lives. I can fancy this room quite well with all the furniture pushed to one side in order that my daughter-in-law, Betty, should have mothers’ meetings in it; and I can see the mothers themselves with their mouths half open, gazing at her in admiration. After all, perhaps she is wise in her generation. If tea is spilt on this ugly grey-green carpet, it won’t show; and of course the mothers will be awkward with their cups of tea. But there—Geoff has made his bed, and he will have to lie on it. It is by no means a bed of roses, for he could have had a brilliant life.”

Steps were heard in the hall, and the girls, both looking fresh and sweet, entered. Betty had put on a white muslin dress and a white hat; for although it was nearly the end of September, the weather was still quite warm. Laura was wearing a tailor-made gown, and entered behind Betty with her usual stride.

“Here’s Betty, mother,” she said, “she’s so sorry not to have been in the house to meet you.”

“Oh, yes!” said Betty.

She went eagerly up to her mother-in-law, raised

her sweet face, and looked into the worldly eyes of the older woman.

“I am, indeed, sorry,” she continued. “I hope you have had every comfort. Helen is a nice girl, and I asked her to attend to you. I was unavoidably prevented being here; it was a case of——”

“You had better not, Betty,” warned Laura, holding up her finger and shaking it playfully. “Mother can’t stand horrors.”

“Indeed, I can’t, my dear,” said Lady Pevensey, giving Betty quite a gracious smile; for the girl’s beauty appealed to her, and she seemed to have acquired new dignity since that day when Geoffrey had brought her to see his mother in London. Now she was Geoffrey’s wife.

“Of course he has improved her; he could not help it,” thought the mother. Aloud she said: “No horrors for me, Betty. If you mean to identify yourself with all Geoff’s parishioners in this huge manufacturing town, you must keep your feelings to yourself, as far as I am concerned. Now that tea does look good, and so do those little hot cakes. Pour me out a cup of tea, please, Betty—not too strong, and with very little milk; no sugar, my dear. By the way, Betty, have you a good cook? It is so essential both for you and Geoffrey that your food shall be well cooked.”

“Oh, yes,” said Betty: “Bridget is quite excellent. She is an Irish woman,” she continued.

“Irish?” said Lady Pevensey. “Horrors—all of them!”

“Oh, no,” said Betty, in her gentle voice. “Bridget is a remarkably nice girl—so clever, and so funny. If ever I want a good laugh I go and talk to Bridget.”

“You don’t *mean* to tell me,” said Lady Pevensey, “that you allow yourself to converse with your servants on anything but matters relating to their duties?”

“I am afraid I do,” said Betty.

Lady Pevensey helped herself to a hot cake. It was not her place to reprove Geoffrey’s wife.

“Why don’t you have a cup of tea yourself, my dear?” she said, as the girl sat down, and Lady Pevensey noticed how white her face was.

Betty shook her head.

“I am sorry,” she said, “I cannot.”

This was true. She could and did manage to talk almost cheerfully to her mother-in-law, but as to drinking tea or eating—these things were beyond her power. She had a horrible vision before her eyes of that tea prepared for poor Jack Hinton, of the easy-chair and the slippers, and the books. What was happening to him now? Was he still uncon-

scious? Was his mother kneeling by his bedside and holding his hand, and looking with the last, long, yearning gaze of love, deep love, into his face? Betty found herself thinking of the widow's last words to her: "Homeless, penniless, and without love!" She shuddered inwardly, and felt almost sick. But Betty had plenty of courage, and while these thoughts assailed her excited mind, she allowed her new relations to chatter to her on all kinds of subjects.

Presently she started upright. His step! Was that her husband?

"Geoff has come," she said. "He—I must speak to him. Please excuse me."

Laura was about to rush into the hall with her, but Betty almost pushed her back. She ran into the hall, shutting the drawing-room door behind her.

"Oh, Geoff!" she said: "how—how is he?"

The Rector folded his arms round his wife.

"Dead. I stayed till the end. Don't ask me too much; it was the most terrible time I ever lived through."

"Where—where is the mother? I promised to go to her."

"I left her, poor soul, lying beside the poor young fellow's body, his head cradled against her bosom,

her arms round him. She was so fierce when any one attempted to move her that the doctor said she must be allowed to have her own way for a little. I believe they are going to have the body conveyed to her house, and I have promised to look in late this evening."

"I will go with you," said Betty: "I mean to stay with her to-night."

"God bless you, my darling! Oh, what should I do without you!"

Betty pushed back her hair from her heated face.

"Geoff, darling, they have come, and you must see them."

"Who have come?"

"Your mother and Laura."

"I had forgotten all about them," said the young man. "One minute, Betty, I must go to my room; I will be down in no time. Go back to them, my darling, my angel. Oh, what would life be without you!"

"What is life to that poor woman!" thought Betty, thinking of Mrs. Hinton—"homeless, penniless, loveless!"

She echoed the words with a fearful ache at her heart, and then re-entered the drawing-room.

There she found her relations in a state of decided friction. Laura had been arguing hotly with

her mother, and Lady Pevensey had a flush on one cheek, and when Betty entered, she refused a second cup of tea.

"No, thank you," she said. Then, after a freezing silence, she added: "Have you informed my son that his mother and sister are here?"

"Of course I have," said Betty. "Geoff has just come from a very painful scene. He ran up to his room to get tidy. He will be with you in a minute."

"I think, Laura," said Lady Pevensey, glancing at her daughter, "that we will return to London to-morrow. The fact is, Betty, I don't wish to blame you nor your husband, but I did not accept your invitation to Hillside Rectory in order to participate in all the trials of the working people. Ah—but here comes Geoff, and looking as—*quite* as handsome as ever. Geoff, my boy: Geoffrey dear!"

"Hallo, mother!" said the young man. "Welcome, welcome!"

He went up to her and kissed her with great affection.

"I am so pleased to have you here," he said, and he patted her on her shoulder.

"Haven't you a word for me, old man?" said Laura.

"Yes, of course, a thousand welcomes to you, too. Of course you'll both make yourselves absolutely

at home. The house is quite comfortable, I think: and everything you want you must just ask for; Betty and I are such busy people."

"We really didn't intend to visit Hillside Rectory simply as guests in a hotel," said Lady Pevensey. "We hoped to have a good deal of your company, Geoffrey, and also that of your wife. But if such things are impossible, you had better let us know at once, for Laura and I have many other visits to make, haven't we, Laura?"

"Yes," said Laura, in a stout voice: "but we meant to stay a week here, and we'll stay for that week unless Betty and Geoff turn us out."

"That's right, Laura," said her brother. "I hope, my dear mother," he continued, "to give you as much as possible of my time; and this in some ways is a good period of the year. To-day, unfortunately, Betty and I are——"

Lady Pevensey held out both her hands.

"Not a word—not a word!" she said. "No horrors for me, please, my dear, good young people! Keep the affairs of your parishioners to yourselves."

Geoffrey glanced at his wife. Betty gave him a vague sort of smile. In truth, she was so much upset and such a fierce longing was over her to go to her room in order to indulge in a good cry that



she could scarcely contain herself. Geoffrey, who read her like a book, said at once:

“You are looking tired, Betty; you had better go and lie down, my love. I will look after mother and Laura; we shall have much to talk over.”

“Much, truly,” said Lady Pevensey, settling herself comfortably in her easy-chair, and smiling at her son.

Betty made her escape from the room. The door had hardly closed behind her when Lady Pevensey said:

“I am exceedingly sorry, Geoffrey, to perceive that your wife is so nervous—a most highly-strung woman! You ought not to encourage it, my dear. In your family nerves ought not to be encouraged.”

“Nonsense, nonsense, mother!” said Laura. “Or rather,” she continued, speaking quickly, “I am inclined to say to you the old proverb, ‘Physician, heal thyself.’ Who is more addicted to nervous alarms and fancies than you, my good mother?”

“Really, Laura, you are very impertinent. My pains and aches are, alas! more than real. Dear Dr. Goodenough has given me a true and accurate description of the state of my heart and my whole nervous system. I begged of him to write it down in order—should I be attacked in any serious way—I might have his exact idea of my case to show to a

less clever doctor. I *always* take dear Dr. Good-enough's opinion about with me, and study it nearly every day. You can see it, Geoffrey, if you like."

"Thanks, mother; but don't you think the less we dwell on our bodily ailments the better?"

"I never, *never*—dwell on mine," said Lady Pevensey; "but when severe pain overwhelms you, you're obliged—yes, my dear boy, obliged—to give way to it. Then remedies have to be followed and valuable prescriptions resorted to. I am sorry that your Betty is nervous; but she has improved. You were right to tell her to lie down. Young wives ought to be careful of their health. Now, if you will allow me, I will retire to my own bedroom for an hour before dinner. You will have plenty to say to Laura. What hour do you dine, Geoffrey? I presume at a quarter to eight."

"No," answered Geoffrey; "our dinner hour is seven—and sometimes, indeed, half past six; that wholly depends on the day of the week. You forget, my dear mother, that I have evening services and meetings for choir practices and other parochial meetings to attend to after dinner."

"Oh—good gracious!" cried his parent. "I always did guess that a clergyman's life was terrible. But I did not suppose that you had to give up your evenings to it."

“All my time, day and night, if necessary,” was his fervent answer, and there came a flash into the dark-grey eyes which Lady Pevensey felt impelled not to rouse again. She said in a limp voice to her daughter :

“Laura, I will go to my room. I have time for half an hour’s rest before Clementina comes to dress me for dinner. I presume, Geoffrey, that after dinner you and Betty will have no objection to a game at bridge?”

“I am deeply sorry,” was the answer, “but both Betty and I have to go out, not immediately after dinner, but at a time which will seem unconventional to you. This may not happen again. It is in connection with an event of the most fearful nature which occurred to-day——”

“Oh—not a word, my dear boy—not a word! Laura and I will play double dummy. It is well, my dear Laura, we have at least that resource to fall back upon.”

## CHAPTER IV

BETTY never knew afterwards how she got through that dinner. In compliance with her husband's wish she dressed for it in one of her very simplest trousseau gowns. She ran downstairs, to find Lady Pevensey in a very elaborate demi-toilette, and Laura in a maroon-colored velvet which fitted tightly to her really fine figure.

Laura turned when Betty entered the room. Betty came up to her swiftly, and held out her hand. Laura clasped it. Laura's clasp had sympathy in it. Betty felt the support of the silent pressure.

Just at that moment, the Rector himself came into the room. He went straight to his mother, and began to talk to her. Laura took the opportunity of going aside with Betty.

"Geoffrey has told me something; he said I must listen. It is quite too horrible."

"Don't talk of it, please," answered Betty, "or I shall break down."

"You mustn't," said Laura. "I will help you. Geoff says you are going out immediately after dinner. I will manage mother. Just keep up as best

you can while the meal goes on; you can slip away afterwards without saying a word. I have got a very exciting new book which I brought down with me, and also a budget of letters that I know will interest the good mater. I will keep her occupied."

"Thank you, Laura," said Betty.

She raised her lovely dark-grey eyes to the speaker's face. Then she added:

"I shall probably not be back to-night."

"You can stand that sort of thing?" said Laura, her voice dropping to an awestruck whisper.

"One must," replied Betty, in the same hushed tones. "Think of her suffering compared with mine."

"Ah, poor creature!" said Laura. Then she added, after a pause: "But that is just it, Betty; that's the difference between you and me: I don't want to think."

"And yet," replied Betty, "you are Geoff's sister."

"Oh, yes, yes," answered Laura; "but as absolutely unlike him as one human being can be unlike another. I am mother's true daughter; Geoffrey is—oh, the son of the Church, the descendant of all the mystics of all the ages; the romantic, self-denying, fervent, enthusiastic priest."

"A follower of God," said Betty, and then she turned from Laura.

There was a diversion at the other end of the room. Helen was standing there announcing that dinner was ready. Pevensey took his mother into the quaint old dining-room. She freely gossiped on its arrangements.

"Why, this is a splendid room," she said, "if only you had it properly furnished. Oak from floor to ceiling; old oak, too. It would fetch a fabulous sum if it were in the market. But it needs lighting up. Did you ever think of having electric light put into this house, Geoffrey?"

"No," replied the Rector, as he helped his mother to some soup.

"I like lamps and candles ever so much better," said Betty, from her distant end of the table.

She spoke with an effort. Her white dress, her cheeks which were now suffused with crimson, the wonderful brightness of her eyes and the sheen of her chestnut hair, made a spot of light in the dark old room. Lady Pevensey glanced at her, and made up her mind that her daughter-in-law, well-dressed, would be an exceedingly handsome young woman.

"I don't object to lamps and candles," she said, "only there must be plenty of them. But never mind, Geoffrey; your mother has come here to help to make things really comfortable for you. To-morrow, or to-night, if you like, we will go into the

subject of the redecoration of your house—quite a charming old house, if well arranged, but as it now is, perfectly hideous.”

“I like it as it is,” said Betty.

“Of course you do,” interrupted Laura. “Mother,” she continued, “can’t you see that Betty has a headache and cannot be bothered?”

“Oh, very well, my dear,” said Lady Pevensey, highly offended. “If my daughter-in-law finds her husband’s mother——”

“Oh, dear me, mums!” interrupted Laura again. “Don’t take offence. Betty delights in having you, but as she happens to have a headache she cannot give all proper attention to your excellent recipes with regard to household management.”

The Rector now steered skilfully past the shoals on which Lady Pevensey was determined to wreck the peace of the dinner-table. He asked questions about old friends, and soon mother and son were deep in discussions about the past. Laura hardly spoke, but glanced from time to time at Betty.

Betty was a revelation to her. She felt herself admiring her sister-in-law as she had never thought to do, beginning dimly to understand why Geoffrey, that most fastidious of mortals, had married the untrained, unaccomplished daughter of a brother rector.

"There is something unusual in her," thought Laura—"steadfastness, truth, courage, and a soul shines beyond those eyes. She makes me uncomfortable. I wouldn't follow in her steps for creation, but I like her, all the same."

As soon as dinner was over, Betty, without ceremony, ran up to her bedroom.

"I can't bear it," was the thought in her heart.

She hastily removed the finery she had been forced to wear at dinner, and putting on a serviceable blue serge, wrapped a cloak round her and ran downstairs. The Rector met her in the hall.

"Ready?" he said.

"Yes, Geoff," she answered.

"I will take you there, but have you prepared anything in case of an emergency?"

"What do you mean?"

The Rector smiled at her. His smile was as a sudden radiance. He disappeared for a minute, returning with a small basket.

"You will find sal volatile and other stimulants here," he said. "There is one thing, Betty, too, that I should like to mention. You must not sit up all night without food. Get poor Mrs. Hinton to make you some tea; she is celebrated for her tea."

"Oh, Geoff," said Betty, "how can I touch it?"

"That is just what you must do," said the Rector.



“You will help her in giving her employment. Now come, dear, we must be off.”

They left the house quickly; not a word was said of Lady Pevensey (who was storming in the drawing-room), nor of Laura, who was trying to subdue her mother’s tantrums.

“If you *will* shut your eyes to the very object of a clergyman’s profession, you must take the consequences, mother,” was Laura’s remark.

“I don’t say anything about Geoffrey,” answered Lady Pevensey; “it is his wife who treats me with open disrespect. What right has she to give her evening to anyone else on the occasion of my first visit?”

“Geoff thinks his wife is part of himself, and therefore must help him,” said Laura. “Besides, the case in point is exceedingly unusual and most, most painful. Shall I tell it to you?”

“Not for worlds! Get the bridge cards and we’ll play double dummy.”

Laura thankfully complied. As she sorted the cards, her mother remarked:

“That’s a handsome girl, notwithstanding her odd ways.”

“Beautiful is my verdict with regard to her,” said Laura. “Besides——” she added.

“Besides what?” asked Lady Pevensey.

“Hers is the sort of face that could never belong to anyone without a beautiful soul shining through it from within.”

“It’s my turn to deal first,” was Lady Pevensey’s response.

The ladies played for an hour or more. Meanwhile, Betty had reached that humble part of Dartminster where Mrs. Hinton lived. The Rector went first up the stairs. Betty followed behind him. He tapped at the door, behind which the poor woman was sitting in her desolation. There was no reply. He opened it, bent his tall head a trifle, and entered, followed by Betty.

Mrs. Hinton was seated by the little table where Betty had found her that afternoon. No change had been made in its appearance. The home-made brown loaf was still there; so also was the clean white cloth. The cups and saucers were waiting—the plates, the knives. There was still the vacant arm-chair by the hearth, and the slippers that poor Jack Hinton would never wear again placed close to it. There also was the tiny table with its pile of books. The ardent young scholar would never need them more.

Betty felt a great lump in her throat, for a minute a sense of giddiness, almost sickness, took possession of her; but the Rector’s manner recalled her to her-

self. He laid his hat on the table, went over to where the poor woman was sitting, and took one of her hands.

“The Lord help thee in the day of trouble,” he said. “The God of Jacob defend thee.”

There was no reply of any sort, but the cold hand trembled for an instant. Geoffrey Pevensey rose and motioned to his wife to come near.

“Put your arms round her, Betty,” he said to the girl. “She wants something warm and living to touch her. Don’t be afraid,” he added in a whisper. “I want her to cry. Her grief will be terrible and tempestuous for a time, but she will be better afterwards.”

Betty paused for an instant. Then she flung herself impetuously into the breach. She knelt by the woman, deliberately raised the grey head and laid it on her own shoulder. She clasped the warm, living young arms round the frozen and shrunken body, and said in the murmuring tone which a mother might address to her child:

“Don’t—don’t keep it all to yourself. Let me help you. I love you—yes, I love you.”

There were tears flowing now, but not from the widow’s eyes; they were raining from Betty’s own. Some warm drops fell on the poor cold cheek.

Mrs. Hinton sat very still for a minute. When

at last she rose struggling out of Betty's embrace, Betty also looked round. The Rector was gone. Mrs. Hinton glanced at the girl.

"You think," she said, speaking slowly and with great effort, "that a few of those drops"—she pointed to the tears still wet on Betty's cheeks—"and a soft, bonny young face pressed to mine, and arms, round and young, clasping me 'ull do me any good. I tell you, ma'am, I'm homeless, penniless, loveless. *He* is gone—my best boy—*he* is dead. They're bringing him along home soon—that is, wot's left of him, I mean. When he comes, you'll be pleased to go out, ma'am; I don't want no one else nigh me when my boy—wot's left of him—is here. It's his own mother'll lie alongside of him to-night. Cold as the dead may be, his mother—maybe—will warm him a trifle. Ah! cold as the dead may be, it can't freeze the love for him in my old heart."

She went to the fireplace, suddenly seized the kettle, and retired into her scullery to fill it with water.

"I'll set the kettle boiling," she said; "the place must be as he'd like to see it ef he was coming back alive instead of dead."

"Oh, yes," said Betty, suddenly; "tell me, please, how he liked to have it? I can guess so well."

“You!” said the widow, pausing and looking with contempt at the girl. “You! You never had a son. Maybe you’ll have bonny children some day, and you’ll be as proud as proud can be of ’em—as proud as I was—*am*, I mean—of him. But don’t you think you’ll keep ’em. They’ll be tuk from you, all in a flash; in the twinklin’ of an eye they that was will be no more. That’s the way God serves out His mercies to us poor women; that is so. When He meted out that my Jack was to die to-day, did He think once that I’d be left—homeless, penniless, loveless? You answer me that, ma’am; you put that question to yourself and answer it to me straight out.”

Betty was puzzled.

“I know you are wrong,” she began. “God, the beautiful God, did not say to Himself, ‘I am going to make that woman, that poor woman, homeless, penniless, loveless to-day, because I like to do it. I am going to do it because——’”

“Why?” said Mrs. Hinton. She came close to the girl, and stared into her face. “You tell me that, you young gel, that know nothing?”

“Because God is Love,” said Betty. “Young as I am, I know that much. He has done it for a reason that we cannot see yet, but some day we shall.

‘Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.’ ”

“You talk cant, you do,” said Mrs. Hinton.

She sank down in the nearest chair, and lapsed into stony silence. After a minute, she said :

“Perhaps, Mrs. Pevensey, you will tell me those words again when your own turn comes. Perhaps you will speak them once more when your heart is cut through and through—cut as though a sword had pierced it, and when the one you love is taken from you. If you say them then I will believe you, but not before.”

She got up and went into the other room. There she struck a match and lit a candle. Betty could look in. She saw at a glance that it was the room where the woman herself habitually slept. It was a neat little room, a small bed with a white counterpane over it occupying the principal position, and all its appointments in perfect order. Mrs. Hinton came out and passed into another room. This was smaller, but also exquisitely neat. Presently, still holding the candle in her hand, she motioned to Betty to follow her.

“Look,” she said: “this is his room—small, of course; he always gave the best to me. This is the bed where he lay last night, and slept the healthy sleep of the strong and the young. It was from this

bed he rose this morning when I went to call him. He had to be at the factory early—at six o'clock. I always called him at five; he liked to have plenty of time. Do you see all his things lying about? That's his Sunday coat hanging at the back of the door; it's a very neat coat, isn't it? and there are his boots that he wore when he went to church. I was planning to make a curtain to put over his coats and things to keep the dust away; it was to be a sort of surprise for him. Here are some books that he bought a week back; he was saving up pence at the time for 'em. He got 'em cheap, he said to me. 'Mother,' said he, 'there are lots o' cheap books going now, and good 'uns at that. I can fill my mind, mother, with this sort of reading.' I never could make them out myself, but he took a sight o' pleasure in them. Yes, this is his room; he won't never go into it any more. It's on his mother's own bed he'll lie to-night, when they bring him back. He always gave the best to me—the best room, the best corner by the fire, and ever and ever he'd be thinking of little comforts for me. Now it'd be a fresh egg that I'd maybe fancy, but wouldn't afford for myself, and then again it'd be a pair o' slippers for my poor feet; that is, when they was took with the rheumatics; and another time a warm pair of bed socks, for I do suffer cruel with

the cold o' winter nights. Ah dear! Ah dear! it's well for you to quote Scripture. Think what I've lost."

"I do," said Betty.

The woman held up her hand imperiously.

"Keep your thoughts to yourself," she said. "It's poor consolation one gets from a young thing that knows nothing at all. I tell you—I'm homeless, loveless, penniless. Did I hear you say a while ago that you loved me? Well, take back your love; I don't want it—a young creature that I never laid eyes on till to-day, do you suppose that you'll ever try to take the place of him who was born of my body, who was bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, who I bore in sore travail, and risked my life for? Do you think, you bit of a young, ignorant gel, that you can in any way fill the sore place in my empty heart? He was the light of my eyes, the joy of my life! There ain't nothing nor no one who can make up to me for him, so don't you try it on."

Having said her say, Mrs. Hinton put the candle on the top of her own little chest of drawers, and began to arrange the bed, turning down the counterpane, and taking fresh sheets from a drawer, laying them on smooth and tidy. Betty went forward to help her, but she contemptuously moved her aside.

"Don't you try it on. Ain't these the last things I



can do for him? Let me make his bed myself. Soon they'll come to fit him for his coffin, but he'll lie in sweet linen sheets smelling of lavender and rosemary; the best his mother has shall be his; and when they secure the lid on the coffin, my heart will go, too. Oh, God Almighty!"—the poor, desolate creature fell on her knees—"take me, too! take me, too! Bury us in one grave together—God—if you are a God of love!"

The silence in the little room was profound. Betty heard the little kettle beginning to sing in the outer room. She went softly back. Her impotence and powerlessness to touch this sorrow was borne in upon her profoundly.

Just then there came steps on the stairs, a murmuring of voices, all speaking in a subdued key. The steps as they approached sounded heavy. They were, beyond doubt, the steps of those who carried a burden. Mrs. Hinton ran from her bedroom. She put up her hand to one ear to listen to the steps. Her deadly white face became suffused with a sudden purple.

"He's a-coming in," she said—"last time home—my boy—oh, my boy!"

She took not the slightest notice of Betty, but put her hand to her head. Her eyes had a wild, strained expression. There came a heavy knock at the door.

Betty would have opened it, but the mother suddenly saw and forestalled her.

"No," she said, "you keep back! I will see my own boy home the last time!" and she flung the door of the kitchen wide. "Come in," she said, as some men appeared, carrying a body on a stretcher. "Come right in; you are honored guests, all of you. Lay him along in this room—my lad—oh! my lad!"

The men entered softly. There were four of them. They laid the dead boy on his mother's bed. One of them glanced at Betty, and tried to say something, but couldn't. One of them said to the widow:

"Can I do nothing more for you, ma'am?"

"Nothing at all," she said. "Leave me with my boy."

All four men looked at Betty as they withdrew, carrying the stretcher on which they had borne the body with them. The door closed behind them, and their retreating footsteps were heard on the stairs. There was an interval of perfect silence. Then Mrs. Hinton put out her head from the bedroom door.

"I am staying alongside of my boy," she said. "You can do as you please."

Betty sank down into the easy-chair which had been prepared for Jack Hinton. Her feet touched the slippers which the dead lad had worn. Her head was swimming. For a time she could not even think

coherently. Then, quite suddenly, she flung herself on her knees; her pent-up grief, her anguish of pity, that terrible pity which avails nothing at all, found relief. Her confidence in her God was restored. It seemed to her that the Lord God Almighty Himself was leading her, and that just now what He most wanted her to do in all the wide world was to wait—to sit still and wait His good pleasure.

## CHAPTER V

TOWARDS morning the Rector called for his wife. He brought a woman to stay with Mrs. Hinton. Betty was seated in a fireless room, her face ghastly white and drawn. The Rector softly opened the bedroom door and looked in at the poor mother. Her arms were clasped tightly round the dead man. Her face was as white as his. She was either asleep or unconscious. The Rector, after a moment's pause of unwillingness, touched her. She opened her eyes drearily.

"You must come and have some tea," he said. "Get up at once."

He spoke almost sternly.

"My wife has been sitting in your kitchen all night. She is cold and stiff; she will be ill, unless you see to her. Get her tea immediately, and relight your fire. Come."

He gave no word of sympathy. The woman looked at him sullenly. Then a new expression came over her face. She hurried into the kitchen. The Rector stood silent while Mrs. Hinton relit the fire, put the kettle on to boil, and made tea for Betty.

Betty felt as though she must choke.

"Drink it, dear," said her husband.

"Yes, do 'e," said Mrs. Hinton.

It was the first reasonable sentence she had uttered since the crushing blow had fallen upon her. She laid her shivering cold hand on the hand of the girl.

"It's death that is everywhere," she said.

"No, no; you are mistaken there," said the Rector.

"It is glorious life that is everywhere. Don't you know what the Bible says—that if you put a seed of corn into the ground, it grows and multiplies and fills the earth, and that is the way with those we love who die in the faith. There is no real death here. Listen to me, Mrs. Hinton. Your Jack was the best fellow I have ever met. He was good all round. He had the simple faith of a child, and the unselfishness of a man. Do you think *he* would have let my wife stay alone all night long in this room at the risk of her health and strength? Don't you think he'd have taken a little care of her? If you love him, as I know you do, follow in his steps."

The widow looked keenly at the Rector.

"You're about right," she said. "Madam, I beg your pardon."

Betty laid her hand on Mrs. Hinton's.

"Follow in his steps; do follow in his steps," said Betty.

"That's a thought," said Mrs. Hinton.

She immediately went to a cupboard, and brought out the identical loaf of brown bread which had been prepared for Hinton himself. She cut a slice and buttered it.

"Eat—do 'e, now," she said.

Betty ate and drank. The Rector asked for a cup of tea and drank it.

"You're very brave," he said then to the mother. "Before we go, will you do something else?"

She looked at him fixedly, her hard eyes still unsoftened, and yet full of hidden fire.

"Continue to follow in your boy's footsteps. Drink some tea yourself; eat some bread and butter."

"My throat is closed," she said.

"Try," said the Rector.

He held a cup of tea towards her. She took a sip—another; there was a gurgling sound. Then the poor woman's face worked passionately, and the long pent-up tears began to flow. Never in all her life had Betty witnessed such anguish; but when it was over, the hard expression had left the poor face.

"I will come to you presently," said the Rector. "Meanwhile, I have asked Mrs. Grice, your next-door neighbor, to sit with you. The Almighty is leading you on to a higher life, but the furnace is

very fierce. Don't let go of that faith which has enabled your boy to see God."

Then the Rector drew his wife's hand through his arm and led her home.

A few days afterwards there was a funeral at Dartminster, which was largely attended both by the rich and poor of the place. Soon Mrs. Hinton, by the Rector's arrangement, was sent away for a time to stay in a convalescent home. She was thoroughly broken down, but the hardness, the passionate rebellion which she had evinced on the night which Betty had spent with her, seemed, to all appearance, gone. She was quiet now, and almost gentle in her manner. Sometimes those who were close to her heard her say: "I must follow in his steps," and then she would rouse herself, almost unwillingly, to do an unwonted act of kindness—doing it gruffly and ungraciously, but still doing it.

On the day before she went away, she called at the Rectory to see Mrs. Pevensey.

"I have to thank you, madam," she said, "for your goodness to me during that awful night. I remember the words you said: 'Sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.' I am trying hard to live as my Jack would like, were he still in the world, and I am obliged to you, ma'am," she added, speaking coldly and without enthusiasm,

“for what you did for me that night. But it takes a deal o’ knowledge to understand the sorrows of the poor, and what I said then is true. ’Tain’t only that my boy is gone—he, who was my sunshine, and filled my heart with love—but my home goes with him. My money goes with him. In losing him I have lost all. Nevertheless, madam, I pray for you, that when your time of great sorrow comes, you will be able to exercise the faith you spoke of to me. I wish you good-day now, ma’am. You have been very good to me, and so has Rector.”

The poor woman went away. She stayed for a month in the convalescent home and got quite well, at least in body. Then, by the Rector’s instrumentality, she was given a post as matron in a small second-class school.

Betty could not help owing to a sense of relief when Mrs. Hinton left Dartminster. All these things happened quickly, for events hurry with the poor. When there is no money, a decided course of action must be pursued, and Lady Pevensey was still at the Rectory when Mrs. Hinton paid her farewell visit to Betty. Betty was not the same since that dreadful night which she had spent in the woman’s rooms. She often started in her sleep, and cried out in terror, and once she clung frantically to her husband and said:



“Mrs. Hinton told me that I was to test myself when my day of sorrow came. She said I knew nothing about trouble now—nothing at all.”

The Rector’s reply was to kiss and comfort his wife, to assure her that she had acted like a little brick in the case of poor Mrs. Hinton, and had thereby endeared herself to every poor man and woman in the neighborhood.

“They are all talking about you, Betty,” he said, “and all praising you. You won their hearts, every man, woman and child of them, by the way you acted on that night. As to the poor distracted mother, try not to think of her too much, my darling, but believe and ever preach the great doctrine of the love of God.”

If the Rector said cheerful and sustaining words to his wife, Lady Pevensey by no means followed his example. On the day before she left Dartminster to continue her round of visits with Laura, it so happened that she and her young daughter-in-law were alone.

Betty had lost her radiant color. Her face was thereby considerably robbed of its beauty. Lady Pevensey, who had kept well out of the way while the Hinton tragedy—as she expressed it—was going on, now thought that the moment had come for her to interfere.

"I am glad we are alone," she said. "I wanted to have an opportunity of talking with you."

"Yes," said Betty.

"Pour me out some tea, child. Draw your chair up close to the fire. Really, these days in early October are becoming quite chilly, and a fire is grateful. Well, we'll be off, Laura and I, by this time to-morrow. I have no doubt you will consider us a good riddance."

"Oh, no," answered Betty. "You cannot suppose," she continued, "that Geoffrey's mother could be anything but welcome to me."

Lady Pevensey bent forward.

"I wonder if you always speak the truth, Betty Pevensey," she said.

"I try to," she answered.

"But you have not spoken it now."

"I have."

"You don't like me; don't pretend for a moment that you do."

Betty considered.

"For yourself—perhaps not," she said then; "but for Geoffrey's sake, yes. He loves you; all those he loves must be loved by me."

"I am glad to hear it," said Lady Pevensey, dryly. "I can see, Betty, that you are very much devoted to your husband, and naturally her dear boy cares

for his mother and for Laura. Now, to speak frankly, Laura admires you very much."

"I love her," said Betty.

"And, to speak out frankly," continued Lady Pevensey, "I admire your appearance, but your character is quite out of touch with mine. I have no sympathies with you; we don't touch on any one point; we are naturally antagonistic the one to the other."

"Oh, don't say so; how dreadful that would be!"

"But it is true, and I imagined that you, at least, would invariably speak the truth. But let me proceed; I will tell you frankly what I feel. You are very much devoted to your husband."

"Yes," said Betty, slowly. She spoke deliberately. Her "yes" had a solid sound about it as though it carried weight.

"I can see it," said Lady Pevensey, impatiently, "and of course you are quite unaware of the fact you are spoiling him."

Betty gave an inquiring glance at the speaker.

"Yes," said Lady Pevensey. "I told Laura that I'd speak to you. She begged me not, but I really must be guided by what I think right myself. You have married, my dear, a man of very peculiar tendencies. His nerves are too highly strung for his own peace of mind. You, in every particular, foster

that part of his character which ought to be suppressed, and by your injudicious enthusiasm suppress all those parts of his nature which ought to be strengthened. For instance, he is fifty thousand times too unworldly. You, if possible, add another quota to that unworldliness. The very manner in which you and he conducted yourselves over that poor woman Hinton—sad as the case undoubtedly was—speaks for itself. The poor woman, through an accident—alas! common enough in all manufactories—lost her son. You took up her case to the extreme discomfort of myself, and to the breach of ordinary good manners. That, however, was a trifle. But, from all accounts, you did the poor creature little or no good by spending the whole of one night with her. She didn't want you. When do the poor want the rich?—for, of course, compared to her, you may class yourself amongst the wealthy. She showed you very plainly that she didn't require you—I gathered as much from Laura, who heard some particulars from Geoffrey. Since that night you have been worn out, weak, woe-begone. Now tell me, Betty, do tell me—how are you to live this life if these sort of things go on? There will always be calamities amongst the poor, as, alas! there are calamities amongst the rich, and if for every accident and every loss of life you wear your-

self to a thread of paper, what sort of creature will you be in a couple of years? It's bad enough to see Geoffrey straining every nerve day and night, in an impossible cause; for we never, alas! can make the world anything but a very so-so place. But if he is to find his wife as strained and overdone as himself, let me tell you at once, my dear, that you will have to face catastrophe."

"What do you mean?"

"I told Laura that I would tell you. Your husband is not the sort of man to do without a commonplace, matter-of-fact life. He cannot get it in his work, therefore he ought to find it in his wife."

"Is that all?" said Betty.

Her face was very white, her lips quivering.

"There is a great deal more," said Lady Pevensey. "Laura says you ought not to know, but I think the only chance for Geoffrey is for you to be informed."

Betty suddenly sprang to her feet. She remembered the day before her wedding—that thing which her husband had not told her, that thing which she and he had arranged she was never to know until one of two conditions occurred. She trembled exceedingly, and sat down white as death.

"There," said Lady Pevensey, "I knew exactly what sort of wife Geoffrey ought to have had. There was a girl in town—a Miss Weston—hard as nails,

popular, a certain power in society, clever as she could be, and she'd have married him if he had asked her. I know she would, for, my dear, he is awfully handsome; and she had money, too—plenty of money, but I suppose that doesn't much affect you."

Betty was silent. Her hands were clasped together on her lap. After a long time she spoke.

"Tell me," she said, "how I ought to live so as best to help my husband?"

These words, uttered very gently, surprised and delighted Lady Pevensey.

"There, now you have sense," she said, "and you enable me to speak. If you are sensible you may avert calamity. You don't choose to hear what the calamity is; therefore I need not tell you. It is a great relief to me, I can assure you."

"What am I to do?" said Betty. "Just tell me what—what—Miss Weston would have done."

She felt a very vehement, worldly hatred in her heart towards Miss Weston as she uttered the last words.

"Oh, dear!" said Lady Pevensey. "You ought not to encourage him to talk so much about his poor, and he ought not to get over-excited over his sermons. Now, on Sunday last, in church, I grant you that Geoffrey did preach a most stirring and admirable

sermon. But do you suppose it brought tears from me? I know the preacher's function and—so to speak—the tricks of the trade. Laura, too, was as cool as a cucumber. But you, my dear Betty; there you sat, your cheeks on fire and the tears in your eyes; your very hands trembled—and he saw it—I know he saw it.”

“Oh, he spoke to my heart,” said Betty. “If I do him harm in feeling what he says, I will get behind a pillar, or hide myself in some way; but not to care, not to feel, is impossible.”

“I knew it,” said Lady Pevensey. “Well, you are going the wrong way to work. He ought to get an extra curate. He cannot work his huge parish without further assistance, and from time to time you ought to bring him to London, and you ought to encourage him to go out to dinner and mix with those people in this God-forsaken place who are willing to entertain you both. Never was I in a more dreary spot. Then, too, you ought to refurnish this house. It really is too hideous as now arranged. Geoffrey can very well spend a few hundred pounds for the purpose, and, for that matter, I am willing to add my dole. I will put a cheque for three hundred pounds to your account in your bank if you will promise to deal with this room on receiving it.”

“But—what is the matter with the room?” said Betty.

“Matter, my dear—matter? It is simply hideous. Look at this carpet.”

“It is a very suitable carpet for what we want. You see we want all the room in this house for use, not ornament.”

“That is just what I complain of. It shows your crass ignorance. You ought *not* to have this beautiful room turned into a place for mothers’ meetings. There’s that old school-room; I explored it the other day with Laura. It would do admirably for the mothers, and you could have cheap linoleum put on the floor and benches round the walls.”

“But, dear Lady Pevensey,” said Betty; “the mothers do so love to come to my drawing-room; it is half the battle to let them sit in this room, and afterwards they go about and examine the pictures, and my little ornaments; they think them quite beautiful, Lady Pevensey; they talk about them together and go to their own poor little homes and try in their own way to imitate what they have seen here. They would hate to come to a bare room covered with linoleum and with benches round the walls.”

“I see, I see,” said Lady Pevensey. “Well, if you think less of your husband and his health than you



do of the mothers of this parish, I wash my hands of the matter.”

Lady Pevensey rose as she spoke.

“If ever you want my advice I will be glad to give it to you. Laura and I will be back in London by the end of November, and there is no reason why you and Geoffrey should not come up and pay us a visit for the inside of a week. It will do you both a world of good; you are a mass of nerves, the pair of you, and how you are to pull along in double harness no one knows.”

## CHAPTER VI

ON the evening after Lady Pevensey and Laura left Dartminster, Betty sat alone by her fire. It was nearly time to go up to dress for dinner. Of late she had been rather remiss in this particular, glad to escape the fatigue of putting on dinner dress. It is true that while Lady Pevensey and Laura were there she was forced to yield to circumstances, but on this night, surely, she might wear the warm blue serge which she had put on when she first rose that morning. She need not want to improve her appearance. She was feeling sadly depressed, but, relieved as she was at the absence of her visitors, nevertheless, in her heart of hearts, she missed them.

While she was thinking, the fire grew low. The lamps were unlit, the room presented a desolate appearance. Betty took note of none of these things; she was absorbed in a cloud of depression which had come over her so suddenly that she could not combat it.

Suddenly the door was opened, and Helen came in with a lamp in her hand. She placed it on a little table close to her mistress, then bent down to do up

the fire. She piled on coals and swept up the hearth clean. She then proceeded to draw the curtains at the windows, and finally turned and glanced at her mistress.

"If you please, 'm," she said, "I scarcely like to give the message, still I did in a sort of way promise."

"What message, Helen?" asked Betty, rousing herself and turning towards the girl. "Is it from one of the poor people?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," said Helen.

"Well, give it to me, whatever it is. Why should you fear?"

Helen got very red.

"It seems sort o' disrespectful," she said.

"Never mind," said Betty, with a smile; "that isn't your fault. I wish to hear it. Please tell me at once."

"It's from Miss Pevensey, ma'am. As she was getting into the cab to-day, she turned to me and said: 'You have got spunk in you; see now that your mistress bucks up.' She made me promise as I'd say it to you, ma'am; and I have said it, though I am very unwilling."

Betty laughed.

"Nobody minds what Miss Pevensey says," she remarked; "and I am not at all offended."

"I'm glad of that, ma'am," said Helen. "I think master is in, and the dressing-gong has sounded."

She left the room. Betty indulged in a low laugh.

"How like Laura!" she said to herself. "How impertinent, and at the same time delightful of her! The idea of her employing my own maid to give me such a message. Well, dear Laura, I will do for you what I wouldn't do for any other soul to-night; I will buck up."

She sprang to her feet, crossed the room briskly and ran up to her bedroom. There she put on a particularly pretty dinner dress, stuck a rose into her bright hair and came downstairs just as the rector entered the drawing-room. He started when he saw her.

"You are not going out, darling?" he said.

"No," she answered, "but I have dressed for you, Geoff."

"You needn't, dear," he replied; "that is, unless you wish."

Betty felt as though a cold douche had been administered to her. She managed to say after a minute:

"Well, then, I do wish, for I want you to admire me."

Geoffrey laughed, and drew her close to him.

"I wonder if you really think that it is because of your dress I care for you?" he asked.

She laughed.

"Never mind about my dress now," she said. "Tell me something. Have you to go out to-night again?"

"Not that I know of."

"To no church service?" she queried. "To no meeting for the improvement of young men?"

"I have not to go out at all."

"Good—good!" she answered. "Only I wish you were in dinner dress."

"The dinner-gong has sounded, Betty, but if you particularly wish it I will go up and dress. I don't suppose you mind cold soup."

"But you do," said Betty, who suddenly felt a rush of good spirits. "I will repeat your own words. I love you quite outside the fact of your dress. Now come and eat. Think of our having a whole evening to ourselves. It will almost be like a honeymoon over again."

They went into the great dining-room. The dinner was good, and they both enjoyed it. When they returned to the drawing-room, Betty nestled up close to her husband.

"I want to tell you what Laura said."

"Oh, Laura!" he replied. "I am glad you like her. She really is quite a fine creature."

"She is," said Betty. "I think her worth—oh, well—I can't help it, Geoff—I get on with her better than I do with Lady Pevensey."

"I expected you would. But tell me what she said."

"She gave a message to Helen to tell me to buck up."

Pevensey laughed and then looked grave.

"Laura ought not to make free with the servants in that fashion," he said. "But there," he added, "she is incorrigible. She will have her own way about everything."

"Geoff," said Betty, "Lady Pevensey had a long talk with me yesterday. She wants me to refurnish this room."

"What for?"

"In her opinion, it is hideous. She doesn't wish me to use it for mothers' meetings."

"My dear Betty," said the Rector, "are we to keep back any part of our possessions from the work of the Lord?"

"I don't want to," said Betty. "I told her all about the poor women, and how they do admire my little ornaments. But she said I must do my duty to you."

"I know what she is thinking about," said the Rector. "But she knows just too much, and too little. The fact is this, Betty. My mother and I are not really and truly in touch. She never wanted me to take Holy Orders. She was ambitious for me, but her ambitions could not embrace the highest life of all—poor mother! I don't think, my Betty, that we'll spend extra money on this room."

"She implored of me to brighten your life, to get you into what little society there is in this place: she even—warned me," said Betty.

Her face grew very white as she spoke. The Rector bent down to her, placed his hand under her chin, and looked into her eyes. She met his gaze steadily.

"You remember our bargain," she said then. "I am ready at any minute."

"It is all right," he said, somewhat harshly. Then he sat very moody for a time. His arm, which had been placed round his wife's waist, relaxed its grip. She glanced at him, and suddenly a conviction that his mother was right, and that Geoff was the sort of man whose mind ought to be kept healthily occupied at all times visited her.

"What I feel about you is this," she said. "You are the best man I know, but in a great parish like Dartminster your nerves may be overstrained."

“Nothing can help that,” he replied.

“Now, Geoff, do be reasonable,” said Betty. “You know the old proverb: ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’ Well, now I want Jack to have his play. Come, you must help me.”

He looked at her, and shook his head.

“You don’t want me to be miserable and down-cast,” she said, “and yet I shall—I shall be if I see you depressed and breaking down.”

“Oh, if you want pleasure for yourself, that is quite another matter,” said Pevensey.

Betty was quick to take her cue.

“Yes,” she said, “I want to go out to dinner. I want to go to a concert—a good concert—now and then, and I want sometimes to accept your mother’s invitation, and in your company; yes, in yours, darling—to spend the inside of a week in town. It will do me good, and if I am cheerful, you will be cheerful. We have our long first winter before us. Let us make it a good one. The sun won’t shine out of these leaden skies much, but we can have sunshine at home.”

“All right, Betty,” said her husband, “and that means——?”

“Pretty dinner dress for me every evening,” she answered, touching her pale blue frock. “Accepting,



not declining invitations to dinner; tickets for concerts to be purchased just for the helping of me, and the carrying of my mind into a new world; and books—books, Geoffrey; books of light literature as well as deep. Oh, Geoff, you will say ‘Yes!’ ”

“Of course I will.”

“And,” continued Betty, looking round her drawing-room, “if I follow your mother’s advice in some things I may as well follow it in all. I can take some of the ugliest ornaments here into the great school-room, and put this carpet on the floor instead of the hideous linoleum. And I can hang pictures on the walls. I have a whole lot of colored illustrations from the great Christmas ‘Weeklies.’ Then this room shall be just for you and me, and for our visitors; for if we are entertained we must also entertain now and then.”

“Very well, Betty,” said her husband, gravely. He looked at her in astonishment. “Where do you propose to get your new carpet, and, I presume, your new furniture, for this room?”

“Dear old Geoff! There is an excellent shop in the fashionable part of Dartminster. I can patronize Hibbert’s shop to a certain extent, and send for other things to come down on approval from Liberty’s. Please come with me to-morrow to Hibbert’s, to help me to choose a carpet.”

“In that case, the room must be repapered and painted,” said Geoffrey.

He found himself becoming interested. He had naturally the most refined and even æsthetic tastes. Betty laughed with glee when she saw some of the old sparkle filling his handsome eyes and the depression leaving his face. They talked long together over what Betty was pleased to call her projects. She took great care to make her husband feel that he was intensely unselfish in yielding to her.

When at last she went upstairs to bed, she could not help saying, as she crossed the floor of her bedroom: “O Laura, I have bucked up.”

Betty got into bed, and soon fell sound asleep, but Pevensey remained up for a long time. He sat by the fire in the drawing-room—that room which was to be rendered æsthetic and modern and beautiful under Betty’s skill and his own really remarkable taste, and forgot the room, and failed to make up the fire, and even allowed the lamps to burn dim: for there was a shadow over him which only Betty herself could keep at a distance, and he knew well that he was as one who flees, but flees in vain from an ever gaining, ever strengthening terror.

“How am I to keep it from her?” he said aloud at last. “O God in heaven! why did I marry? why did

I yield to her wish? Why was I so cowardly? She is my darling—she is my world, and I have dragged her into this!”

There was anguish written on his brows, and his handsome face was convulsed in silent agony. After a time, he got up slowly and, taking one of the reading lamps, entered his study. He set it on a little table, and taking a key from his pocket, opened a small, delicately-carved, oak cupboard which stood in a corner of the room. From the topmost drawer he took a phial, held it between himself and the light, and looked at a number of tiny white globules which lay within.

“Shall I? or shall I not?” he said to himself. “This means instant relief, but it also means—and I know it—danger. The doctor warned me against flying to this recourse; but oh! my God! I must!”

He took out the cork, counted three of the tiny globules into the palm of his hand, swallowed them, and then returned the phial to its hiding-place.

When the Rector went upstairs, his brow was calm, and his heart beating steadily. Betty was awake. She called to him.

“We might have moss green for the color of the carpet,” she said. “What do you say? Moss green will look so pretty in the summer, when we have the

French windows open. It will seem to be a sort of continuation of the green, green lawn in the garden."

"Yes, that is a capital idea," said Pevensey in his brightest tone.

## CHAPTER VII

THE drawing-room was refurnished. It was now a very pretty and modern-looking room, not too modern, for Betty's taste and Pevensey's were both excellent. It was the sort of room that visitors would remark on favorably; and the old schoolroom, receiving the drawing-room's cast-off belongings, was quite appreciated by the mothers. Betty, too, could give them an additional treat by bringing one or two of the most respected and the most hard-working into the restored drawing-room to comment on its beauty.

Betty dressed every evening for dinner, accepted all invitations for herself and her husband, and, in short, followed out Laura's words to the letter.

It was towards the end of October when her labors began. Christmas week brought many cares and responsibilities in its train, and when the New Year had fairly dawned Betty wrote to Lady Pevensey.

"I know you are at home now," she said. "Will you invite Geoffrey and me to come to you for the inside of a week?"

She said nothing to her husband with regard to this letter, but she did not write it without careful premeditation. For Geoffrey was all this time forcing himself to be gay, but the strong, bright look which had so reassured Betty during their early married days had deserted his face. There were lines of care on his brow and round his mouth, and when he was not absolutely talking, his expression was despondent in the extreme. He never cared now to be long alone with Betty, but he invariably found time to take her about. He seemed pleased when he had not a moment in his busy day to think.

Two new curates had been appointed to the great parish, and Pevensey was in consequence not overworked. Betty knew that they could very well spare the inside of a week for town, and waited eagerly for Lady Pevensey's reply to her letter.

It came one evening when the husband and wife were alone. They had just returned from a concert given by some members of the parish. It was a dull affair. The attendance was poor, and the music received without enthusiasm. Betty commented on the fact as she walked home by her husband's side.

"I have a good mind to give a concert myself," she said, "and to have all sorts of topical songs, the sort of songs which are not a bit vulgar and that are funny, and will make the people laugh. The

music to-night was, of course, first-rate, but do you think, Geoff, for a single moment, Mrs. Malone and Peter Griffin understood it?"

"I suppose not, dear," answered her husband.

"And you were so grave, Geoffrey," continued Betty, speaking almost with impatience. "I watched your face from behind a curtain, and do you know, it quite haunted me."

"I hate being watched," said Pevensey.

Betty felt sorry she had spoken. She pressed his arm lovingly.

"I am sorry I did it," she said. "But aren't you well, darling?"

"Yes, yes; absolutely well. I can't endure being remarked upon."

They had now reached the Rectory, and Pevensey opened the door with his latch-key. On the slab in the hall was Lady Pevensey's response to Betty's letter.

"Ah! from my mother," said the Rector.

Betty tore the letter open eagerly. It was a joyful acceptance of Betty's suggestion. Lady Pevensey would be delighted to welcome Geoffrey and Betty; Laura would also be at home. Lady Pevensey promised to give both the young people a good time.

"You poor thing," she wrote, "you can cast off all your sober garments. Come up to town, bent on

fun and Christmas jollity. No more mothers' meetings, no grocery tickets, no coal tickets. We'll just think of ourselves and our own class for a few days."

"Did you write to my mother, Betty?" asked her husband.

She looked full up into his face with her sweet eyes.

"Yes," she answered again.

"And why, Betty?"

"I thought, Geoff, that you needed change, and I knew that I did."

"Oh, then you find this place too much for you; you are tired of tending the Lord's poor."

"I am not tired, but I am like a schoolgirl who needs a holiday, and you, my darling, are like a schoolboy who wants recreation. We'll return all the fresher and braver to our work after we have had a right good time."

"Yes, yes; I understand that," he replied with almost petulance, "but what I do not understand is your writing without letting me know."

"I was so afraid you would prevent me, Geoff."

Pevensey looked at his wife almost sternly for a minute, then he smiled.

"Can you realize, Betty," he said, "that I have been just pining for this?"



"Have you?" she replied, with a gay laugh. "Then I am glad, very glad. When shall we go, Geoffrey? Will next week suit you?"

"Perfectly," was the reply. "We will go on Monday, and get home on Saturday evening. Now run up to your room, dearest; I must answer one or two letters before I go to bed."

Pevensey left Betty abruptly, as was so often his fashion of late. When he found himself in his study, he gave a sigh of the most heartfelt relief. He had locked the door when he went in; now he stood with his back to the fire. Fires were always kept burning brightly in the Rectory.

"What a little witch my Betty is!" he thought. "She has helped me all unknowingly just at the very moment when I must have broken down, but for the thought of this blessed relief and change. Yes, we'll go to London next week, and I will see Preston Dykes. If anyone can help me, he can."

Pevensey was thinking of one of the greatest nerve specialists of the day. He turned his face now towards the fire, forgetting all about the letters he meant to write. There was a look of relief all over his worn and pale features. He kept on gazing at the fire as though he saw visions of hope in it. Suddenly a thought came to him. It was evidently a disquieting thought, for he clenched one

of his hands, and paced once or twice up and down the room.

“I ought not to do it,” was his reflection. “But perhaps this will be the last—or very nearly the last time, and, whatever happens, I must have rest to-night. I am over-excited, and that which I dread comes close to me when I fail to sleep. I cannot lie broad awake by Betty’s side, and think and think all night long of the horror which may be approaching. Yes, to-night I will secure rest at any cost.”

The Rector went swiftly to the little oak cupboard in the wall, took out the phial which contained the white globules, took six globules from the bottle, swallowed them, and returned the bottle to its place in the cupboard. Having done this, he sank into a chair, and looked into the flames. Gradually, but truly, the opiate which he had swallowed did its work. The tired lines were smoothed from his brow. His gaze was calm, still, reflective. He sat very quiet. Gradually his eyes closed, and he slept.

## CHAPTER VIII

EARLY on Monday morning Mr. and Mrs. Pevensey went to town. Lady Pevensey lived in a fashionable part of Mayfair. Her house was small but was furnished with perfect taste; all its appointments were of the very best, and those who entered it felt an immediate sense of luxury surrounding them.

When Betty and her husband arrived, a smart footman opened the door; but Laura was standing in the hall. She ran up eagerly and kissed both her brother and sister-in-law with much heartiness.

“Now this is too delicious!” she said. “I *am* going to enjoy myself. It is delightful to see you! Your room is ready for you; your fire is blazing merrily, and only this morning I put rose-colored silk shades on the electric lights. You had best not see mother, either of you, until you are ready for dinner. We have taken seats for the opera afterwards. They are playing *Lohengrin* to-night. We secured seats the day Betty’s letter arrived.”

“Oh—oh!” said Betty; “isn’t it quite splendid, Geoff?”

She gave a gasp of pleasure.

"You are lucky," continued Laura, "for we don't always have Wagner music in London. Now, Betty, be sure you put on something pretty. Mother is anxious that you should make as good an effect as possible."

The husband and wife went into the beautiful room that had been prepared for them. Betty removed her sealskin jacket and stood for a minute by the fire warming her hands.

"I do like soft things, and the pleasures of life, and comfort," she said. "Oh, Geoffrey, think of not having to give out one coal ticket or one grocery ticket until this day week!"

"We will forget the parish," was his answer.

"Yes," she said, observing with delight that he looked in better spirits already. "We will not speak of it once."

"Agreed," he replied.

Laura knocked at the door.

"Geoff, your dressing-room is at the other side of the passage. Mother's maid, Mandeville, will come to help you to dress, Betty."

"Oh, thanks," said Betty.

Laura ran off. Geoffrey left his wife and went to the dressing-room. Mandeville presently came

in. She quickly unpacked Betty's trunk, and then said:

"My lady is dining a little later than usual to-night, madam; would you like me to arrange your hair now?"

"Thank you," replied Betty.

She seated herself before the long glass, and Mandeville, glancing from time to time at the sweet, bright face, took pains with her work. She saw that Betty had good features; that hers was not only beauty of expression and color, but also that her little nose was Grecian, and her lips beautifully cut. She arranged Betty's very thick black hair in the most becoming manner, and put a solitary diamond star into its rich coils, so as just to show like a gleam of light above her forehead.

"And now, madam, what dress will you wear? If I may suggest anything, I would say your white satin."

"But surely my wedding dress is too smart," said Betty.

"Oh, by no means, madam. Lady Pevensey has taken a box at the opera, and I imagine that the dress will be suitable."

"Then I will wear it," said Betty.

After the maid had left her, she stood for a little

looking at her own reflection in the long mirror. Geoffrey came in. He started when he saw her.

“Good gracious, Betty! Oh, Betty, the parish—it seems scarcely to exist. You are my bride again, and we are going to have a fresh honeymoon.”

He caught her in his arms. She kissed him two or three times.

“I am so happy,” she whispered, “that I can scarcely speak about it.”

When Betty went downstairs with her husband, Lady Pevensey greeted them both warmly. She looked with approval at her daughter-in-law.

“By the way,” she said, after a moment’s pause, “I have never given you your wedding present. You shall have it to-night. Laura, go to my room and bring me the jewel case.”

Laura went, and returned almost immediately with an old leather case. Lady Pevensey took from the case a row of diamonds. These she clasped round the girl’s white throat.

“They suit you, Betty,” she said.

“She looks beautiful, doesn’t she?” said Laura.

Geoffrey was silent, but his eyes spoke his thoughts. Laura, who never could dress like anybody else, rustled about the room in a sort of coat of mail made practically of green beads. The beads were iridescent, and shone whenever she moved.

Laura wore her hair very high. She had a fine figure, and her queer dress suited her. Lady Pevensey, however, did not approve of it.

“Why did you put on that hideous garment?” she said. “Those colors resemble the skin of a snake. Why do you choose such odd costumes?”

“Because I am odd myself, mother,” was the reply. “Ordinary dress would not suit me. Think of me in white satin and diamonds! Now, Betty looks superb in that magnificent although commonplace attire; whereas I——” She shrugged her shoulders. “Sit here, Bettina,” she continued, “and let’s talk.”

Dinner was quickly announced. Afterwards, Lady Pevensey’s private motor-car arrived, and they went to the opera. The music was all that Betty most loved.

“What an evening we had!” she said, later on, to her husband. “How much we shall have to talk over when we get back!”

“Don’t mention even the name of our home,” was Pevensey’s rejoinder. “Oh, Betty, let us be happy, even for a time.”

Her heart gave a bound as her husband uttered these words, and then sank low in her breast.

“What shall we do to-morrow?” she asked, struggling to regain her brightness.

"I shall be busy in the morning," he said; "in the afternoon I am at your service."

"But what are you going to do in the morning?"

"I have an engagement, dear. I shall, in all probability, be home to lunch."

Pevensey looked uneasy. The brightness which had made his face so attractive during the evening left it. A whisper came to Betty's heart—a whisper of dread, of portent. She had knowingly married a man who held a secret. For an instant—only an instant—her sweet dark eyes rested on his worn features, seemed to read the thoughts in his sad eyes, and to guess the words which came so close to his lips.

"The time is near," thought Betty. "I thought he would be able to bear the burden alone, but I see now that we must bear it together. The time is coming; he must tell me everything. Oh, I shall be glad to know!"

Pevensey had made an appointment with Sir Preston Dykes for the following morning at eleven o'clock. He left his mother's house soon after ten, and took a long walk by himself in the park. As the time approached for him to see the doctor he felt strangely nervous. He had made up his mind not to bring his globules with him to London, for his intention was never once during his visit to yield



to the temptation of using them. He had the prescription in his pocket, however, and the temptation suddenly visited him to fortify himself for his medical interview by taking a few of the sedatives.

He passed Squires, the great chemists; paused, hesitated, then turned back and entered. He gave his prescription to a man at the other side of the counter, who immediately began to make up the medicine. Pevensey waited, his hand on the counter. When the man gave him the little bottle, he said:

“You will forgive my speaking, sir; but that is a very strong prescription, and I should advise the—the patient never to exceed the dose.”

“Ah!” said Pevensey.

He took up the bottle, turned it round in his hand, and looked at it.

“There are directions here, are there not, for the taking of these globules?”

“Yes, sir; and three make the extreme dose.”

“So I observe,” replied Pevensey. “What do I owe you?”

He paid for the little phial and put it into his waistcoat pocket. As he was going out, he turned again to the man.

“In case the dose of three globules were exceeded, what would happen?” was his remark.

The chemist raised his shoulders, gave an expressive gesture, then was silent. Pevensey went out. Looking to right and left, he perceived a side street. He walked down it a little way, opened the phial, and hastily swallowed six globules. He then returned the bottle to his pocket.

Almost immediately afterwards he was conscious of a sensation of warmth and comfort round the region of his heart. A heavy weight was also lifted from his brain, and he was as one who feared nothing and who trod on air.

By the time he reached Sir Preston Dykes' house he felt absolutely well—so much so that it seemed ridiculous to trouble the doctor. He had made an appointment, however, and must keep it. In a very short time he was in the consulting-room, and he and Preston Dykes were looking at each other face to face.

“You have drugged yourself,” said Dykes in a brief tone.

“Yes,” said Pevensey.

“What is the nature of the drug?”

Pevensey took the prescription from his pocket and gave it to Sir Preston Dykes. The doctor read the contents.

“How many of these do you take at a time?” he said.

“Six; that is my invariable dose now. I neither exceed it nor diminish it.”

“How long have you been giving yourself this drug?”

“For six months; at first only at intervals, now more frequently.”

“Who ordered it for you? Ah—I see—Hutchinson. You consulted him?”

“Yes; he said I had better have the globules by me, in case of necessity.”

“You find, Mr. Pevensey, that the necessity has arisen?”

“Yes.”

“Did Hutchinson give you permission to increase the dose?”

“On the contrary,” said Pevensey, “he begged of me only to have recourse to it *in extremis*, and not to take more than three globules.”

“Let me examine you,” said Preston Dykes.

The examination was performed quickly and thoroughly.

“Your heart is quite sound,” said the doctor then, “and, as far as it is possible for any man to tell, your brain is healthy and without disease. What is the matter with you? You are afraid of something.”

“Heredity,” said Pevensey, in a low voice.

“Ah—well,” said the doctor, “that is a tiresome bugbear, but it can often be scotched. Come, I want to hear everything about you—your story, from beginning to end.”

Pevensey was now wearing that queer, secretive look which is a marked characteristic of those who habituate themselves to the drug which he was taking.

“No lies—no keeping back anything,” said the doctor. “The absolute truth, and at once.”

Then Pevensey spoke. It was torture to him to lift the curtain and reveal to the doctor what haunted him day and night.

When he had quite finished his story, Sir Preston Dykes spoke.

“This won’t do at all,” he said. “You live under the shadow of fear. You have no cause, none whatever. The shadow must be removed.”

“It cannot,” said Pevensey, clasping his hands. “My days are horrible, and my nights without the aid of that drug would be unendurable.”

“The drug must be stopped—instantly.”

“I cannot do without it,” said Pevensey.

“Then I can do nothing for you. You will, in all probability, approach that condition which you fear. In all probability you will enter the state which you dread. You are a sound man now—sound, mentally

and physically. In six months' time, if you are not insane, you will be very nearly so. The drug is undermining you; you must not take it again."

"You don't know what I am without it. I am a clergyman, and have a large parish. How am I to go about amongst my people, helping to support and cheer them, when I am myself suffering the tortures of hell? I am married, too. It is the thought of my young wife that so completely unmans me."

"Does she know that you take these?"

"A thousand times no!"

"Is she aware of the fact that troubles you?"

"I wished to tell her before my marriage. I wished to break off my marriage, but she would not break it off, nor would she listen to my story. We decided between us that she was never to know the secret until the day came that I could bear it no longer."

"What sort of woman is your wife?"

"She is young, brave, and bright. She is strong, too, mentally and physically. She is a woman in a thousand."

"How long are you married?"

"Six months."

The doctor, who had been seated, stood up.

"There are two courses before you," he said.

"You can go down the hill—and, let me assure you,

your speed will be rapid; you will find yourself quickly at the bottom. At the bottom dwells despair; in that pit which you will enter you will listen to the cries of other souls damned like your own. You are already taking double the right amount of these globules. In a month's time, where you now require six to calm your nerves, you will have recourse to twelve. Meanwhile, your self-respect and your self-control will leave you, and all that you most dread will come upon you; your wife, even, may turn to hate you."

Pevensey shivered violently. The doctor suddenly changed his manner.

"That is the downward course," he said. "We surely need not dwell on it. You are young; you are at present healthy, and you have plenty of moral fibre about you. There is no doubt that, owing to that heredity which so terrifies you, your brain has a tendency towards mental disease, but it depends altogether on yourself whether you become the victim of that disease. Give up this drug; go through hell for a fortnight—you *will* go through hell without the drug—and come out restored and in your right mind at the end of your period of suffering. Conquer this pernicious habit, and, above all things, my good fellow, consult that wife of yours. Make her your confidante. When you are overpowered

with mental distress go to her, not to this vile poison, for consolation."

As the doctor spoke he tore up the prescription and flung it and the phial into the fire.

"Be a man," was the final counsel. "I can do nothing for you, but your wife can do everything. Take my advice; come and see me again in six weeks' time."

## CHAPTER IX

INSTEAD of meeting his wife as he had arranged, Pevensey sent her a telegram, and then took the first train into the country. He went to Waterloo, and took a train as far as Godalming; there he got out and walked for long hours. He wanted to tire himself out physically; then he wanted to face the position.

He was without his drug; he was without his prescription. All the mental depression which invariably followed a strong dose was beginning to visit him. He almost cursed his own carelessness in having left the little bottle of globules at the Rectory. He felt inclined to go to fetch them. He felt a mad desire for them; he hardly knew how to contain himself. What should he do? How should he spend the night? He would not go back to Betty; he could not face her. He felt it absolutely impossible to take the doctor's advice. He must have recourse to the drug once again.

Presently, utterly weary, for he had eaten nothing since early breakfast, he entered a small inn not far from the station, ordered some food, and then, going to the railway station, sent off a telegram:





“Don’t expect me to-night. Quite well, but kept on business.”

He was just about to push the little form through the slit for the telegraph boy to take, when a hand, light as a feather, was laid on his arm, and turning, he saw Betty herself.

“Good Heavens!” he said, starting back and fixing his wondering, anxious eyes on her face. “My darling, where have you come from?”

She laughed just a little; then she said gently:

“I was waiting for you outside the doctor’s.”

“Betty, I never told you I was going to see any doctor; and I hate to be followed.”

He tried to push Betty’s clinging hand from his arm.

“If you didn’t want me to follow you,” she said very gently, “you should not have left the doctor’s letter on your dressing-table. I saw it; I told no one; I just went out to wait for you. Before I could come up to you, you had got into a hansom and driven away. There was nothing for me to do but to follow you in another hansom. I did; I followed you down here. I thought I would let you be alone for a little; but now you want me and I am here. Is the telegram which you have just written meant for me?”

“Yes, Bettina.”

She felt by the tone in his voice that he was no longer sorry to have her with him. She placed her hand with renewed confidence on his arm.

“Let us go to the hotel,” she said. “It is quite nice; I have been there already. The people know that I am waiting for my husband. Come back with me there, dear.”

Pevensey followed his wife obediently. After the first shock he felt astonishingly cheered and comforted by her presence. She was, after all, next best to his globules.

They entered the little inn. Betty went at once to speak to the landlady.

“My husband and I want the very best bedroom you can give us,” she said, “and wish to have a fire lighted immediately in the room. Have you a private sitting-room?”

“No, madam.”

The woman was attracted by Betty's sweet face. She then looked beyond her at the haggard man who was standing more or less in shadow. Suddenly she recognized him.

“Why, sir, you have already ordered a room and—and dinner.”

“Yes,” he answered. “I did not know I should find my wife here.”

He took out his card and gave it to the woman. She read the name on it: "The Reverend Geoffrey Pevensey." She looked at Betty.

"I'll do the very best I can for you both, madam. There isn't a really private sitting-room, but I think I can manage to let you have the coffee-room to yourselves; there are no visitors staying at the hotel to-night, and any odd persons who come I'll arrange that they shall have dinner in the bar."

"You are very kind—very kind indeed," said Betty. Then she added, in a very low tone: "My husband is not quite well, and noise disturbs him."

"Oh, yes, madam! I quite understand. Alice, take Mrs. Pevensey up to No. 6, and see that a fire is lighted immediately. About your luggage, ma'am?"

Betty colored.

"Neither my husband nor I have brought any," she said. "The fact is"—she dropped her voice—"I followed him down here to-day as he was not very well. He didn't know that I had done so. We are returning to town to-morrow."

"Yes, ma'am; certainly, ma'am. I think I can lend you all you require for the night."

"Oh, how kind of you! that will be splendid," said Betty.

She gave one of her joyous, girlish smiles, and

the woman felt her heart warming to the pretty creature.

No. 6 was a good-sized bedroom with heavy, comfortable, old-fashioned furniture. It had a huge fireplace, and the servant piled on large knobs of coal. Dinner was presently served in a corner of the coffee-room; a screen was put round to make this portion of the room more private and cosy, and the landlady herself came in to wait upon the guests.

"Somehow, ma'am," she said suddenly to Betty, "I have a feeling that I've seen your face before."

Betty looked at her in surprise.

"I have never been to Godalming before," she said. "Are you an old inhabitant?"

"An old inhabitant!" said Mrs. Jenks. "Jenks and me—we've kept the Red Lion for the last twenty years. I *have* seen your face, though—now, let me think." Then her brow cleared. "To be sure!" she said, "and what a good likeness it do be. You never give your photograph to anybody, did you, ma'am?"

"Oh, I am sure I have, to several people."

"To a woman, for instance, of the name of Hinton?—a woman who lived through a great and terrible trouble."

Even the Rector looked up interested.

"Do you know Mrs. Hinton?" he said. "My

wife and I have been—oh! so terribly sorry for her.”

“Do I know her?” said Mrs. Jenks, her cheeks blazing and her eyes shining. “Am not I own cousin to her? and didn’t Jack—the dear boy—spend many of his holidays at Godalming when he were a child? Ah—poor thing! poor thing! It’s but a week since she left me. She come here on a little visit, and could talk of no one but your dear young lady, sir, and all that she done for her in the midst of her trouble. She showed me your lady’s photograph, sir, and said she wouldn’t part with it for its weight in diamonds. Ah, to be sure, poor thing—she is to be pitied.”

Betty and her husband asked several questions with regard to Mrs. Hinton, and the landlady, who now could not do enough for them, hurried backwards and forwards into the room, bringing one good thing to eat after another.

“We live plain here,” she said, “but we live well—the best meat in the country, and the plumpest fowls, and the freshest eggs, and home-cured bacon, and—my word! as to preserves—you have but to name ’em, ma’am, and I’ll get you any sort you fancy.”

“We have had an excellent meal,” said Betty, in her sweet voice, “and you have been so very, very

kind, Mrs. Jenks, and I cannot tell you how thankful I am to hear something of Mrs. Hinton again, for I love her most truly. But now, my husband is very weary, and I do not think we want anything more."

"You want quiet, not my rattling tongue," said Mrs. Jenks, who spoke, however, in the height of good humor. "Well, my dear young lady, and you shall have your quiet; not a soul shall enter this coffee-room to-night except your two selves. Jane shall bring you in coffee when you ring—and my coffee ain't the sort to be scorned—and real cream, too, fresh from the cow."

The good woman took herself off. Betty lit a cigarette and gave it to her husband. She stole up close to him and slipped her hand through his arm.

"Geoff, are you so dead tired that you would rather go to bed and to sleep, and wait until the morning for a real talk, or shall we have it now?"

"Go to sleep?" he answered. "I shall not sleep all night."

"Then, if necessary," said Betty, in her sweet, clear tone, "we will talk all night."

He did not answer. He seemed to shrink away from her. She knew this quite well, but was not hurt or surprised.

"Geoff, you remember the compact we made with each other on our wedding day?"

“Yes, yes,” he said. “I was mad to make it.”

“No, darling; but the time has come for us to keep our compact. My own Geoffrey, I must know exactly what is troubling you—I must know all about that thing which is undermining your health and destroying your usefulness. I have known for a long time—for months past—that something was wrong, but I could not guess what it was. Now, I *will* know. Geoffrey, I claim your promise. You cannot do without my support and my sympathy. Whatever your secret is, we must share it together.”

He looked full at her with that strained expression in his eyes which was so terrible to see. Betty longed to put her soft white hand gently across his brow and to close those eyes in soft sleep.

“Oh, poor darling! He cannot—he shall not stand it another hour alone!” she thought.

“Come, Geoff,” she said then, cheerfully; “you know I am not at all a weak sort of girl, and as to my being troubled with nerves—I don’t think I have got any.”

“Oh, come, Betty,” he said; “you remember what you felt at Mrs. Hinton’s.”

“I am stronger since then; I learned a lesson that night,” she said in a low tone.

“It seems to me you are always learning lessons,”

he answered. "You are almost perfect; you are ten thousand times too good for me."

"That is for me to decide," she replied. "You are the one man in all the world I love, or could ever have loved, and I would rather be with you, my Geoffrey, even though you were to tell me now that you were the greatest sinner on God's earth, or that you were mad, or going to be mad, or that anything—*anything* on God's earth was going to happen to you, than be the wife of another. But there is one thing I cannot stand, and that is, to find myself outside your life."

"Outside, Betty; what do you mean?"

"My dear old boy," she said, and now she laid her hand on his knee, "you know perfectly well that your Betty is outside your life. Your real life is spent in your study"—she gave him a keen glance—your real life means a mask over your face and your poor sad thoughts turned inwards—ever inwards; your real life forgets faith and the love of God, and the strength of God, and the mighty guiding hand of God. Your real life, Geoffrey, is lived when you slip away from me, your Betty, and go and see a man like Sir Preston Dykes—*alone*. Geoff, while you were in the great doctor's house I found out that he was a special nerve doctor; in short, that many people who suppose themselves to be on the



verge of insanity consult him. I had to find out; I had, as it were, to act the spy upon you, my own Geoff, for I could not stand living outside your life any longer. So take me in now, Geoff, take me in now."

She fell on her knees beside him, and opened her warm, round, young arms, and folded them round his thin neck, and all of a sudden he found a great sob rising to his throat, and tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

"Oh, Betty, Betty!" he said; "you are saying to me in your own way what Sir Preston Dykes has said already. He urged and urged me to make you my confidante."

Betty was very, very gentle now that she found she had won. She was a creature with infinite tact and abundant tenderness, and with little or no thought of self in her nature. She sank slowly down to the hearthrug, looking as she did so almost like a child, but the strong light in those brown eyes and the steadfast tenderness of those lips belonged to a woman; and the man who looked down at her took courage.

"Well, I will tell you," he said suddenly. "It came upon me as a crash. I only heard it the day before my wedding."

"And who—*who* told you then?" said Betty.

He bent down and whispered a word in her ear.

“Not your—not your mother?”

“Yes.”

Betty trembled and clenched her hands. After a minute she looked up.

“Go on,” she said. “I never, never did like Lady Pevensey.”

“Oh, Betty, my darling, she could not help herself.”

“Why did she tell you then? Did she want you not to marry me?”

“There is no use in judging her, Betty; she told me what is a fact. I blame her for not having given me the information before.”

“Well, tell me what she said, and let us get it over,” said Betty.

She did not know why she felt almost cheerful, but the fact was that she had very little belief in Lady Pevensey, and was almost sure that whatever bad news she had to confide to her son she would exaggerate it to suit her own purpose.

“My mother was always queer to me,” began the Rector; “very affectionate at times, proud of me at times, but at other times neglectful, even resentful. I think Laura was her favorite, although Laura never treated her with the respect which I showed her.”

“Laura is very good for all that,” said Betty, stoutly. “I like her; she is so honest.”

“Yes, isn’t she?” said Pevensey; “quite a splendid girl all round.”

“Different from anyone else I have ever met,” said Betty.

“Yes, Laura has always been what one might call peculiar from her very earliest days,” said the Rector. She was born with an intensely strong will of her own, and as her father died when she was a very little child, she has ruled my mother from the first.”

“Don’t think of her now,” said Betty, a little impatiently. “Tell me what your mother said.”

“She told me my family history.”

“Oh, I know the sort of things,” said Betty, with impatience. “You’re consumptive, or—or something of that sort.”

“Worse than that, Betty.”

“Worse?” said the girl.

“Yes, very much worse. The taint does not come from my father’s side of the family. The Pevensys are all healthy, but my poor mother confessed to me with bitter tears that she was the one to blame—that she married my father without telling him her secret.”

“What secret, Geoff?” asked his wife. “I fail to understand.”

“It is a very curious and strange state of things, and having married my father I blame my mother for letting me know at all. She excused herself by saying that she had suffered so fearfully by never having told my father that she could not allow me to marry without giving me full particulars with regard to her family history.”

“Well, well,” said Betty, “I don’t suppose it is half as bad as she made it out.”

“You are wrong, Betty,” said the man. “It is as bad as it can be. Now I will tell it to you.”

He shivered. Had not Betty known that this confidence would be his very best chance of relief she would not have allowed him to continue. His face turned ghastly; he tried once or twice to speak, but words failed him.

“Come, Geoff, try,” said Betty, in her cheerful tone. “Nothing that you can say will frighten me. What is it, dear?”

“It is a strange and terrible thing, Betty. I told Sir Preston Dykes the whole story to-day. He, of course, tried to cheer me. I had already gone to consult Henderson—another very great nerve specialist. I went to Henderson immediately after my mother had related to me that ghastly history. Oh,

shall I ever forget that day! You know what I was before I knew of this secret, Betty. My nature was naturally bright, happy and cheerful. I felt a great enthusiasm with regard to my work. I believe—I humbly believe—that I had faith in God. I hoped to do right; I hoped to be the means of helping suffering men and women, and cheering them with the knowledge of the Love Divine. I felt that it was surrounding me. I cannot tell you how uplifted I was. Then came the crash, the reaction. I came out of my mother's drawing-room staggering like a man who has got a death-blow. I saw Henderson. He did what he could for me, but looked grave. He did not forbid my marrying, but he said that I ought to tell you. I came to you. Don't you remember the day? don't you remember how I looked and how I spoke?"

"Yes, I remember," said Betty. "You wanted to break off our marriage. That—that, indeed, would have been terrible."

"But, Betty, darling, you at least would have escaped. Oh, when I think of what I dragged you into!"

"You have dragged me into nothing that I cannot bear," replied Betty. "Now, go on, Geoff. Tell your own wife the very truth—the very heart of the truth; keep nothing back from her."

“Betty, dearest, when first I married you I was possessed of a kind of hope that I could get the better of my heredity, that the awful doom of my ancestors would not fall upon me. I thought that I could fight the demon, Fear. But, Betty, day by day it gets a stronger and stronger mastery of me, and fear is the first symptom of the ghastly fate that awaits me.”

In spite of her courage the girl could not help trembling slightly. After a minute she said:

“Fear, as a rule, ceases to exist when two share the secret.”

“Even your love, Betty, and your knowledge cannot undo the horror which grips me day by day. Well, to put it in plain words, this is what is wrong: For generations—five or six generations, I believe—the male members of my mother’s family have been, more or less, subject to a certain form of insanity: not the usual form of the disease—no suicidal mania, or homicidal mania, or anything of that sort. The form that this special insanity takes is as follows:

“At a certain period of full adolescence—generally about thirty years of age—a slow collapse of the mental powers sets in. This collapse is not caused by what is usually called softening of the brain, but to a certain extent it resembles that most

dire disease. Doctors have tried all in their power to help the miserable victims. After death, post-mortems have taken place, and the brains of the victims have been examined, but not the slightest trace of disease, of degeneration of any kind, has been found to account for the terrible symptoms. No doctor can really understand the complaint. The victim dies, as a rule, young—generally under forty years of age, and invariably for the last few years of his life he becomes—oh, Betty! not a man at all, but a mere animal, with little or no brain, no mind, no affection, no hope. He feels nothing, he suffers nothing; he eats, he sleeps, he likes to bask in the sun, or to huddle near a fire. As his end approaches he is unable even to rise from his bed. He is nothing but a mere living, breathing mass of flesh; in short, the soul of the man is dead.

“It is that fate that lies before your husband, and the first symptom has already appeared—an overmastering, terrible, appalling fear. Each of the victims begins his downward course with that grim fear to keep him company, and the stronger the fear the swifter is the march down hill. Betty, I am in the grip of that fear. Now you know all. You are inside my miserable life for what it is worth.”

Betty did not speak for a minute. Then she rose to her knees; then she swept her strong young arms

round her husband's neck, and then suddenly she burst into weeping. Her tears had an extraordinary effect on Pevensey. He forgot himself in his anxiety for her. He grew quite calm as she became agitated. He patted her gently, and held her close to him. He kissed her many times; he assured her of his love.

When at last she was still once more, she raised her head and said:

"There is no denying that it is terrible, but I am glad I know; I am glad to be inside your life."

Before the husband and wife went to their room, Pevensey confessed to Betty that he was accelerating his own downfall by the use of certain globules.

"I have promised Preston Dykes to give them up," he said. "He has, in fact, forbidden me to touch them again, assuring me that I shall not escape what I dread if I continue to take them. I have promised to abstain from what has been my only comfort. Oh, Betty, you will have a dreadful time while I am struggling to do without the one thing that calms me. Are you strong enough to go through it?"

"Strong enough?" she answered. "Yes, and fifty times as much. You do without the comfort of your globules, Geoffrey, but then you have got the comfort of my presence. I am always there, always close to you, darling—sympathizing, understanding,



and—*believing*. Yes,” she added, raising her eyes steadfastly, “believing, with all my heart and soul and strength, that you will never be the victim of that dire disease.”

He gave her a vague smile. He was tired out. She hurried him to bed. She lay down beside him. She laid her hand on his shoulder. Hers was a touch of the utmost soothing.

After a time the man slept, but the woman lay awake—thinking—thinking hard.

## CHAPTER X

WHEN Betty and her husband reached Lady Pevensey's house after that remarkable and never-to-be-forgotten evening at the little country inn, they were met by Laura. Laura had been out riding and came towards them in her habit.

"What have you two been doing?" she said.

She looked into their faces: her eyes were full of penetration. She was a remarkably clever girl, with not a grain of sentiment in her composition. But she was kind-hearted; she had taken a fancy to Betty; she loved Geoffrey dearly. She wished, if possible, at the present moment to shield them from Lady Pevensey's inquiries.

"You look fagged out, Bet," she said; "and as to you, Geoffrey—good gracious! I am only thankful I am not a clergyman—or a clergyman's wife. Why, even when you come to town for a week's recreation you seem to be carrying the troubles and sins of all your parishioners on your shoulders. Now, for goodness' sake, don't be a scapegoat; look the handsome, light-hearted fellow you used to be at one time."

"I will do my best, Laura," said her brother.

He went up to his room, but Betty stayed behind.

"Laura," she said, "you must help me. I want to talk to you quite, quite alone. You must help me with all your might and main."

"What is it?" said Laura, changing her voice at once to one of real sympathy. Then she added: "I do think, Betty, that you're a right good sort."

"Geoffrey wants help and encouragement," said Betty; "the very best that we can give him; and I must talk to you, but not now. You are clever—you know you are: you can keep—it seems a dreadful thing to say—Lady Pevensey at bay."

"Oh, I'll manage the mother, if that's what you mean," said Laura, "and you and I will have a straight talk to-morrow, for I mean to take you for a drive all by myself. You shall come in my motor with me: we'll go right away into the country and have a jolly time."

Betty smiled. "Thank you," she said. Soon afterwards she joined her husband in their bedroom. Meanwhile, Lady Pevensey, who considered her neurasthenia worse than usual that afternoon, turned with an annoyed look to Laura.

"Well," she said, "have the runaways returned?"

"The runaways, mother! What a way to speak of dear Betty and Geoffrey!"

Lady Pevensey tossed her head.

"It's all very fine for you, Laura," she said, "but I have some old-fashioned ideas. You're nothing more nor less than a woman suffragist. I believe if you had it in your power, and I permitted you, you'd go howling to the House of Commons and cling round a policeman's neck and beg of him to arrest you as soon as not."

"Yes, mother," said Laura, calmly; "I'm very keen about the suffrage, and I shouldn't greatly mind spending a fortnight in Holloway Gaol."

"Good God!" said Lady Pevensey. "What an awful daughter I have got in you! For which of my sins am I so punished? You can't mean what you are saying."

"To a certain extent I do," said Laura, looking attentively at her mother. "I think sensible women ought to have votes; but then, the rub is this—all women are not sensible."

"I suppose you allude to me by that sweet and kindly remark," said Lady Pevensey, very crossly.

"I do not say to whom I allude," remarked Laura. "But listen, mother; I have something to say. Geoffrey is not well."

"Of course he's not well," replied Lady Pevensey. "Is it likely he would be? I warned him before his marriage, but he wouldn't take my advice. He

was infatuated about that silly country girl. Now he finds what it is to be tied to a wife, and to have a burden as well—greater than he can bear.”

“His wife will save him, if anyone can,” replied Laura. “But, please attend to me. I am not going to have her annoyed, and I want my dear old Geoff to have a cheerful and fairly happy time while he is here.”

“Am I preventing it, Laura? Have I not arranged to have dinners and visits to the theatre, and one amusement after another for the dear children during their stay?—I, who am worn out with this terrible neurasthenia, and whom Dr. Goodenough has simply ordered to stay quiet and not worry myself about any single thing? But no one thinks of me and my sufferings.”

“Oh, yes, dear old mums!” said the daughter; “we all think of you—and perhaps we’d think more if you didn’t worrit so about yourself.”

“*Worrit!* Laura, what a horribly vulgar word! Surely, even though you are impertinent to your mother, you may at least speak the King’s English.”

“I am a very determined subject of the King, whether I speak his English or not,” said Laura. “Ah! that’s right! here comes tea. When the children, as you call them, come down, don’t torment them with a number of idle questions. We’re to

have some nice people to dine to-night, and it will do Geoffrey real good to talk with them."

"Nothing will do him good," said Lady Pevensey, in her slow and drawling voice. "But have your way, Laura: you master me."

"I mean to," said that young lady.

"I suppose you don't mean to sit down to pour out tea in your riding habit?"

"Oh, bother my habit!" said Laura. "I don't intend to change it."

A minute or two later Geoffrey and Betty entered the room. Betty, although tired, looked sweet and fresh. She had changed her dress for one of her very prettiest trousseau robes. Even Lady Pevensey could not help glancing at her with approval.

"I am sorry we were out last night," began Betty to her mother-in-law.

"Say nothing about it, my dear," was Lady Pevensey's reply. "Young people will be young people. When you come to my age you will understand how sweet is thought and consideration for others. My head is racked with neuralgia. I saw Dr. Goodenough this afternoon, and he prohibited all worries. Laura speaks of them as 'worrits.' She really can be very annoying when she likes. Geoffrey, my son, come and sit by my side and hold

my hand. I have before now found the touch of a strong man's hand very soothing."

Geoffrey immediately went up to his mother and sat by her. He took her slim hand in one of his, and with the other gently stroked her fingers.

"Ve-ry soothing—ve-e-ry soothing *indeed!*" said Lady Pevensey. "I have always found that you, Geoffrey, have the gift of magnetism. Even when you were a little child I used to remark on it."

Betty, meanwhile, was helping Laura with tea. She brought a cup, daintily prepared, to her mother-in-law. Lady Pevensey gave a slight shudder.

"Tea! with my nerves!" she said. "Laura, you have forgotten my hot water; that is the only thing a person of my extreme delicacy can venture to take."

"I am certain you want nourishment," said Betty, stoutly.

"Do you really, Betty, set yourself up as a better judge than Dr. Goodenough?" asked Lady Pevensey, in a peevish voice.

"Oh, no," replied Betty, contrite at once.

She looked at her husband. Their eyes met—hers full of courage; his with a dim, beseeching look in them. But the courage in hers inspired him. He devoted himself to his mother, provided her with

her favorite meal of spongecake and hot water, while he himself ate with considerable appetite.

"You are looking better, Geoffrey," said his mother. "I am glad of it—very glad. We are going to have some delightful people here this evening. Mr. Power, whose remarkable thoughts on the New Socialism have created such astonishment; also Mr. McDermot, a leading surgeon—I do hope he will describe some of his operations; I have a morbid delight in listening to descriptions of the horrors of the operating-table; also that dear fussy little Miss Spring—she plays so admirably on the violin, it will be a treat to hear her. The Dancocks have also promised to come; Mr. Dancock has *such* a fine intellectual head; don't you think so, Laura?"

"A fine intellectual noodle, I should call him," replied Laura.

Lady Pevensey looked pathetically at her handsome son.

"Laura and I never agree on any one single point," she said. "It's pleasant for me, isn't it?"

"Oh, mother," said Geoffrey, "Laura means no harm."

"But the fact that she means no harm doesn't make it more agreeable for me," said Lady Pevensey. "To be frank—I am fully convinced that



Laura is the real cause of my neurasthenia. If you hadn't married, now, but——”

She looked at Betty. The color flew from Betty's cheeks. She was about to make a hasty retort, but the expression of pain on her husband's face kept her silent.

The dinner that followed turned out to be a great success. Mr. Dancock, with his massive head and portly appearance, was by no means such a noodle as Laura described him. He was a vain man who considered that he knew more than anybody else on any subject. He really was well informed, but, notwithstanding his vast bulk of person and large store of knowledge, was of a somewhat timorous nature and could easily be set down. He expanded in Lady Pevensey's presence, who encouraged his vanity, but when with Laura he looked subdued and even limp.

Mrs. Dancock was pale and æsthetic, and lived entirely for Mr. Dancock. She seldom spoke a word, but hung on his utterances with an expression of face which seemed to say: “Did you ever before listen to such wisdom?”

She came to dinner in a sage green dress that was very long, clinging, and out of date. Her hair was plastered smoothly down round her long, thin, white face. She had pale, protruding eyes and a somewhat large mouth. Her eyes were always indicative of

wonder—the wonder inspired by Dancock. She wanted the rest of the world to share her astonishment at the greatness of this remarkable man, and as she was under the impression that they did, she was on the whole fairly contented. Whenever he spoke, she looked round at the company to see if they were listening, and any person she found attending to his pompous utterances she adored for the time being.

Miss Spring was a lady of what people are pleased to call uncertain age. She aimed at thirty-five, and aimed fairly successfully. What her real age was she and Somerset House alone knew. She was fond of calling herself an orphan, but was not at all depressed at the circumstance—on the contrary, she had a very bright, eager manner. She was under the illusion that almost every man she met was in love with her, but that she had never yet found her other half. She confided to Laura when they were alone that she never wished to find him, that she infinitely preferred single bliss.

“All men are tyrants,” she said to Laura. “I don’t wish to be tyrannized over. If my other half does come along I shall be forced, by the mere magnetism which attracts one human being to its affinity, to take him, so I really trust he will not appear. Ah,

those poor fellows who have adored me—all in vain! I am sorry for them, but it can't be helped."

Miss Spring dressed very smartly, and in the extreme of fashion. Her dress was decidedly *decollete*, and as she had a very thin neck this was scarcely becoming to her. Her face was powdered, and also slightly rouged. She wore her hair very low on her forehead. Her eyes, which were of a reddish brown, were quick and penetrating in character. She had a thin mouth and a long upper lip. She was a rather small woman, and of slight build. She believed herself to be very graceful, and was fond of looking behind at her train as she entered the room.

Miss Spring had, however, one gift which for the time being, at least, raised her above the commonplace. She could play the violin so beautifully and with such true tenderness that silence fell upon the room when she was so employed. Her secret terror, as she confided to Laura, was that her other half would discover her, on one of these occasions, come forward, and claim her.

"There will be no hope when he does appear," she said. "I live in continual dread, I assure you, Laura; I only trust to Providence that he will not find me out."

Mr. Power was a man of real and great ability.

He had a steadfast and very earnest type of face, a great domed head, hair slightly grey, a decided stoop between the shoulders, and a look in his eyes as though his thoughts were far away. It was difficult to get Mr. Power to honor any dinner-party, and Lady Pevensey was proud of having secured him. She was a little afraid of him in her heart of hearts, and much preferred Mr. Dancock, who flattered her up to her full bent just as much as she flattered him.

Mr. Power was an unmarried man of about forty years of age. He was noted, as a rule, for his silence. When people spoke to him on the subject, his answer was: "I refuse to talk nonsense, and as it is impossible always to talk sense, I am perforce obliged to be silent." Mr. Power was in no sense of the word a "lady's man"—in fact, he disliked women. Miss Spring felt nervous in his company. She thought it quite likely that he might be her other half, and on the present occasion, running up to Laura she said in an emphatic whisper:

"Don't send me in to dinner with Mr. Power. His eyes have such an extraordinary habit of looking round as though he was seeing nothing, and then suddenly opening wide and catching you, so that you can't get out of his vision for a minute. If he does that to me during dinner I shall get palpitation, and there'll be no violin-playing afterwards."

Laura had to inform Miss Spring that the arrangements of the dinner-table made it necessary for that lady to endure Mr. Power's society. Miss Spring pretended to look displeased, but in reality she was elated and even a little excited. She murmured softly:

"If he catches me with those eyes of his I shall not be able to do anything on the violin afterwards."

But Laura had others to attend to, and stood now talking to a thin, tall man, who might be called in every sense of the word commonplace. He was an old friend of Lady Pevensey's, and his name was Mr. Stale.

Stale was rich, well-born, and, in Lady Pevensey's opinion, would make an excellent husband for Laura. There was no doubt that he admired her very much, and there was equally no doubt that nothing would induce her to look favorably on his suit if he ever thought of proposing to her.

The party were kept waiting for the arrival of a Mr. McDermot, the celebrated surgeon. He appeared on the scene five minutes late. During the interval of waiting Mrs. Dancock was seen to cast most sympathetic glances at her lord and master. A mixture of pity, love and despair filled her prominent light-blue eyes. She knew that he was aching for his dinner; she knew also that the delay would

cause him to eat too fast afterwards and produce a fit of indigestion. She was already planning in her mind what remedies she could employ for his relief on their return home, and, in consequence, was very vague in her remarks to Pevensey, who was standing near her, preparatory to taking her in to dinner.

“Have you any peppermint in the house?” she asked him suddenly.

He started, and looked at her in some amazement, but before he could reply the door was thrown open and McDermot was announced.

He was a little man, very lean, exceedingly “all there,” quick, resolute, determined. He looked the sort of person who never wasted a moment. Mrs. Dancock instantly took a violent dislike to him, for she was persuaded that he would eat his dinner too fast, and thereby still further hurry on the meal to Mr. Dancock’s discomfort. For the great man had a set of teeth which did not quite fit, and was obliged in consequence either to bolt his food or be very slow over his mastication.

“I am very sorry I am late, Lady Pevensey,” said McDermot. “I was unavoidably kept at the last moment. How do you do, Miss Pevensey? Ah! Pevensey! It is long since we met: I am very glad to see you.”

His quick eyes wandered from Pevensey to

Pevensey's wife. She was wearing her wedding dress. Her cheeks were full of exquisite color, and her lovely eyes expressed that womanliness which goes straight to the hearts of all true men. McDermot was a true man in the best sense of the word, and he took a strong fancy to Betty on the spot. He was glad when he found himself chosen to take her in to dinner, and when there he found much to talk to her about.

Mr. Power was at Betty's other side, and Miss Spring sat between Power and Pevensey. McDermot knew Miss Spring, and in his heart of hearts disliked her. She, on the contrary, admired him immensely, and endeavored as well as she could to draw him into conversation, but she could only do this by speaking across Betty, and after a time gave up the attempt in despair. The subjects which interested Mrs. Pevensey and Mr. McDermot were as unexplored countries in Miss Spring's mind. What did she know of the country at its best, or of the joys of work, or of the condition of the poor and the best means of helping them?

McDermot was a philanthropist, and he was deeply interested in Betty's account of Dartminster and of Hillside Rectory. After a pause in the conversation, he said:

"Your life is a very absorbing one, but may I

just, from a medical point of view, give you a warning?"

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Do not dwell too much on sad things, both for your own sake and your husband's."

Betty glanced down the table where Pevensey was sitting. Her heart beat fast: the color grew brighter in her cheeks. Had McDermot noticed anything special about Geoffrey?

"Take my warning," he continued—he had not failed to notice her quick glance; "nerve strain is the thing to be avoided in your life and in mine."

Betty suddenly felt glad and uplifted that this good and humane man should put their two lives in the same category. After a pause, she said:

"You have said something very nice."

"How?" he inquired.

"You spoke of your big life and my little one as though they were in the same class."

"So they are," he answered. "We are both deeply interested in those whom trouble visits, and, I doubt not, our best happiness is to be found in relieving them. Is not that the case?"

"That is the only happiness worth living for," said Betty, with fervor.

She had raised her voice a little, and her last words came just when there was a sudden pause in



the busy and animated conversation which flowed round the dinner-table. Miss Spring, who found Geoffrey dull, and Power more silent than usual, gave a little snort. She bent forward, and interrupted the conversation by saying sharply:

“I should like to ask you an exceedingly delicate question, Mr. McDermot.”

“Indeed!” he replied, turning and looking at her out of his short-sighted eyes.

He knew all about her—her real age, her little vanities; her good-nature, too, for she had many excellent points.

“Do you,” said Miss Spring, “believe in affinities?”

“If you mean,” said McDermot, after a long pause, “to ask me if I believe in certain natures possessing a corresponding chord to other natures, I should not be human if I did not do so.”

“H—m!” said Mr. Power. His silence was broken up: he turned round and glanced full at Miss Spring.

“What is this?” he asked.

Mr. Dancock had been pouring forth a stream of eloquence on Church ritual to Lady Pevensey. His wife, who had been taken in to dinner by Pevensey, managed to see his face from time to time by poking herself well forward. Mr. Power’s start

and loud exclamation were so arresting, however, that the whole table stopped talking in order to listen.

“I was really saying nothing remarkable,” said McDermot. “Miss Spring asked me a question, and I replied to it in common-sense fashion. Sympathy and antipathy are the great laws of life. We have the power of attracting some natures and repelling others.”

“Quite right,” said Power; “quite right; “and those towards whom we feel antipathy ought if possible to be removed from our neighborhood.”

Here he glanced full at Miss Spring.

“On the other hand,” he said politely; he stopped, and all of a sudden fixed his thoughtful eyes on her face. She turned crimson. She dreaded Mr. Power, as she had said to Laura, inexpressibly; and yet—*that* man made her thrill. He was the only person in all the world who had ever made her thrill, and she pretended to herself that she had a latent and ever-growing terror lest he might be her other half. His abstracted eyes were now on her face: his knife and fork were laid down, his dinner forgotten. The poor woman grew redder and redder.

“He is finding out: I shall certainly faint if he stares at me much longer,” was her thought.

McDermot turned to talk to Betty. Mr. Dan-

cock resumed his flow of eloquence. Mrs. Dancock said abstractedly that she thought veal cutlets were quite wholesome. Mr. Power suddenly exclaimed:

“Forgive me, Miss Spring—what is that you are wearing on your head?”

There was no doubt that Power had a large and penetrating voice. His strange remark caused everyone again to turn and look at poor Miss Spring. Power, now bending slightly forward, delicately removed a most graceful osprey from the lady’s hair. He looked excited. His eyes were full of animation.

“May I?” he said. “Will you permit me, for the sadness and, I trust, the profit of all those here assembled, to tell the true story of this ornament?”

“Oh, don’t—don’t, Mr. Power! I beg of you, don’t say any more!” cried poor Miss Spring.

“Don’t! my dear madam? Believe me, I am not blaming you, not for a moment: I am only too well aware that you are one of the ignoramuses of the earth. You put this delicate part of an unfortunate little bird into your hair in ignorance: but the opportunity is not to be lost. Although ignorant of your cruelty, you are, I am certain, a brave woman. You have it in your power to forbid me to speak. If you forbid me, I will not speak; but I long to seize the opportunity.”

“He *is* my other half!” thought poor Miss Spring to herself. “It is impossible to resist him. These thrills are fearful—there is no doubt on the subject.”

“Say what you wish to say,” she murmured in a shaking voice.

Whereupon, for five minutes the dinner-party were horrified by Power’s description of the manner in which the osprey’s plume was secured. McDermot was called upon as a witness to the truth of Power’s utterances. The surgeon said:

“It is an abominable practice; and women who wear such ornaments ought not to be permitted in Society.” Then he started, perceived his mistake, and apologized very humbly to Miss Spring.

That poor lady, what with the terror of discovering that her other half was so close to her, and of having her treasured ornament discussed at the dinner-table, was very nearly in tears.

Power, having delivered his soul, returned the osprey to its owner. In a transport of rage, she flung it on the floor and said fervently:

“I thank you, sir. My eyes are opened: never shall I be seen with an osprey on a hat or in my hair again.”

“Bravo!” said Mr. Power. “I have made one convert. I will send you papers to-morrow, madam, which I shall be glad if you will sign. There are

many, many cruelties which I long to put down, and this is amongst them.”

“I will gladly sign anything you send to me,” said Miss Spring.

“Then you must give me your address after dinner.”

“I will do so,” said Miss Spring.

She whispered to herself: “He will call—and if he calls, I am certain he will propose! It will be a frightful wrench to have to give up one’s liberty, but when your other half appears you are, in a sense, both lost and found.”

## CHAPTER XI

MISS SPRING looked very conscious when the ladies returned to the drawing-room. She did not want to talk; her heart was still beating faster than its wont. She took up the invariable book of photographs which is to be found in every drawing-room in the land, and pretended to absorb herself in examining them. After a minute, Laura came towards her.

"I am really sorry for you, Miss Spring," she said. "I could not imagine that Mr. Power would act in such a peculiar manner."

"Oh, don't speak of it!" said Miss Spring. She kept her eyes lowered. "I am glad—I am thankful. He has done us all a service. What a wonderful man he is!"

"Oh, yes; he is very clever," said Laura, gazing at the agitated woman in some amazement. She was about to turn away, when Miss Spring called her back.

"Even though Mr. Power did take me in to dinner, and—and so much occurred during the meal, I

should scarcely like to refuse to give you a little music, dear Miss Pevensey, but it must be something very soft and gentle—Mendelssohn's 'Spring,' or something delicate of that sort."

"That is all right," said Laura, who did not know one note of music from another; "but you needn't play until the men come in."

"Do come here, please, for one minute," said Mrs. Dancock to Miss Pevensey as she was passing. "Sit down near me. I want to ask you a question. Did you notice my dear husband at dinner?"

"Of course I did," said Laura; "I was sitting next him."

"Did you ever hear him quite so magnificent?"

"He had a great deal to say, certainly," remarked Laura.

Mrs. Dancock sighed.

"He will be terribly exhausted afterwards," she said. "He gets so wound up, and then comes the reaction. I assure you, after such a display of great thoughts as he has given utterance to to-night, he may be silent for the best part of a day."

"How interesting!" said Laura. "You can rest, too, at such times, can't you?"

"I—rest?" said Mrs. Dancock. "My rest is to listen to him."

"Oh," said Laura. "He was a very wise man

when he married you. You certainly were his affinity."

Mrs. Dancock clasped her hands.

"Yes—ah, yes!" she said, and her eyes filled with tears. "On the whole," she said, after a pause, "I was gratified with the menu: calves' head is very digestible, and I don't think he ate very quickly."

"I will come back in a few minutes," said Laura, who knew that she would give way to mirth if she stayed for another minute in the good lady's society.

When the gentlemen appeared, McDermot came straight to Betty's side. Miss Spring was induced to play gently on the violin while Mrs. Dancock most mournfully accompanied her. Mrs. Dancock was an absolutely correct musician, without a vestige of soul. She never played a wrong note, and her time was admirable, but somehow she did not help to interpret Miss Spring's lovely playing of the violin as that good lady's playing demanded. Was there not love hovering in the air?

The music came somewhat abruptly to an end. Miss Spring confessed to a sense of fatigue, and sidled gracefully to where Mr. Power was seated.

"I really don't know how to thank you," she said.

He had forgotten all about her, but with an effort recalled her to his mind.

"Yes!" he said; "what for?"



"The osprey," she murmured.

"Ah, I am glad you are not wearing it," was his remark.

"You won't forget to send me the papers," she said.

"Madam, what papers?"

"You said you wished me to put my signature on paper in protest against the barbarity of depriving the osprey of its plume."

"Ah! quite so, quite so," he said. "I will get my secretary to send them to you to-morrow."

"Your what?" said Miss Spring.

"My secretary—a very nice girl who comes to me every morning and works at my dictation all day. Her name is Mary Hughes."

"May I give you my address?" said Miss Spring. "I was thinking that perhaps I—I might—call."

"Oh, as you please," said Power. "That would save Miss Hughes the trouble of putting the papers into an envelope."

"I know your address," said the lady, pathetically. "You are——"

"I beg your pardon! Yes, Pevensey, I will come and speak to you in a minute."

Power moved across the room. Miss Spring sat down and trembled. Was he—after all—her other

half? She felt an unreasonable sense of jealousy towards that innocent individual, Mary Hughes.

Meanwhile McDermot had taken the opportunity to talk to Betty.

“We surgeons,” he said, “often do strange and what may be termed out-of-the-way things. Now I am going to throw myself on your compassion. I never met you until to-night, but I have known your husband for some time, also his mother and Miss Pevensey. Your husband is very much changed. Has he—forgive me for asking the question—seen a doctor?”

“Yes,” said Betty. She dropped her voice to a low tone. “He went only this morning to see Sir Preston Dykes.”

McDermot received this information without any comment whatsoever. After a moment he said:

“I am known in my world as a surgeon; but I have studied medicine; I have, as far as possible, worked all round the great subject of the ills that come to our human lot. Do you think, Mrs. Pevensey, that you and your husband would ask me to stay with you at your rectory for a day or two, just as your guest? Should you object? Should you find me in the way?”

“Oh, it would be delightful!” said Betty, her eyes growing bright and the color flaming in her cheeks.

"May I regard it as settled then?" said McDermot.

"Yes, oh, yes! When will you come?"

McDermot took a little book out of his pocket and looked at his engagements.

"I have two days free immediately after Christmas," he said. "I always like to have a holiday then. I have a dear old mother with whom I have spent Christmas Day ever since I was born: she comes first. Then I could go to Dartminster—say, on the Tuesday after Christmas, and remain with you for two days."

"I shall be more than delighted," said Betty. "And here is my husband. Let me tell him; I know he will be pleased."

She started to her feet, and going up to Pevensy laid her hand on his arm.

"Come here, Geoffrey," she said.

He approached McDermot's side, a smile on his face.

"Please, Mr. McDermot, give my husband the delightful information you have just given me."

"The fact is this, Pevensy," said McDermot, "I have acted in an exceedingly frank and apparently outrageous manner. I have invited myself for a couple of days to your rectory. Your wife has been graciously pleased to say she will be glad to

have me; but what about you? My host must also express his willingness.

“Glad? I shall be delighted!” said Pevensey. “When will you come?”

McDermot named the day.

“I shall be particularly glad to see a large town like Dartminster,” he said, “and to hear from your own lips some stories with regard to the mill hands and the other poor of the place.”

“If you come to us you must not work. You must do what you recommended me to do at dinner to-day,” said Betty, her eyes sparkling.

The surgeon looked at her and laughed.

“Quite right,” he said; “I won’t forget. We shall have a holiday. Your wife is one of my affinities, Mr. Pevensey, so I hope you won’t be jealous.”

Geoffrey gave a heart-whole smile.

“I am not surprised,” he said, after a pause. “Betty wins most hearts.”

Miss Spring spent a night of great agitation. She was never a good sleeper: she was too highly strung, too nervous, for that. On this special night she did not sleep at all. After her return home she sat for a long time gazing pensively into the fire.

She was quite well enough, and had a beautifully-furnished flat in which she lived. She wanted for nothing, as far as outward things were concerned.

Her life was full, too, in its way, for she had many so-called friends. Her violin was her constant companion, and when she had nothing else to do she attended all the good musical concerts that she could make time for. In the real musical world Miss Spring was unknown, but she had sufficient talent to have become a professional had she been lucky enough to be born without wealth. As it was, there was no necessity for her to work, and she never thought of doing so. She rather despised women who worked for money; she scarcely considered them ladies. She had not the slightest knowledge of the sterner side of life. Her bread had been thickly buttered from her birth, and she could not conceive of a state of being where the butter was not plentiful, and where one could not have as much jam as possible.

She had her own little hired victoria in summer, and her hired brougham in winter. She had a very accomplished lady's-maid, who attended with skill to her toilet. She had her own favorite dressmaker and her own milliner. Her time was, on the whole, well filled up. She dressed beautifully: she lived luxuriously, resolutely shutting her eyes and ears to the problems of life. A rich woman like Miss Spring would naturally attract members of the other sex. She was proud to think, deep down in her

heart of hearts, that she had received several proposals. Not for worlds would she mention the names of those whom she had refused; but she liked to hint to her lady friends that she could have been a wife had she wished. She was quite ladylike over the matter, and very resolved. She was a woman with a great deal of romance in her nature; although her age was of that character known as uncertain, she often believed herself to be only thirty-five.

She was exceedingly fond of day-dreams. She liked to imagine what would take place when her other half appeared, and she believed faithfully in the existence of her other half. When he came along all obstacles would fall at his approach. His masterful touch, the look in his eyes, the sound in his voice, would awaken that virgin heart. She would yield to him, were he rich or poor, or low or high. She knew that such would be the case.

Birthday after birthday passed over poor Miss Spring's head, and still the adorable one—the Prince—did not put in an appearance. Nevertheless, she still dreamed about him, and, strange as it may appear, the older she grew the more she thought of the man who was to give her back her youth, and whose heart was to beat in unison with her own.

She often sat for hours by her fireside making up pictures of him. In her pictures he was of a very

kingly appearance. Year by year she made up different types of him. Sometimes he was remarkable for his great strength of body, his great muscular power; at other times he was lithe and wiry; but his best attribute of all was his magnificent beauty. At other times again her hero was an intellectual giant. Of late her favorite hero was built up in her mind on the model of the knight in Burne Jones' celebrated pictures of the "Briar Rose." She had a set of proofs of these pictures in one of her rooms, and she often gazed at the figure of the knight, and thought of herself as the sleeping princess.

She came home on the present occasion from Lady Pevensey's dinner-party with a good many of her ideals shattered. For the first time for weeks she passed the picture of the knight without stopping to gaze at it, and going straight to her bedroom dismissed her maid, and sat long by the fire.

"After all," she said to herself, "the man I met this evening is different from anyone I ever thought of before. What tremendous force there is in human nature! I have dreamed of that one who would take possession of me since I was quite a young girl, and oh! how many pictures has he presented to my mind! He has been of the Byronic, Tennysonian, Browning, and Burne Jones' type, but I never imagined him until to-night to be in the least like

Mr. Power—a man with eyes that look through you; and his domed head, it is true, is slightly bald, but I reverence such a dome as his: the hair is only thin from the immensity of his thoughts. Then that delicious thrill that his contact gave me! Ah, I am not old after all! I won't think of my baptismal certificate. Women far older than I am forget their years—it is much the best plan. Nobody is old in these days; but—Could I give up my liberty to him?—my comfortable, comfortable home? Could I submit to living in harness? Yes: for he is my master: a woman will always do anything for her master. My soul bows before him: he has subjugated me already. When his words of fiery eloquence denounced the cruelty of those who wore the plume of the osprey, my whole heart thrilled. I will go to see him to-morrow, and I will endeavor to take Laura Pevensey with me. It would not be delicate to go alone—nothing would induce me to err on that side: I am the last woman in existence to push myself forward; but I must see him again. He has invited me to call, and doubtless, now I come to think of it, he did it with a meaning. That poor girl, his secretary, was, of course, mentioned to make me feel comfortable. A gentleman would not be likely to ask a lady to visit him in his private apartment with-



out some sort of chaperone—certainly not a gentleman who has an *affinity* to me, for I am the most delicate-minded woman, I think, in the whole of London.

“Yes, I will call, beyond doubt, to-morrow. He needs a champion to awaken others in his good work. The League of the Osprey shall be inaugurated by me, and the announcement of my marriage with a great philosopher will doubtless take place before many weeks are up.”

Miss Spring retired at last to rest. Whether she slept or not cannot be told. In the morning her maid, Eugénie, remarked on her mistress’s tired appearance.

“I have lived through an exciting time, Eugénie,” said Miss Spring. She made a confidante of the woman, not ever telling her anything definite, but hinting broadly at possibilities which often took Eugénie’s breath away.

“It is a sort of *ennui* dat fatigue mademoiselle to nottingness, but I shall employ the massage, and arrange the most ravishing transformation; then, *voilà!* dee years will ron a-way—da will fly—da will forsake mademoiselle——”

“Don’t talk of years in my presence, Eugénie!” said Miss Spring; “the subject is exceedingly indelicate.”

"Ah, mademoiselle! I ask pardon from you: I did forget. Never from now will I so transgress."

"You have done so once or twice lately, and annoyed me a good deal," said Miss Spring. "My age is thirty-five: I do not wish to dress younger, and I do not wish to dress older."

"*Mais oui*; mademoiselle is still quite young, in the springtime of life," said Eugénie with uplifted hands. She knew perfectly well that her mistress would never see forty-five again, but her place was a thoroughly comfortable one, and she had no wish to offend the good lady.

During the process of Miss Spring's rejuvenescence that morning, she sighed several times.

"Our hearts they do reciprocate, mademoiselle," said Eugénie.

"Not quite," said Miss Spring, "seeing that you are a serving-maid and I am your mistress; nevertheless, I am quite willing to extend my sympathy to you in any of your trials, as you give me yours in mine."

"Ah, yes! anyone may see for himself that the path of mademoiselle has been one of pricks; but mademoiselle have also de courage and de fortitude of her rank, and also de riches——"

"It is very nearly as indelicate, Eugénie, to speak of my riches as it is to speak of my age."

"Pardon, mademoiselle: never again will Eugénie transgress so from now."

"We were talking of heroes," said Miss Spring.

"Were we, mademoiselle?"

"You know it: we often do."

"We did vow ourselves to the life of a celibate, did we not, mademoiselle?" said Eugénie.

Miss Spring turned and faced the maid.

"By no means," she said; "at least—you may have done so; but when you meet your affinity—your other half—you will change your mind. I have alluded once or twice in confidence to the fact that a hero may arrive on the scene, and I have described him."

"Ah, mademoiselle! and you have thus caused the heart of Eugénie to beat strong—especially when you did speak of the type from Byron, one great *po-et* of your contree."

"The philosophic hero is far nobler," said Miss Spring. "Thank you. I am going out presently: I shall not lunch at home. Please see to having a selection of dresses ready for me to choose from to-night."

Miss Spring departed. She was now elegantly attired in the latest mode. Her figure being exceedingly slim, she could wear a dress which might well suit a young girl. The color of her costume was of

a dove-grey, but she wore a little toque of exquisite blue with a shaded blue feather which hung low over her transformation at the back.

Her carriage was at the door. She stepped in, and desired the coachman to drive her to Lady Pevensey's. She arrived there just when Betty and Laura were returning from their motor drive.

"Dear Miss Pevensey," she said, "I have asked myself to lunch: do you think your mother will object?"

"Of course not," said Laura, in her hearty tone. "One extra person doesn't make the slightest difference."

"I want to speak to you for a moment by yourself, Miss Pevensey. I hope you do not mind," she added, turning to Betty.

"Certainly not," said Betty, going into the house as she spoke. Miss Spring laid her white-gloved hand on Laura's arm.

"Dear Miss Pevensey, will you do me a great kindness?"

"What is that?" asked Laura, in her brusque fashion.

"I want you to reserve a little time in order to pay a call with me this afternoon."

"To pay a call with you, Miss Spring! Where?"

"I have been invited by Mr. Power to visit him at his house. You can of course understand the delicacy of the situation; I should like a lady friend to be with me."

Laura very nearly burst into a laugh.

"Oh, Miss Spring!" she said: "poor old Mr. Power! you needn't be in the least shy of going there by yourself—you really needn't."

"I must go there by myself if you won't come with me!"

Laura thought for a moment.

"Very well," she said; "I will go with you if you don't mind taking Betty as well."

"Your sister-in-law?—that very pretty young woman?"

"Yes; isn't she sweet?"

Miss Spring thought for a moment. Betty certainly was very young, and quite extraordinarily good-looking; but then—she was married. She felt certain that her philosopher was the sort of a man who would think it wrong to look twice at a married woman; and Laura was not in the least attractive—in fact, she was out of the running.

"Very well," said Miss Spring, "we will all go. I just want to tell Thompson at what hour to bring the brougham back."

Miss Spring was now in the highest spirits. Laura ran up to Betty and told her that they were going to pay Mr. Power a visit that afternoon.

"What?" said Betty. "That dear old gentleman who talked so bravely about the osprey yesterday at dinner?"

"Yes; the very same."

"He is a remarkable man," said Miss Spring, now coming gracefully forward, looking back as she did so to see if her train was correct; "but, pardon me, Miss Pevensey, I should scarcely speak of the great philosopher as old."

"Oh, well, he is not young," said Betty; "is he?"

"We have our ideals with regard to age," said Miss Spring. "My ideal age for a man is forty: I don't think any man under that age worth speaking to——"

"Lunch is ready," interrupted Laura. "I am starving. Good people, do come and eat—come and eat."

They all entered the dining-room. Lady Pevensey was very gracious to Miss Spring. She regarded her as a useful sort of woman, who could play soothing melodies on her violin, and who always looked a lady. Pevensey was not present. He had gone out for the day. Betty, relieved after her talk with Laura, which, however, had not been

anything like as confiding as she had intended it to be, was in fairly good spirits. Miss Spring sat by Lady Pevensey.

"Ah, Lady Pevensey," she said, "what a delightful evening you gave us yesterday!"

"Did you find it so, my dear?" said the widow. "Now, to tell you the truth, I found it rather dull."

"Oh, mumsie!" cried Laura, "how wrong! and Mr. Dancock took you in to dinner. You certainly were kept occupied all the time, for he never stopped talking for a moment."

"That is what I complain of," said Lady Pevensey. "A person who talks without ceasing, and never allows you to get in a word, is, in my opinion, intolerable."

"How different from my philosopher!" murmured Miss Spring, in an undertone.

"What were you saying, Miss Spring?" asked Laura.

"Nothing, dear Miss Pevensey. I beg your pardon—I was only thinking of contrasts."

"That was an awkward moment for you," said Lady Pevensey, suddenly turning and looking at her guest, "when that rude man, Mr. Power, seized the ornament from your hair. I was deeply annoyed, and made up my mind never to ask him to dinner again."

“Oh,” said Miss Spring, “I beg of you not to be so cruel! on my own special account I beg of you. I think his action was noble.”

“Well, I don’t,” said Lady Pevensey. “I shall have people afraid to come here if they think that part of their dress is to be snatched off by a member of the party who has a crank in his brain.”

“Oh, not a crank! not a crank!” said Miss Spring, tears filling her shallow blue eyes. “Think of the poor little birds!”

“I never do,” said Lady Pevensey. “James, pass the claret round.” She spoke to the footman, who immediately obeyed. “I should have enjoyed my dinner very much,” continued Lady Pevensey, “if I could have got Mr. McDermot to take me in; but, Laura, you are always so masterful, and you would give me Mr. Dancock. Mr. Dancock would have done quite well for Betty”—here she looked with small favor at her daughter-in-law—“whereas I am quite certain that if I could have had an exhaustive conversation with Mr. McDermot he would have given me hints which would have made me quite comfortable on the score of appendicitis. I am often dreadfully nervous, fearing that I may have symptoms of the dire complaint.”

“Not a bit of it, mums,” said Laura; “you are as healthy a woman as ever lived.”



"I!—with my neurasthenia?" said Lady Pevensey.

"Yes," said Laura. "That is what keeps you healthy. People with nerves never have anything else."

Lady Pevensey turned her handsome bright eyes towards Miss Spring. In her mind she was saying: "How old that poor woman looks!" Aloud, her remark was:

"You perceive how little sympathy I get from my daughter."

"But Miss Pevensey is so funny," said Miss Spring.

"Funny! Miss Spring!—when she insults her mother!"

"You know I don't mean it, mums," said Laura; "and Miss Spring knows I don't mean it."

"Actions speak louder than words," said Lady Pevensey. "Miss Spring, you are a lucky woman: you have avoided the shoals of matrimony."

"Ah!" said Miss Spring, with a start.

"I repeat it," said Lady Pevensey, "the fatal shoals of matrimony. You have never gone through the pangs of motherhood, nor the sorrows of widowhood; nor the daily rubs, the daily misunderstandings, of wifedom. You are not left now with a son and daughter on your hands who, to say the

least of it, are modern in their ideas, and who leave you, therefore, out in the cold. You are a wise woman. When your symptoms of appendicitis come on you will have no one to say to you, 'It's only neurasthenia.' Now, shall we all come into the drawing-room?"

"Really, mumsie is crushing to-day," said Laura in a low tone to Betty.

It was decided that the three ladies should visit Mr. Power about four o'clock in the afternoon. When the subject was discussed before Lady Pevensy, she expressed amazement.

"What a dreadfully dull place to go to!" she said.

"Not to me," said Miss Spring, clasping her hands in ecstasy.

Lady Pevensy looked at her without comprehending her meaning.

"I mean," said Miss Spring, after a pause, "to take up the great mission which has suddenly been offered me in life."

"Good gracious!" cried Lady Pevensy.

"The philosopher's cruelties," continued Miss Spring.

"Are you mad?" asked Lady Pevensy. "I never had a great liking for Mr. Power, but until now I have never heard him anathematized as cruel."

“He is endeavoring to put *down* cruelty,” said Miss Spring, in a strong and penetrating voice. “I am prepared—I am up in arms—and I trust, Lady Pevensey, that I shall find in you one of my earliest disciples. Not a friend that I possess shall be left in the dark with regard to this great subject. Mr. Power has aroused enthusiasm within me by the way in which he spoke at your dinner-table yesterday.”

“I should advise you to keep your head on the subject,” said Lady Pevensey: “but, after all, you can do as you like; you’re not married; you can thank God for your freedom.”

Presently the ladies drove off to visit Mr. Power. Miss Spring was now the leader of the expedition. She was in her own brougham. She could therefore command the situation. Betty, in a soft brown dress, with a brown hat to match, its drooping plume of ostrich feathers shading her sweet face, insisted on sitting opposite to Laura and Miss Spring. Miss Spring would have vacated the seat of honor in Betty’s favor had she not suddenly remembered that sitting with her back to the horses gave her a red nose. It was necessary for her to look her best. The philosopher might not admire her quite so much if her nose were rubicund. As a

matter of fact, the more she saw of Betty the less did she care for her. She looked such a girl and was undeniably beautiful.

Mr. Power lived in a ramshackle house in Kappel Street, Bloomsbury. He owned the entire house, but only occupied the lower part of it. There he had his large study, or library, and his laboratory at the back; and down a long passage was his bedroom. He had a housekeeper of an ancient and forbidding type to look after him, and Miss Hughes came every morning at ten o'clock and left every day at five.

Miss Mary Hughes was a middle-aged, freckled woman, with a determined cast of face. She was an excellent typist and shorthand writer, and her spelling was so admirable that, notwithstanding the extraordinary words the philosopher was fond of using in his writings, she was never at a loss with regard to putting them on paper. She was a really clever woman, and could also, to a certain extent, correct his proofs. She was unobtrusive and faithful, and he looked upon her something in the light of a machine. He paid her liberally, however. She had been with him now for two or three years. He was accustomed to her, and she to him. There were often days when he had nothing whatever to

give her to do, when he paced restlessly up and down his library, occasionally taking a heavy tome from a shelf to look up a certain passage, murmuring that it would not do at all, and then continuing his walk.

On these occasions Miss Hughes busied herself with a novel, which she generally kept concealed in her pocket. She always arrived sharp to the minute at ten, and always left sharp to the minute at five, and she never said "good-morning" to the philosopher, nor "good evening" when she was going. On the days when he was abstracted, and puzzled over a problem, she read comfortably, except during the hour when she went out for lunch. He never noticed her presence. She was there if she was required. He was semi-conscious of that fact: that was all.

It so happened on this particular afternoon that Professor Power was at home. The ladies arrived sharp at four. Miss Spring looked round her very excitedly. The hall was intensely dreary: the housekeeper was forbidding. Miss Spring was absolutely obliged to raise her dainty skirts as the three went in the direction of the Professor's library.

"This won't do," said Miss Spring to herself. "He must come and live with me in my flat: but of

course he won't mind. This is a fine house, but the situation is impossible, and—oh, it's quite too dark and dingy!"

Professor Power, dressed for dinner, looked his best. Professor Power, in the midst of work, looked the reverse of his best. He generally wore an old dressing-gown of a flowery pattern, which was lightly corded round his waist and reached to his ankles. He had no collar on, and his domed head was, even in Miss Spring's eyes, scarcely beautiful. He blinked when the ladies arrived, stared in amazement, and then, recognizing Laura, came forward.

"How do you do, Miss Pevensey?"

"How do you do, Professor," said Miss Spring, in a voice which she considered clear and flute-like, but which was in reality very shrill. "I have come according to our arrangement."

"Our—I beg your pardon?" said Professor Power.

Miss Spring thought it time to take up a firm attitude. She shook her finger in the Professor's face, and said:

"Ah, naughty man! You pretend to forget; but of course you remember all too well. I am here as your champion."

Mary Hughes, who had been typing in a corner,

now stopped work and turned a decidedly aggressive face towards Miss Spring. She perceived a lady dressed to simulate youth, and knew quite well by the elongated appearance of the Professor's back and the way he straightened his sloping shoulders that he was exceedingly annoyed.

She tripped forward at once.

"Can I do anything for you, madam?" she said.

Miss Spring turned and looked at her.

"Nothing whatsoever," she answered. "I am here to speak to Professor Power."

Miss Hughes colored angrily. Betty immediately went up to her and diverted her attention.

"I am so interested in typewriters," she said. "Do show me yours."

How sweet was that young voice! how pretty that charming face! There was an eagerness in the tone, too, which won Miss Hughes' withered, but by no means unkindly, heart.

"I want to get a typewriter to take home with me," said Betty. "My husband is a clergyman."

"Husband!" thought Miss Hughes; "then she, at least, isn't after him. That other woman is quite too dreadful."

"Yours is a Remington typewriter, I see," said Betty. "I really must get one. I wish you would teach me how to use it. I suppose it is asking you

too much; but I should so much like to type my husband's sermons for him."

"I will give you a lesson with pleasure," Miss Hughes found herself saying. "It is really quite easy. You can learn the mechanism very quickly. Rapid work, of course, only comes by practice."

"Show me how you do it," said Betty.

Laura began to move round the room, peering forward to read the names of several ancient books.

"What a dreary place," she kept saying to herself. "I wonder how long Miss Spring will be. The philosopher is in an awful rage, I can see that. What is Miss Spring driving at? If there were a single new looking book in the room I'd sit down and read it."

Miss Spring had now, as she considered, the field to herself.

"I want to speak to you," she said to the Professor, lowering her voice. "I have been thinking over your words."

"Excuse me, madam, what words?"

"Dear Professor"—the lady's tone became very gentle—"you cannot forget what you did last night—the osprey in my hair—your eloquence on the subject: I—your devoted convert—I, resolute, touched, humiliated, brought round for evermore to your point of view."



"I recall the circumstance now," said Professor Power. "Forgive me that I did not remember you quite at the first."

"I have made up my mind to help you. You spoke of having inaugurated a league to put down this cruel practice."

"By no means: it was inaugurated long ago by others. I think Miss Hughes can tell you who are the people to apply to."

This was a great blow to Miss Spring.

"Miss Hughes, come here," called the Professor.

Miss Hughes instantly left Betty, and came up to where Miss Spring and the Professor were standing.

"This lady is interested in the League for Suppressing Cruelty to Birds. You have got some papers: will you give them to her?"

"Yes, Mr. Power."

"Put them in an envelope, and be as quick as you can."

"Yes, Mr. Power."

Miss Hughes withdrew.

"And," continued Miss Spring, the moment they were alone again, "there are other subjects, other cruelties, that your great, your magnificent heart would suppress and subdue. I am with you, heart and soul."

“How kind of you! Ah, excuse me one minute—I see that young lady has taken one of my books from the shelf. It is a very rare folio. I cannot permit it to be touched.”

The Professor darted away, leaving Miss Spring standing in the middle of the room. The next moment Miss Hughes came up to her with a little packet containing the papers.

“You will find all particulars here,” said Miss Hughes, sweetly. She had a much nicer voice than Miss Spring possessed. The two women gazed each into the eyes of the other.

“She, that dreadful creature, thinks that my Professor is her other half!” was the angry conclusion which flashed through Miss Spring’s brain.

She said “Thank you” in an icy tone, took the packet, and sailed across the room, looking back at her train, as was her invariable habit.

“Dear Laura!” she said, “I must call you Laura; we seem to be such friends; we have spent so many happy days together, and girls ought always to be friendly each with the other.”

“Girls indeed!” thought Laura. Her eyes filled with fun. “Betty, come here,” she said.

“Ah, that is delightful! Mrs. Pevensey will help me. Laura, I know you will help me. Professor, we have a great favor to ask at your hands.”

“What is that?” asked the Professor. “You have come at a busy moment, ladies, but of course I don’t wish to be rude.”

“We should so dearly love—we should think it such an honor—if you would let us have tea with you,” said Miss Spring.

“Of course not!” said Laura.

“We could not think of disturbing you!” said Betty.

They were both really distressed on account of Miss Spring.

“She has got that mania about her other half on her brain,” thought Laura. “If I don’t soon get her out of the house she’ll propose to him.”

But the Professor all of a sudden looked into Betty’s eyes, where he saw youth and beauty; and his irritability at the intrusion of the three ladies vanished from his mind.

“Yes; Miss Hughes, see to it,” he said, calling over his shoulder to his secretary, who promptly left the room to obey his behest.

After a long time tea was brought in by the ungracious housekeeper, who plumped it down sullenly on a dusty table, looked with rage at Miss Spring, with annoyance at Laura, then suddenly became complacent and agreeable when she glanced at Betty.

During the meal the philosopher only talked to Betty, and all Miss Spring's arts and devices were thrown away. Before the ladies left he did an extraordinary thing, very much what McDermot did the night before. He asked Betty if he might come and see her at Hillside Rectory. Betty cordially invited him to do so. It was arranged that his visit should be immediately after Christmas—in fact, at the very same time as McDermot's visit. Soon afterwards there was no excuse but to go, and the three found themselves once more in Miss Spring's brougham.

"You needn't do any more work to-day, Miss Hughes," said the Professor, when his guests had gone. "That is a very beautiful young lady."

"Which, sir?" asked Miss Hughes. "I trust, sir, not the—the old young lady."

"There were only two young ladies present. There was an elderly woman who, I think, is rather weak in her head. But I was speaking just now of the married young lady—Mrs. Pevensey."

"Oh, yes, yes!" said Miss Hughes, in a tone of delight: "hasn't she a charming face? She wants me to teach her typewriting."

"I am going down to stay at her husband's rectory immediately after Christmas," said Power. "Why shouldn't you come at the same time? I

will drop her a line to that effect. You can take notes for me in the mornings, and teach her the typewriter in the afternoons."

"Oh, sir!" said poor Miss Hughes; "if you would—if you could manage it, it would be heaven!"

"Now don't make exaggerated remarks, young woman. Yes, I will manage it. She is a very sweet creature. You can go now."

## CHAPTER XII

MISS SPRING had not much strength of character, but she was a curiously tenacious person, and seldom or never saw when she was beaten. She said to herself that the Professor really thought very highly of her, that it required but a very little influence on her part to bring him over completely to her side, and that if she could secure for herself an invitation to Hillside Rectory she would accomplish this task with ease.

Accordingly, she made herself delightful to Betty.

“We have enjoyed ourselves,” she said. “What a very fine type of man that is. Now, I tell you what, girls, you must both come home with me. I think we will have a little extra tea. Poor dear Mr. Power’s housekeeper is not a proficient in the art of making tea for ladies to drink.”

“We can’t come back to-day, Miss Spring,” said Laura, “for Betty and her husband and I are going to the theatre this evening, and it’s getting late already. If you will kindly drop us at our own hall door we shall be very much obliged to you.”

“Very well,” said Miss Spring.

During the rest of the drive she animadverted on the Professor’s surroundings. She said that in her opinion it was a crying shame that a great man should be so neglected.

“He wants for everything,” she said.

“Everything! What do you mean?” said Betty.  
“It seems to me that he wants for nothing.”

Miss Spring opened her eyes in anger.

“Do you mean for a moment to say to me that a person with that great brain power is comfortable in a horrible, dark, dirty, musty room like that—with no one to speak to, no one to mingle his thoughts with, no one to sympathize? Why, he doesn’t even get his meals properly: his brain will fail him for lack of nourishment.”

“He is not a young man,” said Laura, “and his brain has held out for a long time. As to friends, he likes men friends best. Now, good-bye, Miss Spring. Thank you very much for seeing us home. Come, Betty.”

“Good-bye,” said Betty, in her sweet voice.

“Will you at least come and see me to-morrow?” said Miss Spring, in an eager tone. She felt she must not let Betty out of her sight.

“I will if I can,” said Betty.

“Oh, but you must—you shall! I do so long to

show you my little home. Bring your husband with you. Come and have tea with me to-morrow. Now, say 'yes': don't hesitate: say 'yes' at once. You will come—you know you will."

"Very well," said Betty. "I don't think we have an engagement. If we have, I will let you know to-night: but I don't think we have."

"I will expect you both at half-past four: you two, alone. Good-bye until then."

Betty entered the house, and Miss Spring drove home. She was going out herself to dinner and afterwards to a very large At Home. She flung the thick envelope with which Miss Hughes had supplied her into a waste-paper basket, and, seating herself by a glowing fire, thought and thought.

"It is a great opportunity," she murmured. "It would be giving up a terrible lot, but in such a cause who would not? It would be changing all my life, but, again, in such a cause who would not? He was impressed—I could see that. He would never woo a woman on the ordinary lines; but I could see that he was attracted. His short-sighted eyes seemed to devour me once or twice. He tried to cover his feeling by talking to little Mrs. Pevensey. That's an excellent idea—his going down to Hillside Rectory. I must manage to be one of your guests, too, my dear, pretty Mrs. Pevensey."



The good lady sighed.

“Will mademoiselle now choose a costume for this evening?” interrupted Eugénie’s voice.

“Ah, Eugénie!” said her mistress. “I want you to make me look as—as beautiful as you can.”

“Then mademoiselle have still the desires of the *jeunesse?*”

“Did I not tell you, Eugénie, not to speak to me of youth or age. There is no such thing as age: we can all keep young if we choose.”

“And mademoiselle is truly young,” said the maid. “I propose the coral pink robe with the passementerie that shine with the glory of de rainbow—it will suit mademoiselle; and I have arranged a transformation that will adorn the head *a merveille.*”

“Yes, I will wear the rose-colored dress; but I want to rest for an hour. Just give me that latest novel by Elinor Glyn: it lies on the table. Now go away for an hour, Eugénie. I must have that time to sleep if I can.”

“Ah, the lovely sleep! How it does repose the weary!” said Eugénie. “And,” she added, as she looked round the luxurious room, “has mademoiselle found Monsieur le Professeur so charming as she did say Eugénie?”

“I will tell you presently,” said Miss Spring.

“She will meet him to-night,” thought Eugénie to herself. “I do not want her to marry. I am so comfortable in this snug little *appartement*; and my friends are many, and I have my own admirers, not a few. I will not that she is beautiful to-night: she shall be ugly, but she shall think herself beautiful.”

## CHAPTER XIII

THE next day Betty and her husband arrived at Miss Spring's flat in time for tea. The good lady met them with an enthusiasm which she knew well how to affect. She was dressed perfectly; she had seen to that herself. Eugénie could not coerce her into wearing an unsuitable dress. In a pale fawn-colored robe, wearing an exceedingly becoming transformation, in the subdued light of the flat, with its rose-colored curtains drawn, while the firelight mingled with the lamplight, she might almost have been what she forced herself to believe—a lady who has reached the delightful age of thirty-five. Now twenty-five was the ideal age of youth, but thirty-five had much to say for itself, for it meant a ripe experience, with all the charms of womanhood intact.

This was the age Miss Spring had decided to adopt. She had her violin near, and the piano was open. There was a scent of flowers in the room. Altogether, she looked picturesque. Her worst enemy could not deny that she was a graceful per-

son. She moved well, and had an elegant figure. She came forward at once to greet Betty.

"This is good!" she said. "Thank you so very much for coming."

Betty suddenly remembered that Miss Spring had said on the previous day that no man was worth talking to who was less than forty years of age. Miss Spring seemed to find Geoffrey Pevensey a thoroughly agreeable person. She drew him out, using some skill in the process. She had soon launched Pevensey on a subject about which he knew a great deal but on which she herself was totally ignorant. She confessed her ignorance with the prettiest sigh and a smile.

"Alas!" she said, "behold me—a woman in the prime of life—thirty-five years of age my last birthday! I don't mind confiding my age in you two sweet young creatures. Of course you think me terribly old; but anyone who lives to that age may reasonably hope to have excellent health to spend many more years of life. Now, I was deeply impressed the other night with what that splendid man, Professor Power, said. Scales seemed to fall from my eyes. The question of the poor, the question of the lower creatures who suffer, loomed large before me. Professor Power, dear man! is a marvellous instrument in the hands of the Almighty for

checking cruelty to dumb creatures. He is, I understand, an antivivisectionist—oh, the horror of vivisection! He devotes all his valuable time to his propaganda. But you, Mr. Pevensey, take even a higher attitude, for the birds and beasts cannot compare to the human race.”

“What is the woman driving at?” thought Pevensey to himself.

He made a commonplace remark. He was tired, and looked wearily round him. Miss Spring continued:

“I have no experience of the wants of the poor—the destitute; but do have another cup of tea, Mr. Pevensey. Sugar? Yes, of course; I know you take one lump. Cream?”

“Very little.”

“Quite so.” She handed him a cup. “Mrs. Pevensey, pray make yourself at home. Won’t you have a sandwich? These are very delicious, for Victorine, my waiting-maid, always makes them herself. But what was I saying? Yes, I remember; I am totally ignorant with regard to the poor and their sufferings, as I was until lately with regard to the sufferings of the lower creatures. To be absolutely frank—as I have just been with regard to my age—I never could bear the lower creatures. No bird, or dog, or cat for me. Well, now my eyes

are opened. It is even possible that I may take in a stray cat, but I am not sure—it would be a fearful sacrifice. But there is one thing I can do. I don't mind telling you two dear young things that I am rich—yes, really, absolutely rich. My father was a wealthy man, and he has left me more money than I know what to do with. A lonely woman, even though she is surrounded by the comforts of life—and I never aspire to more—cannot spend a great deal on herself. The fact is, that year by year I never use even my income: consequently the money which I possess increases at a very steady pace. Now it has occurred to me that money is a talent. I think of offering some of it to Mr. Power in order to help him with his great work. And I would offer some of it to you, Mr. Pevensey, if you think you could spend it for the benefit of your suffering poor.”

Pevensey's eyes grew brighter, while Betty leaned forward, looking impulsive and eager.

“Oh, if you only would!” she said. “Why, it would be quite splendid; wouldn't it, Geoff?”

“There is an old saying,” remarked Pevensey, “to the effect that those who give to the poor lend to the Lord. I believe in it, Miss Spring.”

“Quite so,” said Miss Spring.

“There is a great deal of suffering at Dartminster

during the winter," said Betty, "and they say this special winter is going to be particularly severe. We want all the help we can get. Do you really, really mean what you say?"

"I undoubtedly mean it; but I never give of my wealth unless I know the exact cases that will be relieved by it. You must pardon my eccentricity—you may call it my mania if you like—but I must know all about those whom I relieve."

Pevensey and his wife looked quietly at the lady, who spoke in an eager voice, but without apparent excitement. She felt that she held the key of the position.

"To be frank," she said, after a pause; "first, do have another cup of tea, Mrs. Pevensey."

"Thank you; half of one, please," answered Betty.

Miss Spring poured out the tea and handed the cup calmly back to Betty. It was delightful to have the key of the situation. These young people were very gullible. She could practically do what she liked with them.

"I had," she said, "a great awakening the night before last. The cause was the osprey."

"Oh," said Pevensey. "We thought Power very rude."

"And I didn't: he was forced by the greatness of

his indignation to pour forth his words. Even though they stunned and frightened, they also roused and animated me. I am a different woman. Mrs. Pevensey, I heard you ask him to visit you at Hillside Rectory immediately after Christmas. He is an exceedingly busy man, and there is little or no hope of my daring to interrupt him while he is in London; but while with you I could find an opportunity. I could impress upon him the fact that I have the will to assist him largely; and I also could, with your aid, Mr. Pevensey, find out how best to assist you in your great parochial work. I propose, therefore, if you have no objection, to come to a hotel at Dartminster at the same time, and thus join your party, and aid you, as it were, in a council of war."

"But you must come to us," said Betty. "If you come at all you must come to us. We have a large house, and plenty of room, and we will be quite delighted to have you. What a big party we shall be!" she continued excitedly; "for Laura is coming, too, and this morning I had a letter from Mr. Power asking if his secretary, Miss Hughes, might accompany him."

"What?" said Miss Spring; "that repulsive-looking woman?"

"But indeed," said Betty, "she is not repulsive



at all. She is exceedingly nice. I was delighted when he suggested it; for she can take down notes which he is anxious to make—he studies every sort of subject; and she can also teach me the Remington typewriter. I bought a machine this morning, and am going to take one lesson from her before my return home. Mr. McDermot is also coming. You will be heartily welcome.”

“For two days,” said the Rector. “You will forgive me, Miss Spring, for putting a limit to our invitation, but our other guests are staying only for that period, and Betty and I are very busy people.”

“How delightful you both are!” said Miss Spring, who, having gained her point, was now in radiant spirits. “Trust to my helping you. Of course, I must come, when you urge it so prettily, Mrs. Pevensey. In some ways I should have preferred the hotel, because I do so hate to crowd people.”

“You won’t crowd us,” said Betty; “we have abundance of room.”

“Very well; then I accept. On what day does the Professor come? I could perhaps ask him to chaperone me to Dartminster. It is rather a wild sort of place, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” said Pevensey, knitting his brows into a frown.

“I have been given to understand,” said Miss

Spring, "that all great manufacturing centres are peopled by bodies of roughs. I am terribly afraid of roughs."

"You needn't have the slightest fear. If you really want to help people you must not show undue nervousness, must you?"

The Rector smiled gently. Soon afterwards, the final arrangements having been made, Betty and her husband took their leave. As they were driving back to Lady Pevensey's house, Pevensey looked at his wife.

"You dear little girl," he said, "you *have* put your foot into it."

"What do you mean, Geoff?" she asked. "Put my foot in it?"

"Yes," replied Pevensey, "by asking that dreadful woman."

"Oh, she's not dreadful, Geoff; she is just rather queer and stranded. I do so pity stranded people. I want to set her afloat again."

"And you think you can do it, darling?"

"Of course; once she knows what the feelings of the poor really are, and once her eyes are opened to the great cruelties that underlie our modern civilization, she will only be too glad to spend and to be spent."

"You have wonderful faith, my little Betty."

"I couldn't live without it," she replied with enthusiasm.

The Rector sighed. He made no further remark about Miss Spring. His thoughts were altogether turned inwards. He was dwelling on himself and the tortures of mind he was really undergoing from the loss of his sedative. He was determined to conquer for Betty's sake; but the struggle was terrible.

Betty, with her quick intuition, knew almost exactly what he thought; but she would not allow herself to dwell on the matter for his sake. On the contrary, she spoke cheerfully. Once she laid her hand in his, and he felt the sympathy of her touch.

When Lady Pevensey and Laura found out that Miss Spring was to be one of the Rectory party after Christmas they gave vent to no slight criticism.

"That woman is intolerable," said Lady Pevensey.

"Oh, but I don't think so," said Betty; "she has a great many good points."

"She has a pretty way with her as regards the violin, but beyond that I have never discovered her *points*, as you call them," said Lady Pevensey with a sneer.

Betty was sitting close to her mother-in-law.

Now she laid her hand on her knee and looked into her face.

"It strikes me," she said slowly, "that it is much, much better to help people who have not got points than people who have. Those who have all sorts of attractions don't need us a bit: those who haven't many need us a great deal. I think, somehow, Miss Spring needs Geoffrey and me."

"Really, Betty, you will become intolerable if you carry your philanthropy into everything," was Lady Pevensey's remark.

"It is not exactly philanthropy," said the girl, "it is a question of faith. I am put into this world to help to make it a better place. I want to make myself better and happier if I can."

"I tell you what," said Laura, "you fleece her, Bettina, for all she is worth. She is enormously rich, poor thing, and as stingy with regard to giving to others as anyone I ever met."

"She has promised to help Geoffrey and me," said Betty in a low voice. "And I am very glad," she added; "we do need her money for our poor, and if we can help her in return, it seems but a very small thing to do."

"You know, of course, why she is going to stay with you?" said Laura.

"Oh, she told us quite frankly. She said that

Professor Power had opened her eyes; that at last she perceived the sufferings of the lower creation, and by that means the sufferings of the human race."

"She was very frank: Professor Power opened her eyes," said Laura, in a meditative voice. "Betty, you are a little goose! But I won't enlighten such innocence; it would not be fair."

"I wonder," said Lady Pevensey, "if she happened to mention her age to you."

"She did, poor thing!" said Betty. "But she asked Geoff and me not to speak of it. I thought it was so nice of her."

"Very nice indeed," said Laura. "You naturally won't speak of it, will you?"

"No," said Betty, "of course not. 'Though," she added, "I don't think anybody need be ashamed on the subject of age. It is really the one thing we are not to be blamed about. We cannot help our years."

"So speaks sweet-and-twenty," remarked Laura. "Wait until you are Miss Spring's age—eight-and-forty—and you'll have a very different story to tell."

"You make a great mistake with regard to poor Miss Spring," said Betty. "She is nothing like as old as that."

"Ah, I thought not, I thought not," said Laura,

dubiously. "All right, Betty: I am not the one to shake your faith."

"There is one thing I am delighted about," said Betty, after a pause, "and that is, that Miss Hughes is coming down. I want to give her such a good time. I know she is poor; and she has never had any of the real pleasure of life. Geoff, dear, I wish you could see her. She has just that anxious, overwrought sort of face that we see now and then amongst some of the mothers of the mill hands—those mothers who know that their sons may be killed any day or any hour in the work which is their daily bread. Oh, I like Miss Hughes. I am, as a matter of fact, more interested in her than in any of my guests except dear Mr. McDermot."

"Dear Mr. McDermot, indeed!" said Laura. "And haven't you a good word to throw in for your sister-in-law, Bettina?"

"Oh, Laura, you don't count," said Betty; "you are one of the family."

A couple of days later Betty and her husband returned to Hillside Rectory, and there the Rector began in grave and sober earnest to fight his foe. It had been a comparatively light task while he was in London; for the bright atmosphere, the many social functions, the constant change from one

pleasant scene to another had acted healthily upon his mind. But now, once again, the cloud of despair visited him. There were long nights spent in torture, and over and over again he was on the point of going to the chemist who had the prescription of the medicine which gave him relief and which could so easily be made up again. But up to the present he had not yielded. He made a request of Betty when he first returned home not to watch or appear to notice him.

"You know everything, my own wife," he said. "You asked me to share my secret, and I have put it into your loving hands. But although it is in your possession you must never use it against me."

"Use it against you, Geoff!" she replied. "How could I do such an awful thing? What can you mean, darling?"

"I mean exactly what I say," replied the young man. "You can use it against me by showing anxiety, by watching me in any way. I want you to keep that secret so firmly and safely locked up in your heart that I shall never perceive by the expression on your face or the look in your eyes that you know anything about it. If I spend the whole night in my study and never once come to our room, you must not question me. If you suspect me of having broken my resolve, you must say nothing. When

I want to speak to you I will speak, but you must never broach the subject. Promise me that."

"I promise," she replied.

"Look me in the eyes, Betty."

She raised her beautiful brown eyes to his.

"You are a darling!" he continued. "Oh, what a heavy weight I am causing you to bear!"

"No, no, no!" she replied; "I love to carry it for you."

Thus the first fortnight after the Pevenseys' return from London passed without anything special occurring. The Rector suffered, but did not once break down. Such suffering as his must lead in the end to a calmer state of being and to recovery of lost nerves. But the time of real victory was far off, and Geoffrey felt each day that the strain upon him was more and more intolerable.

The weather was dull and very foggy. There was a slackening of work at some of the mills, and a considerable number of people were in great distress owing to lack of food.

The Rector lived in the gloomy atmosphere of the great town all day long, and returned home nearly maddened by the sight of misery which he could not relieve and yet was called upon to witness. His wife was his right hand, helping him in every possible way. Once, when he spoke of the



impossibility of relieving the real distress, she suggested that she herself should write a line to Miss Spring.

“No,” he answered. “She says she will give nothing until she sees for herself. If there is anything in her, which I doubt, she shall see for herself and learn her lesson while here. But, somehow, I have little faith in that woman, Betty.”

It was about a week before Christmas, when Betty, who had been spending a very busy morning, first attending to her household duties, and then distributing coal and grocery tickets, had just returned to her sitting-room to write a long letter to her old home, when a telegram was put into her hands. She opened it, and read the following words with consternation:

“Rachel dangerously ill. Come home at once if you can.”

Without a moment's hesitation Betty looked up the time-table, discovered a train which would take her to the nearest junction where she must change for Deepdale, and filled in a return telegram.

“Will be at Deepdale to-night.”

The boy who had brought the telegram hurried off, whistling unconcernedly, with Betty's reply. Betty felt her heart beating hard. A sensation of great misery assailed her. Little Rachel, the baby

of the happy rectory, ill—wanting her! For the time she forgot her husband, and could only think of the home baby, as she always spoke of little Rachel Ross. Such a message as had just reached her would not have been sent if the case were not urgent.

She would not hesitate: she must go, without a moment's delay. Geoffrey would not be home until dinner-time. Betty enclosed the telegram which she had just received, and wrote a few words with it.

“Will leave Dartminster by the 2:10, and will wire you when I get to Deepdale. Take care of yourself. Will come back the first moment I can.—  
BETTY.”

Then she ran upstairs, put a few things into her portmanteau, and came down to give what directions she could to her household.

All her servants loved Betty Pevensey. She had told one or two of them about the bright little child who was the idol of her own home, and they were full of sorrow when they learned the fact that she was dangerously ill. Betty gave all the directions she could about her husband, but her thoughts were still with little Rachel. For the time being, the child came first; the husband was put second.

It was not until she found herself in the express which was carrying her rapidly to the great junction where she was to change for Deepdale that the thought of Pevensey all alone without her bright presence came back to her with an intense wave of anxiety. Had she done right to leave him? But—oh, yes, she had; she could not do otherwise. The little one whom she had loved and mothered from her birth was dangerously ill. Her own father and her stepmother had sent for her. Pevensey would be the last person in all the world to hold her back. Nevertheless, she was miserable and anxious about him, for she thought of his secret care, of the temptation which daily and hourly assailed him. She knew well that although he never spoke of it to her it occupied all his thoughts; and she knew well also that when the enemy came in like a flood he took refuge in her presence and remained with her until the worst of the temptation was past. Now she would not be with him. Nevertheless, the child wanted her—the little, sweet, eager, loving, impulsive child. Her very life might be hanging in the balance. The presence of Betty once more by her bedside might cause the child's recovery. Her refusal to be present might, on the other hand, bring about little Rachel's death.

When Betty at last reached Deepdale she was met

by Mr. Ross. She was sincerely attached to her father. Until she met Geoffrey the Rev. Michael Ross had been the strongest love of her life. Now when she saw him waiting for her on the platform, his back slightly bowed, his hair much more grey than when Betty had last seen him only a few brief months ago, all her heart went out to him. Oh, there was no one like her father! She flung her arms round his neck, and, overcome by many emotions, burst into tears.

“Why, Betty!” said Mr. Ross, “this is not like you!”

“I cry because I am glad,” she said, trying hard to suppress her sobs. “It seems such ages since I saw you last. Oh, dad, it is good to kiss you once again!”

He kissed her eagerly and affectionately, then drew her into the light and looked at her face. It was the same sweet and beautiful face that the Rev. Michael Ross had missed—oh, so sorely!—when he gave her up to Geoffrey Pevensey. He was a thoroughly unselfish man, and would not have kept the child he loved best from what he believed to be her true happiness for all the world. But now he felt doubtful. Betty’s face was lovely still, but there was a new expression in it—an expression born of suffering: nothing else in all the world

would have caused it. It was impossible that such a look could have grown into her eyes and formed delicate lines round her mouth, even though she had spent a few hours of anxiety with regard to little Rachel.

Betty winced a little under her father's fixed gaze. He had always read her heart. She did not want him to read it now.

"Oh, dad, tell me," she said, "how is Ray?"

"Very ill indeed. It is double pneumonia."

"My little darling!" said Betty.

"She knows you are coming, Betty. She is hungry for you. She is the best of sweet little patients."

"Then you really think, dad, that I can do her good?"

"I am sure—I am certain of it," said Mr. Ross. "We can walk back to the Rectory, Betty: it's only a stone's throw."

The Rector took Betty's little bag in his other hand, and they started off. It was night now, but the village of Deepdale had its own gas, and the place seemed to Betty full of subdued brightness. The air felt so clean and fresh and invigorating after the smoke-laden air of Dartminster.

"You look rather thin, my darling," said her father.

"I am all right, dad, really."

"And how is Geoffrey?"

"He is overworked, but, on the whole, well."

"Betty, you are not as happy—as—I expected—to find you."

"Don't talk of it," she said, tightening her clasp of his arm.

"Is it Pevensey?" said the Rector, sternly. "Is it possible—is he—unkind to you?"

"No—oh, no! He is an angel to me!"

"Thank God!" said the Rector. Then he added: "You love him as much as ever?"

"Better—ten thousand times better."

"You don't regret that you have married him?"

"Most truly I do not."

The Rector again heaved a sigh of relief.

"I have missed you—very, very sorely," he said. "My consolation was the thought of your happiness. You don't look happy."

"I am—on the whole. There are some cares."

"You cannot tell me?"

"No."

"Quite right: I won't ask you."

"Father, I must go back very soon again. Geoff wants me."

"Not more than your little sister does at the present moment. Betty, I trust your husband is not selfish?"

"He is the most unselfish man I know. Oh, father, don't ask me! I cannot explain what is the matter; only I ought to be by his side."

The Rector drew his daughter's hand further through his arm.

"My dear," he said, "it is appointed unto all men to suffer, and you, I see, are no exception. It is our common lot. Well, you have pluck; and I don't think that with your nature you will ever be destitute of hope. What you have told me is in one sense nothing; in another sense, all. You have a sorrow, my child; but I will lay it before the Throne of Grace."

"Ah, do, do!" said Betty. "That will help me more than anything else in all the wide world."

They entered the beloved old rectory where Betty's happy, careless childhood and early girlhood had been spent. The house was bright, and fresh, and orderly.

Mrs. Ross came forward, her comely, good-natured face full of intense anxiety. She had always adored Betty, but she had not the Rev. Michael Ross's penetration, and was too much absorbed by her own little Rachel to give her stepdaughter any special attention on the present occasion.

"I am so thankful you have come," she said. "I felt sure you would. Your father did not want me

to telegraph, but how could I help it when the child did nothing but cry out for you? 'I want my own Betty—my own Betty!' she has kept on saying all day. You will come to her, dear, as soon as you have had something to eat?"

"I can come at once to the little darling," said Betty. "My whole heart is with her, the sweet pet that she is."

"Oh, Betty!" said Mrs. Ross, "she really gets more beautiful every day: she is quite a lovely little creature: isn't she, Michael?"

"Yes."

"What did the doctor say when he called last?"

"The fever is very high: her restlessness is terrible, and she will not take to her nurses. The doctor insists on two. I wish I could manage her all alone, but I am little or no use in a sick-room."

"Well, I am," said Betty. "Oh, tea!—I am just pining for a cup. I will have some, mother, if you don't mind, and then I'll go up at once to Rachel."

Half an hour later Betty was ensconced in a chair by little Rachel's cot. She had been moved since her illness into the largest room in the Rectory. The carpets had been taken up and most of the furniture removed. The little cot looked sadly desolate, standing as it did in the middle of the room. The poor baby who was fighting for her life was sup-



ported high in bed with pillows. Her little cheeks were deeply flushed, her eyes intensely bright.

When she saw Betty she gave a hoarse, glad cry, then buried her head on her sister's shoulder. The relief of seeing this dearly-loved sister caused her to burst into tears. One of the nurses came forward, but Betty held up her hand with an authoritative gesture.

"Let me manage her, please. Come, Rachel, my own treasure, don't cry any more. Betty will stay with you to-night."

The tears in some extraordinary way relieved the child, who lay pale and exhausted afterwards on her pillows, her eyes devouring Betty's face, her little hot hand clasped in Betty's.

"Oo not going from me!" whispered little Rachel.

"I will stay with you to-night, Rachel."

"Then I'll have a boo'ful night," said the child, with the sweetest of smiles.

The nurse put some nourishment between her parched lips, and a few moments later, with her hands still held in Betty's, she dropped asleep.

When the doctor came in, a little before midnight, he took the child's temperature, and immediately uttered a sigh of satisfaction. He crossed the room and spoke in a whisper to the nurse. What he said was unheard by Betty, who did not dare to relin-

quish her hold of the little hand. It was no longer burning hot, but wet with the dews of perspiration.

The doctor left the room. He met Mr. Ross.

“You may be thankful that your daughter, Mrs. Pevensey, has arrived. The disease has reached a climax, and already the temperature has gone down considerably. This sudden change is, of course, accompanied by the danger of relapse, but I am taking measures to ward that off. The child is in a sound and most refreshing sleep, and I shall, with your permission, stay in the house all night in order to be at hand should any fresh change occur.”

Perhaps in some ways that night which Betty spent without moving, holding little Rachel's hand, was one of the most trying of her whole life. She was deadly tired, for her work at Dartminster was by no means light. She had been up till past midnight the night before, and again, she was never free from anxiety. The hurried journey, the mingled pleasure and pain of coming back to the old home had further excited her and worn her out. She would not touch food, although the nurse brought her sandwiches. She felt sick and dizzy, and could not eat. While her whole loving heart was centred in the little child, whom she was surely but slowly bringing back from the shores of death, her thoughts flew to her husband in the lonely rec-

tory at Hillside. Oh, would he be brave, or would he succumb to temptation?

“God help him!” murmured the poor girl. “Oh, if only I could cut myself in two!—if part of me could be with him, and part of me with little Rachel!”

In the early, early hours of the morning little Rachel Ross awoke. The fever was gone: the crisis had been successfully combated, and, unless there was a sudden turn for the worse, the child’s life would be saved.

Betty, completely worn out, went to her own old room, where she lay down and slept heavily for long hours. It was between three and four in the afternoon when Mrs. Ross came in to awaken her. She brought a bowl of strong soup and some toast.

“Come, Betty,” she said, “you are as white as a ghost. If you don’t eat we’ll have two invalids on our hands. You’re a perfect angel, my darling. Dr. Stuart cannot be loud enough in your praise. He says that you have saved our precious darling’s life.”

“Oh, how is she?—how is little Rachel?” asked Betty, starting up from her pillow impulsively.

She pushed back her hair. She had been dreaming about her husband, and her dream had been the reverse of happy.

“Is Rachel better, mother?”

“Better!—of course she is, dear. She has been sleeping most of the day—dear little one! She is taking her nourishment: the pneumonia is checked; both lungs are beginning to clear, and the fever is quite gone. Do take your soup, Betty; you don’t look a bit well yourself.”

“I am tired, I suppose,” said Betty.

She began to eat the soup, while Mrs. Ross sat on the edge of the bed and watched her.

“I don’t really think marriage suits you,” she said, after a pause, during which she watched her step-daughter anxiously.

“It does, admirably,” said Betty. “But, mother—forgive me—if Ray is quite out of danger I ought to go back to Dartminster to-night.”

“Nonsense, child! that is most unreasonable and impossible. You ought to stay with us for at least a week—in fact, until over Christmas. Your husband could surely manage to join us for Christmas.”

“Now, mother, how can a clergyman be away from home at Christmas?”

“I forgot. How stupid of me! Of course it is his busy time. Still, as to your going to-day, that is out of the question. Your father would be fearfully annoyed.”

“Will you send father to me?” said Betty suddenly.

“Of course I will, love—in fact, he is waiting now outside the door, just dying to be with you. It would break his heart if you left him so soon.”

“Send him to me, mother darling—and quickly, please.”

A minute later the Rector entered the room.

“Kneel down by me, father,” said Betty.

He did so.

“Oh, how much I love you!” she said, and she twined her arms round his neck.

“It is a joy to have you back: and what a debt we owe you, my child—the life of the dear little one!”

“Father, darling, never mind that now. I am so truly glad I came, but you, at least, won’t oppose me.”

“Have I ever done so, Betty?”

“Indeed—indeed, no! You have been the best of all possible fathers. But you know—you must know—that when a woman marries she gives up father and mother and cleaves to her husband. I want you to look up a train. I want to go back to Geoffrey to-night.”

“My dear, dear Betty! You ask for the impossible.”

“No, no, I don’t. I told you yesterday that I had a care. No one in all the world wants me as Geoffrey does. It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to leave him, even to be with little Ray. Rachel’s life is spared now, and I must go back. Help me, dad—help me. Don’t make things harder for me.”

“I won’t, my poor child. You must do as you think right. I will get a time-table and let you know the trains.”

The Rector went out of the room, and Betty sank back on her pillows with a sigh of relief. She had put her case into her father’s hands, and whatever the Rev. Michael Ross wished was invariably done. He managed her stepmother, he managed everyone, and she had seen little Rachel, who, sleeping and weak, was not half so excited about her as she was on the previous day. She had said good-bye to her stepmother and father, and was back again on her road to Dartminster before six o’clock that evening. She would get to Dartminster at midnight.

## CHAPTER XIV

THERE was a great deal of parochial disturbance just then in the large parish over which Geoffrey Pevensey had been appointed rector. One curate was ill, and obliged to stop work for a time; the other curates were objectionable to several members of the flock; another accident, although not of a very serious nature, had occurred amongst the mill hands; the choirmaster was not conducting the choir properly: in short, many of those small entanglements happened which fill up certain days of life when one is obliged to confess that everything from morning till night goes wrong.

It was on one of these days that Betty Pevensey left her home to visit her little sister, and it was consequently on this special day that her husband most sorely needed her. He was the sort of man who would fling himself heart and soul into his work, and he was also the sort of man who keenly felt any sense of failure. He had, in short, to bear rubs of every description all day long.

The day was one of the worst of the season, a thick, sulphurous fog filling the air, while the ground

was frozen under foot. When Pevensey at long last let himself into his own house, he breathed a sigh of relief, and already his tired mind was filled with a picture of what would be awaiting him.

Betty was very careful with regard to external things. Whatever the Rector had to encounter outside the Rectory, there was always brightness and beauty, and at least outward peace, at home. The drawing-room, with its cheerful fire and carefully-brushed grate, the electric light softly shaded by gold-colored silk shades. The house itself was warm and bright, for Betty never held with allowing people to get ill owing to cold rooms and passages; and there was Helen, the neat parlor maid, with her charming manners and quiet way, her devotion both to Pevensey and his wife; and above all, Betty herself—Betty, in her simple evening frock—she always would dress for dinner, except on the few days when she accompanied her husband to a church service or a parochial entertainment—Betty, with a flush of health, or excitement, or happiness on her round young cheeks, and a wonderful glow of love in her brown eyes; Betty, who always ran into the hall to meet Geoffrey, who herself removed his hat and coat, and went upstairs with him while he dressed for dinner.

Ah, well, the painful day was over. He need not



go out again that night; and home was home. He entered the hall. Helen was standing there.

“Oh, sir!” she said. “What a dreadful night! Let me take your coat, please, sir. I do hope you have not caught cold.”

“No, Helen,” replied Pevensey; “but it has been a horrible day. Where is your mistress?”

“Mistress gave me a note to give you, sir. She has had bad news.”

“Bad what?” exclaimed the Rector.

“It’s in the note, sir. She’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“Your mistress not at home?”

“No, sir. She left between one and two o’clock to-day. You’ll find all about it in her letter.”

The Rector tore open the letter, read the telegram and Betty’s few words. He then folded it up and slipped it into his breast-pocket and, without comment, went slowly and wearily upstairs.

The house was in itself quite as comfortable as usual, but somehow it felt cheerless, almost as though it were a dead-house to the hired man. He entered the beautiful bedroom; the fire was burning merrily. He passed on into his dressing-room; a fire was there also. His shaving materials were laid out ready, and his evening suit was put out for him. Helen had done this.

He stood stock-still, glancing now at the fire, and now round the pretty cheerful room. Traces everywhere of his wife's handiwork; traces everywhere of her sweet spirit—her true and devoted love. Poor darling; what a trial for her! He ought to follow her. She did so passionately love little Rachel.

“I wish I could go, too,” he thought. “It would be best, far best; and yet I daren't, with Stanhope laid up, and Philcox and Emerson so disagreeable. It is impossible to leave the parish in their charge. Then I am to have an interview at ten to-morrow morning with Atkins. If he doesn't manage the choir better I must really get another organist. No, I cannot leave, and yet—poor Betty! poor Betty!”

The Rector did not put on evening dress. He went down again and entered the drawing-room. The room was bright and cheerful. All things possible was arranged for his comfort. A new book lay invitingly near his favorite chair. But the absence of Betty made the place intolerable to him. He rang the bell and desired dinner to be served. He hated to think that at the present moment, just when his wife needed him most, he was an enforced prisoner in his own parish. It was all very well to attend to the poor and to undertake parochial duties, but the absent wife came first of all, and his wife—

his young, sweet, beautiful wife—needed him: he felt sure of it.

During dinner he ate very little, but took two glasses of port wine. Then he went away to his library. In this room alone the fire was unlighted. He rang for Helen.

“I shall sit up for a little to-night, Helen, and shall not require the drawing-room. Please light the fire here.”

“Oh, sir, I did hope that you’d go to bed early. You look so worn out, and I am sure missis would wish it.”

“Light the fire, Helen: I have things to attend to,” said Pevensey.

He had scarcely said the words before there came a ring to the front door. Helen went to answer it, and returned in a few minutes to say that a man of the name of Richards from Harding’s cotton-mill wished to speak to the Rector without delay.

“Show him in,” said Pevensey, with a sigh.

A tall, gaunt-looking man appeared a moment later at the study door.

“Come in, Richards,” said Pevensey. “What can I do for you, my man?”

“It’s our girl Hilda, sir. I am sorry to trouble your reverence, but the poor wife’s in an awful taking.”

“What’s the matter with Hilda?” asked the Rector.

He had a very good memory for the different people in his large parish, and recalled Hilda Richards as a remarkably handsome, upright, fine-looking girl of about seventeen years of age.

“I saw Hilda last week,” he said. “She was very well. I spoke to her about going into service; it seems a pity that she shouldn’t help you and your wife. But what is wrong?—tell me. Take a chair. You seem troubled.”

“She’s gone, sir; that’s about it.”

“Gone! What do you mean?”

“Run away, sir, with young Mr. Ransom—the brute! the scoundrel! Her mother’s near mad.”

By slow degrees Pevensey got the story out of Richards. Hilda was always contrary. Mr. Ransom was a young partner in Ransom’s mills—the largest mills in Dartminster. He was well known for his shady character, and no girl in Hilda’s station might expect mercy at his hands.

“If I have the luck to see him, he won’t have much chance of his life—the scoundrel—the worse than scoundrel that he be!” said Richards.

“We must do what we can,” said Pevensey. “When did you find this out?”

“It was to-day she run away. We’ve thought

her queer for a time past—flighty in herself, and taken up with fine clothes, and often slipping out at night unbeknown to the mother and me. She left a letter, saying the usual lie—that he meant to marry her, and that she was all right, and would come back to us a lady. The mother's heart is cut to bits, your reverence—she who always held her head high. We never had a disgrace of this sort in our family before.”

“I will call round and see her with you now at once, Richards. I am sincerely sorry for you,” said the Rector.

A minute or two later the two men went out together. The fog was denser than ever, and the air more acrid. Pevensey did not return home until eleven o'clock. During that time he did all that man could do for the stricken family, and further promised that he would call on Mr. Ransom—the head of the firm, and father of the young man—on the following morning, and see what possible arrangements could be made for the unhappy girl.

“He'll do naught—naught,” said Richards: “less than naught! He's as 'ard as iron.”

Meanwhile the mother moaned and sobbed incessantly. She did not speak against anyone, only murmured at long intervals: “My gel! my poor gel! My wench! my poor wench!”

This occurrence was altogether the final straw for poor Pevensey's overwrought nerves, and he returned to the Rectory in a state of depression which was almost unbearable. Oh, how soothing, how delicious, how sustaining that sedative would be! He knew exactly how he would feel if he took some of those tabloids once again. The fever and misery and unrest would be lifted. In its place would come a delicious sense of peace and well-being. His troubles would be removed from him to an incalculable distance—put away altogether, for the time being. He would sleep: he would not even miss Betty. He would awake the next day refreshed and ready once more for the duties which lay before him. More complex now than ever were they with this terrible case of Hilda Richards to attend to.

On his way home the Rector passed the chemist's shop where those special tabloids could be made up which Sir Preston Dykes had implored of him never to take again. He passed the shop very quickly, but after having gone a dozen yards, he paused.

"There are moments in life," he said to himself, "when a man must take the nearest means of succor or he perishes. With my family history ever before me, with Betty away, with this agony of mind, with this appalling depression, I dare not trust myself

to-night unless I have something at hand to give me succor in case of need. I will get just a few of the tabloids made up."

A moment later he had rung up the chemist, who was just retiring for the night. The man knew the Rector well, and came down at once. Pevensey asked for a supply of the medicine. The chemist made it up without remark; but as he handed it across the counter to the Rev. Geoffrey Pevensey, he said:

"It's a very strong dose, sir."

"I know," said Pevensey, "I know; thank you very much."

"You will forgive me, sir——"

"I cannot talk to you to-night," said Pevensey.

The man looked at him reproachfully and with a sort of terrified warning in his expression. But Pevensey could not discuss his own most private affairs with the chemist. He put the precious little bottle into his pocket, and immediately felt a sense of soothing. At the worst, he had his weapon at hand. At the worst, he could cut the Gordian knot and give to himself peace—and rest.

"No doctor in all the world knows a man as he knows himself," thought Pevensey.

He entered the house. Helen was up, and waiting for him.

“Oh, Helen,” said the Rector, “you ought not to do this; you ought to be in bed.”

“It’s nothing, sir,” said the girl, looking at her master affectionately. “I know missis would wish it. I’ve made some hot cocoa for you, sir. I’ll bring you a cup into the drawing-room immediately.”

“Thank you, Helen; you are very kind; but please bring it to me in the study: I do not care to sit in the drawing-room when your mistress is away.”

“Oh, sir, and I am not surprised,” said the girl.

She hurried off, and soon came back with a large steaming cup of delicious cocoa and a plate of sandwiches.

“You will go to bed, won’t you, sir? You will forgive me for saying it, but I know my missis will be thinking of you, and she trusted to all of us to look after you.”

“You are a good girl, Helen, very, and I will go to bed presently.”



## CHAPTER XV

BETTY sent no telegram to announce her return. She just caught a train at the junction, and leaned back in a corner of her carriage with a mingled feeling of fear and rejoicing. How glad Geoffrey would be to see her! and after all, she had only been away from him for one night. She felt very, very tired. She thought how sweetly she would sleep that night, how restful it would be to hold her husband's hand in her own, and drop off into the land of slumber with him by her side.

She arrived at Dartminster exactly at midnight, and took a cab to Hillside Rectory. The whole house was in darkness, with the exception of a faint light in the hall, and also a light which only showed dimly through the curtain and blinds of the study windows.

"He is up. Oh, how glad he will be!" thought the girl.

She tried to force herself to put fear aside; but fear was hammering at her heart. She sprang from the cab, paid the man, put her little bag on the doorstep, and rang the bell. She expected Geoffrey

instantly to rouse himself from whatever work was employing him in the study, and to hasten to answer her summons. She smiled a little, for she thought that he would know her ring. He used to remark on it sometimes and tell her that it was impetuous and determined, without being in the least bold or imperative. In short, it was characteristic of Betty.

But there was no sound of anyone coming, and after a time the smile faded from her lips, and the sense of fear grew keener in her heart. She rang again.

The Rectory stood in its own grounds, a little out of the town, and there was no possibility of anyone in a neighboring house hearing. Betty rang and rang. Still there was that light in the study windows, very, very faint, and that faint light in the hall, and the rest of the old house shrouded in darkness. There was no fog to-night, but the air was murky, and heavy drops of rain soon began to fall.

The girl finally made up her mind to go outside the study window and throw gravel against the pane. She did so, but there was no response. She called aloud: "Geoffrey! Geoffrey! Geoffrey!" No answer of any sort. Fear had now taken complete possession of her. She could not possibly stay in the porch of the Rectory all night. She blamed herself severely for not having sent a telegram to

announce her return. But surely she must find some means of getting into the house. Once again she rang, employing the knocker also, and knocking very loudly. Now, at long, long last, there came a response. A head was thrust out of an upper window, and Helen's voice called: "Who's there?"

"I have come home, Helen," her mistress called back. "Let me in at once, will you?"

Helen disappeared. Betty leaned against one of the pillars of the porch. Presently Helen in her dressing-gown flung open the door, her face pale, her eyes full of anxiety.

"Oh, dear, darling mistress!" she said. "How long have you been here?"

"A good long time, Helen."

"I never heard you: did you ring often?"

"Yes: very often."

"Master's in his study," said Helen: "I wonder he didn't hear."

Betty immediately put herself on the defensive. It had been her great object ever since her marriage to conceal any weakness on the part of her husband both from her servants and parishioners. She assumed at once an almost cheerful manner.

"I expect the Rector is tired and has dropped asleep," she said. "I will go and see him. Go to bed, Helen, will you?"

“But—dear madam, you must have something to eat.”

“No; I had a meal at Stockton, I am not the least hungry. Go to bed, please. I am sorry to have had to disturb you.”

There was never any gainsaying Betty when she wished to be obeyed, and Helen went off dolefully. When her figure had disappeared up the stairs, and was quite lost to view, Betty stood still in her long grey travelling cloak. She clasped her slight hands together and for a minute raised her eyes upwards.

“God help me! God help him!” she thought; and then she went towards the study. She trod softly. To reach the study it was necessary to walk down a long passage. The room faced towards the side of the Rectory. There was a gravel path running round the entire house, and the two windows of the study came down to the floor. In the summer time they were mostly open, so that one could step straight through to the gravel path and then to the lawn beyond. Betty’s dread now was that the door would be locked. To her relief, however, she found that it was only shut. She turned the handle and went in. All the electric light was turned out except one burner, and that was in a distant part of the room. The fire in the grate was nearly out.

On a sofa lay the Rector. He was lying on his

right side, one hand and arm stretched out, almost reaching the floor, the other hand holding a little bottle which contained white tablets.

Betty knew at a glance what had happened. The worst had befallen her. She removed her cloak and her travelling hat. She then knelt down by the fire, and very carefully built it up, for the night was a bitter one. After doing this, she took a rug which lay near and covered her husband with it. She gently removed the bottle of tablets from his hand. She could not tell how many he had taken, but she saw that the bottle was half empty. He was sleeping the heavy sleep of the drugged. His breathing was stertorous: his usually pale face was slightly flushed. She knew well that it would be useless to waken him, but the expression on his face caused her the utmost terror and alarm, for in that fearful, drugged sleep something very awful had happened to the Rector of Dartminster. A sort of mask, which at ordinary times hid the baser part of his nature, seemed to be withdrawn, and that which was low, and weak, and poor, and sensual was revealed.

Betty turned shudderingly away. Then she said to herself: "But he is my husband—he is my husband, and I will help him."

She sat very still by his side for some time. There

was nothing to be done. He need not be awakened at present. He must sleep his sleep out. She felt his hands; they were cold. She touched his feet; they were icy. She left the room and came back with hot-water bags, which she applied to his feet and hands. She touched his cold, damp forehead, and swept the hair back from it. Was this the man she loved? The man she had promised to honor and obey for all her life? Could she honor him? Her feeling at this moment that she could not was one of the most awful that she had ever endured. Hitherto she had known—or at least she had known for some time—that he was addicted to the worst form of the drug habit, and that there was an awful hereditary disease which this habit alone would undoubtedly cause to assail him. But this was the first time she had seen him under the influence of the medicine. It was as though an angel had fallen from heaven. Not for worlds would she leave him. Not for worlds, either, would she look into his face.

She was dead tired, weary, beyond words. But she sat close to his sofa with her back to him staring out into the room. All her life seemed now spread before her, and all her life seemed hopeless. He had been so brave, and had struggled so long and so well: but now—he had fallen! She had done wrong to leave him. She had done wrong to go

and see little Rachel. Even the child's life was nothing at all in comparison with her husband's downfall. Yes: he had fallen. She remembered him as he had looked in the pulpit—as she had seen him only the Sunday before, with his voice upraised and his eyes full of fire, and his ringing words in which he warned sinners to repent. “Now is the axe laid to the root of the tree,” was the text; and how fervently had he described the despair of those who did not repent, and how thrillingly he had depicted the words of the great Husbandman when He said: “Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground.”

Ah, yes! Geoffrey Pevensey was a great man then—an apostle of light: but now!

The poor girl crouched down and covered her face with her trembling hands. The night wore on. Hour after hour struck. The drugged man never moved.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when Betty became alarmed about him. Up to this time she could only think of his trouble; and though shocked at the repulsive spectacle before her, yet through it all she could not cease to love him. But now, symptoms arose which frightened her. Suppose he had taken too much! His breathing was not only stertorous, but it came in gasps, with long

and ominous pauses between. What was she to do? She did not hesitate. She was not the woman to hesitate, neither would she disturb the household.

She hastily put on her cloak and hat, and letting herself out, ran to the nearest doctor.

There was a certain Dr. Spurgeon who had called once or twice to see the servants. Betty had never been ill herself since her arrival at Hillside Rectory, but she had liked this young man's appearance. And there was no time to lose: she must get someone. He was close at hand, which was one thing to be considered.

She rang the young doctor up and brought him back with her to the Rectory.

"What is wrong?" he asked, as they almost flew over the ground.

"I cannot conceal the truth from you," said Betty. "My husband has from time to time suffered from acute attacks of nervous depression, and has had recourse to a certain drug—I don't know its name. I was obliged to be away owing to the illness of my little sister, and when I came back last night I found him in a very heavy sleep. I don't like his breathing. Ah, here we are! You will soon find out."

Dr. Spurgeon was quick and prompt. He saw at a glance what had happened, and, with Betty's help,



applied vigorous remedies. In a short time Pevensey opened his eyes and sat up with a dazed look.

"Now, that is all right," said Dr. Spurgeon. "You must not do that sort of thing again. If your wife had not come to fetch me, you would have had an attack of convulsions in another hour, and then would have died. Come, how many of those globules did you take?"

Pevensey murmured almost incoherently that he did not know.

"Enough to poison a man who was not habituated to them, at any rate," said the doctor. "No, you are not to lie down and go to sleep again. Come: you will walk up and down with me in the study. Please leave me, Mrs. Pevensey; your husband's life is quite safe now, and I should like to talk with him alone."

Betty went from the room. She did not dare to meet the dumb protest and appeal in Pevensey's eyes.

"Lean on me," said Spurgeon. "When you come a little more to your senses you will know what a mad thing you have done."

"I know it now," said the victim.

"What possessed you?"

"Torture of mind that you cannot conceive."

"Yes, I can: I have gone through it. Half the

men you meet have—and half the women, too, for that matter. But they're plucky—bless 'em!"

Pevensey shivered slightly.

"All your senses are numbed. Do you know what you have taken?"

"Quite well."

"It is one of the most harmful preparations that modern science has invented," continued Spurgeon. "Did no one ever warn you against it?"

"Yes: Sir Preston Dykes told me just what would occur if I took any more of it."

"Then you are a slave to the habit?"

"I took the drug in moderation until I saw Sir Preston Dykes. After that I never touched it until two nights ago. My wife was away, and I was in torture. I took some, and it enabled me to pull through yesterday. What a day—what a day of horror! I was too weak last night to resist it, and I took—oh, a handful of the things!"

"You must never take it again."

"I dare not promise you, Spurgeon. There is a fiend within me stronger than I."

"You are a clergyman," said the doctor; "you believe in God Almighty?"

"I believe in the devil."

"Well, well, I don't want to enter on theological questions; but you have got to overcome this and

fight it—tooth and nail. Why, a man with such a wife—you ought to do that much.”

“I wish it were lawful for you to put me out of the world,” said the miserable man.

“Well, it is not, you know: and you’d be a rank coward to want to go: you’re young, and strong, and have untold blessings. If I had a wife like that——”

“You’re not married, Spurgeon?”

“No, thank God! for if I could think it were possible under any circumstances to bring such agony on my wife, I’d rather never have been born. Well, I don’t want to rub it in, but you have got to give the thing up, Pevensey.”

“Is there any way you can help me?”

“I can give you tonics, and come and see you now and then. Now, go up to your wife. You are coming round rapidly, and all danger is past; but remember that you owe your life to her.”

As Spurgeon was leaving the room, Pevensey went after him and took his hand.

“You don’t know my temptation,” he said: “you can never understand.”

“I can: you are no worse than others. Why, look here: I suppose the saddest thing on earth is the dread of insanity. No man with your sort of appearance need fear that; but even with that in

view, you have no right to deliberately bring on brain disease as you are doing. Now, I must go. I will look in this evening."

Spurgeon went away, and Pevensey slowly and thoughtfully paced up and down the room. He was still so much under the influence of the drug that his worst pains were quieted. But he felt a horror of meeting Betty. The doctor had told him to go to his wife, but he felt he could not do so.

Suddenly the door was opened, and a young, fresh girl, spotlessly neat, wearing a pretty frock of light blue, entered the room with an appetizing breakfast.

"I prepared this for you, darling," said Betty. "Sit down and eat it. We won't talk about anything painful. Why should we? Your own Betty understands. I blame myself, my darling, for I had no right to leave you."

"Oh, Betty, you are an angel: you are too good for me," said the poor fellow, and he suddenly burst into intolerable weeping.

## CHAPTER XVI

It took Pevensey a week to recover himself. During that time Dr. Spurgeon did him much good, but he could not get himself to confide his family history to the doctor. Once Spurgeon said to Betty:

"There must be some hidden cause for this. Your husband has a splendid physique, and is also possessed of a noble and particularly upright mind; but there is something undermining him. I wish you could tell me."

"You are right," said Betty, in a low tone: "there is something, and it is very terrible, and I can never tell you."

"Then how can you expect me to help you?"

"As you have done, but only in the dark."

"I will do my best. To be frank with you, Mrs. Pevensey, your husband is going through tortures. He is oppressed by a secret dread. If that could be removed, he would no more need to use drugs than either you or I."

"I am certain of it," said Betty. After a pause, she added: "Do you happen to know Mr. McDermot, the great London surgeon?"

“By name, of course,” said Spurgeon. “What a splendid man he is! But I have never had the pleasure of meeting him.”

“I hope, Dr. Spurgeon, you will have that pleasure in this house, for he is coming to us in three days’ time. He invited himself to our rectory, and I think it is because he is interested in my husband. Although he is a surgeon, not a physician, he has studied medicines exhaustively.”

“Of course,” said Spurgeon; “an all-round man, not a doubt of it: I should be indeed proud to meet him.”

“My husband has the greatest possible dislike to the feeling that he is watched,” said Betty.

“That is quite natural,” replied Spurgeon. “All people have who are addicted to the drug habit. Well, Mrs. Pevensey, your husband is much better now; and I have done a bold thing. I have been to see his chemist, and told the man that he had better cut that prescription out of his book. By that means we effectually cut off the supply. We cannot prevent your husband getting similar tabloids made up elsewhere, but these special ones he can never obtain again. I took away that bottle with me the morning when I first came to see him. His mind must be diverted as much as possible. The heavy work of a great place like this is really more than he can stand.

I wish you could change to a country rectory, where he would have fewer parishioners and live more in God's sunshine."

"Oh," said Betty, "but we don't want a smooth life. We both of us want to be fighters. We want to help: we want to be in the thick of the battle."

"That's all very fine, Mrs. Pevensey, and your sentiments are noble; but the man who fights ought to be whole both in body and spirit, and Pevensey is at the present moment in a state of nervous collapse. Well, we have got him over this present difficulty, and I hope much from Mr. McDermot's visit."

Miss Spring made active preparations. She overhauled her wardrobe; she removed osprey plumes from more than one fashionable headdress. She burnt these beautiful ornaments with ostentation and to the intense grief of Eugénie. She further examined her dresses. They must be neat, plain, and becoming. She studied her face in the glass. She studied it against several colors—brown, dove color, deep rich red, and different shades of blue. She believed that the Professor was the sort of man who would not notice dress unless it was peculiar and unbecoming, in which case he would make plain and disagreeable remarks about it.

Eugénie was distracted about her mistress during these days. She was so untidy, so unlike herself, and once or twice she made remarks which alarmed Eugénie. Was it possible that this ancient lady was seriously contemplating matrimony?

Miss Spring decided, after many reflections, not to take Eugénie with her to the Rectory. This final resolve filled the maid with resentment. Why was not she to go? It was surely not *convenable* to her lady's exalted rank and riches to travel without a maid.

"*Chere mademoiselle* will not spare her Eugénie who so well understand to make her *elegante*, who geev herself dee pain to arrenge dee transformations dat day fall not, and garnish dee toque and hat so *chic*——"

But Miss Spring was firm. Truth to tell, she was a little afraid of Eugénie, and wanted the auspicious visit to pass off without the watchful eyes of the Frenchwoman being fixed upon her face; for there was hidden mirth sometimes in those black eyes, and on more than one occasion, when Eugénie was arranging her coiffure for the evening, and assuring her beloved mistress that she did not look thirty years of age, Miss Spring had caught a look of malice in the sharp black eyes, which the maid little guessed that she noticed.



Eugénie should stay behind. Miss Spring would manage during the two days she spent at Hillside Rectory without her assistance.

“I cannot take you,” she said. “It would not be fair to young Mrs. Pevensey. She says the house is large, but I am quite convinced that she has no room for you, and I can manage alone. You will pack my most suitable dresses, Eugénie; but everything must be very quiet, please: remember that I am going to a rectory.”

“Mais—quel dommage!” cried Eugénie, “dat mademoiselle wear not her beautiful robes!”

Finding, however, that Miss Spring was resolved, Eugénie began to look on the bright side, and to consider what an excellent time she might have while the proverbial “cat” was away. The maid had, on more than one occasion, attired herself for an evening festivity—a great ball, for instance—in one of her mistress’s gowns. She would go to a ball each evening of Miss Spring’s absence. The rose-colored dress with the rainbow sequin trimmng would become the dark-eyed, dark-complexioned French-woman. It would not add to her years—she was still in the early twenties—whereas it destroyed all semblance of good looks on the part of Miss Spring when she wore it.

The question of dress being settled, Miss Spring

now turned her attention to Professor Power. She wondered by what train he would go to Dartminster. She determined to find this out, and boldly ask him to accompany her. Accordingly she wrote to him. Her paper was naturally headed with her address, and also slightly scented. Miss Spring wrote as follows:

“DEAR PROFESSOR:—I like to dub myself when I think of you as the ‘Lady with the Aigrette.’ You will never forget, will you, how you converted a thoughtless but sympathetic nature by one powerful and magnificent stroke of genius. It has been arranged by my dear young friends, the Pevenseys, that I go to stay with them on Wednesday next, the day after Boxing-Day; and they happened to mention that you are also to be one of their guests.

“I should greatly like to travel to Dartminster in your company, if you have no objection to my presence. If you have, it would be easy for you to express that dissatisfaction by a courteous letter; but if I do not hear, I will conclude that you are going to Dartminster by the train which leaves Paddington at 1:30. I shall meet you on the platform. You go on a mission to these dear young people: so do I also go on a mission.

“Dear Professor, congratulate yourself on having

won a convert. How magnificent that Society for the Suppression of Cruelty to the Bird Creation is!

“Yours sincerely,

“CAROLINE SPRING.”

It so happened that this letter, amongst a pile of others, arrived at Mr. Power's house on the following morning. It was scented, and had an elaborate crest on the flap of the envelope. He took it up, and flung it down again. Other letters absorbed his attention; and when Miss Hughes arrived on the scene, Miss Spring's epistle had not yet been opened.

“Will you see to these letters?” said the Professor, handing a pile to his secretary. “Open them; answer any that you think necessary to answer, destroy those that don't require attention, and speak to me after lunch about the one or two which are of greater importance.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Miss Hughes.

“I shall be exceedingly busy all morning, Miss Hughes, so pray do not speak to me. If I require you, I will address you. Go to your typewriter and get the correspondence through.”

The secretary moved noiselessly across the room. She was excited at the thought of her visit to Betty. She had only seen her once, but that did not matter at all. It was years—long years—since anyone had

looked into her eyes with the affectionate interest which Betty had shown; and it was years—long years—since a kindly, gentle, refined voice—the voice of a young woman, a lady in every sense of the word—had addressed her.

Miss Hughes was one of those lonely people who make few friends. She was intensely reserved, intensely proud, and exceedingly poor. Her poverty obliged her to earn her living. She had been fortunate in meeting Professor Power. She had got into his ways, and he had got into hers. She was unobtrusive, obliging, diligent, and, to a certain extent, clever. Nothing would induce him to change her for anyone else, and she certainly contemplated holding her present position for long years.

She did not at all think that she loved the Professor. She would have considered it very indelicate to love any man who had not proposed to her. She belonged to an old-fashioned school, and had a holy hatred of the women of the present day who made bold advances towards the men they met.

On that happy and wonderful day when Betty, Laura and Miss Spring had visited the Professor in his study, poor Miss Hughes had gone through despair and rapture; for if Betty had been kind to her, Miss Spring had hurt her holiest feelings. She was thoroughly ashamed of Miss Spring—her push-

ing ways, her innuendoes, her hints. With a woman's shrewdness she guessed at once what the lady meant. It was quite true that Professor Power never for an instant thought of matrimony: but he might be hoodwinked, beguiled, entrapped. Were such a terrible thing to occur, Miss Hughes knew well that she should instantly lose her post. In consequence, her feelings towards Miss Spring were the reverse of amiable. The poor lady hated herself for feeling unkind towards anyone, but she could not banish the strong jealousy which Miss Spring had awakened in her heart.

On the present occasion it was Miss Hughes' lot to open that pretty confiding letter which the artless lady had written to Professor Power. It could not possibly have fallen into more unsympathetic hands. Miss Hughes read it with heightening color. Her heart beat fast. She was consumed both by jealousy and anger.

"The odious thing! the horror!" thought poor Miss Hughes. "She's as old as ever she can be, and yet she pretends that she is young. She is a dreadful, designing woman."

Again Miss Hughes read the letter. Quite a becoming color came into her faded cheeks, and her eyes were very bright.

"Miss Hughes!" called the Professor.

“Yes, sir.”

Miss Hughes started to her feet.

“Have you read my correspondence?”

“Not all of it yet, sir.”

“Well, burn anything that does not require an answer. Be quick, for I find myself in a mood to dictate to you this morning.”

Miss Hughes never felt herself so proud as when the Professor, pacing slowly up and down the room, his hands clasped before him, his head bent a little forward, his eyes fixed on the ground, gave forth rapid utterances. She never questioned him. She always took down his speeches correctly. She was excited at these times. These moments were to her as the wine of life. No one else could do what she did.

“I will be very quick indeed, Mr. Power,” she said.

She snatched up Miss Spring's letter, and tearing it into fragments took it with several others which had shared a similar fate and consigned it to the flames. Soon afterwards, the Professor was in the throes of a most elaborate and deep composition. He was dictating one of those celebrated articles which were to add still further to his fame as one of the greatest philosophic thinkers of the day. Miss Hughes rose to the occasion. As to Power, he for-

got his secretary. She was a very useful machine. He was absorbed in his own great thoughts.

When he came to himself again, and, as it were, closed the flood-gates of thought, he noticed how tired and flushed the poor woman looked.

"I have wearied you," he said kindly.

"Oh no, sir," she replied: "it has been delightful."

"You are a good soul, Miss Hughes. You suit me admirably. By the way, by what train do we go to Dartminster on Wednesday next?"

"I have been looking up trains: the four o'clock train will be best."

"Will not that bring us in late for dinner?"

"It is a good train," said Miss Hughes, in a stubborn voice.

Soon afterwards she went out to lunch. She always disappeared for an hour in the afternoons. Professor Power found himself thinking with great interest of his visit to Betty. A time-table lay on Miss Hughes' special desk. He took it up, looked out the trains, found that the 1:30 would take them to Dartminster by four o'clock, and that the four o'clock train would not arrive until eight.

"What does the woman mean?" thought the Professor.

To think with him was to act. He rang his bell,

desired the housekeeper to send the kitchen maid immediately with a telegram, and wired to Betty:

“Miss Hughes and I leave Paddington at 1:30 Wednesday next.”

When Miss Hughes returned after her lunch he said:

“You made a mistake.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“You looked up the trains to Dartminster, did you not?”

“Yes,” said Miss Hughes.

“Well, you showed stupidity. The best train in the day is the 1:30. The other train takes four hours to get to Dartminster. I have wired to Mrs. Pevensey to say we will start by the 1:30.”

“Yes, sir: of course,” said Miss Hughes, and she sat down in a very dejected fashion before the typewriter.

She was busy all the rest of the afternoon, transcribing her shorthand notes, but in spite of herself her thoughts were wandering. She remembered Miss Spring's letter, and how she had said: “If I don't hear . . . I will conclude that you are going to Dartminster by the train which leaves Paddington at 1:30. I shall meet you on the platform.” How stupid of her to have left that time-table about! The Professor would have been quite content other-



wise to travel by the later train. She felt a fresh hatred towards Miss Spring burning in her heart, and, in consequence, her transcription of the Professor's notes was not so accurate as usual.

On the next day the Christmas holidays began. Miss Hughes was glad of a little leisure to prepare for her visit. She was not to meet the Professor again until he arrived at Paddington on the Wednesday after Boxing-Day.

"How happy I should be if only that dreadful creature were not coming!" thought the poor secretary. "I know she will poison my cup. She is setting her cap at dear Professor Power, and I dare not—I dare not warn him."

Wednesday arrived all too quickly, and it was a modestly-dressed woman of a little over thirty years of age who waited for the Professor on the long platform. She knew he would be late: she hoped he would be late. If only he were so very late that he must hurry into a smoking carriage that terrible journey in company with Miss Spring would not be undertaken. But, alack and alas! here was Miss Spring!

Her figure was perfectly graceful and even youthful. Her sealskin jacket was of the very richest Alaska seal, and fitted extremely well. On her head she wore a little brown toque with no orna-

ments of any sort—not even an ostrich plume. A brown veil of spotted net hid some of the wrinkles on her face. She had been copiously powdered, and even rouged, for the occasion. But Miss Spring knew that the Professor was a little blind and might not notice these things. She had used rouge and powder so long now that she could not bring herself to do without them.

Miss Spring paced up and down expectantly. She had taken a first-class ticket, but she resolved in her heart that if Professor Power decided to go third she would accompany him.

“Oh, if *only* he would be late!” thought poor Miss Hughes. “He generally is. He may even miss the train. If so, I go third, and the haughty madam goes first. What do I care?”

Miss Spring saw Miss Hughes and recognized her at once, but did not appear to do so by either word or bow, and the poor angry secretary found her cheeks burning with greater rage than ever.

The platform began to fill up with departing travellers: the porters hurried here and there. All of a sudden a shabby-looking man, carrying his own Gladstone bag, was seen advancing. A very old umbrella was stuck under one arm. He wore a greasy hat which had seen long service, and a long,

very loose overcoat which reached far below his knees. He was gazing in his short-sighted way about him, and refused the service of any porter.

Before Miss Hughes could reach him, Miss Spring advanced.

“Ah! now, how sweet!” she said. “So you have decided that we are to travel in each other’s company. That will be a great consolation to me, for after all the dreadful things that have occurred I feel quite timid going alone. One hears of such dreadful men!”

“Miss—er—I beg your pardon—I forget your name,” said Professor Power.

“Spring,” said the lady, gently—“the Lady of the Aigrette. Naughty man!” She shook her finger at him. She felt certain that he must recall her face. Anyhow, he had done what she desired. He was coming by the same train. She felt perfectly happy.

The Professor stared at her as though she were a lunatic.

“May I ask,” he said, “where you are going?”

“To Dartminster, my dear Professor.”

“Dear Professor!” thought Miss Hughes, who approached at that moment.

“Well, madam, I travel third.”

“And so do I,” said Miss Spring in a gallant voice, shuddering inwardly as she spoke, for all the

third-class carriages were crowded. "Ah! and this is your secretary!"

"That's all right, Miss Hughes," said the Professor, looking gratefully at the woman who understood him and whom he understood. "You had better take your seats, ladies. I must get some newspapers; I always take advantage of a railway journey to read."

Miss Spring was forced to get into the same carriage with Miss Hughes. The Professor stepped in immediately afterwards, handed Miss Hughes a copy of *The Gentlewoman* and Miss Spring a copy of *The Field*. He had got for himself that morning's *Times* and the latest number of the *National Review*.

"Now, ladies," he said, "make yourselves happy."

He took off his hat, revealing that noble domed head, and prepared to read. But this was more than Miss Spring could stand. It so happened that Miss Hughes was established in the further corner of the carriage, and that Miss Spring and the Professor were *vis-a-vis*. She bent forward and touched him on the knee.

"My dear other half!" she said inwardly. "How I thrill when I touch him!"

That there was no corresponding thrill on the

part of the Professor was all too evident, but Miss Spring was not to be easily abashed.

“You got my letter?” she said.

“Your—your what, madam?”

“I ventured to write to you. I am a very nervous little thing.”

“Little what?” said the Professor.

“Little thing. My nerves are highly strung. I did so dread travelling alone, and the dear sweet Pevenseys insisted on my coming to them. They gave me as an inducement the fact that you would also be with them. Ah, Professor, you must not desert your convert!”

“You talk in riddles, Miss—Spring.”

“No,” she replied, “I do not think so. You pretend to be very innocent, Professor, but you must know that we arranged this little journey together.”

“I have for some time much dreaded my loss of memory,” said the Professor, “and you alarm me considerably when you say this, for I have not the most remote conception of having arranged to travel to Dartminster with you, madam.”

“I wrote to you: I named the train. I said that if I did not hear I should consider the matter arranged. You have come by this train.”

“You wrote to me?”

“Certainly I did. I wrote the end of last week.”

The Professor shouted across the carriage:

“Miss Hughes, did we receive a letter, or did we not, from this lady—Miss Spring?”

Miss Hughes bent forward and in clear tones replied:

“We received a letter.”

“You told me nothing about it.”

“You said that letters of no consequence were to be burnt, Professor.”

“Ah,” said the Professor, “so I did—so I did. Thank you very much, Miss Hughes. Don’t let me disturb you. Pray read your paper.”

Miss Hughes sank back in her seat, but if looks could kill, the glance Miss Spring gave her at that moment would certainly have deprived the poor lady of life.

“Miss Hughes is an invaluable secretary,” murmured the Professor.

“An insufferable upstart, I call her!” said Miss Spring.

“Madam! What do you mean? I don’t like those whom I employ abused.”

“Sir, do you consider a lady’s letter of no consequence?”

The Professor looked hard at her.

“Your request was trifling,” he said. “You are

old enough to go as far as Dartminster alone. As we have met, I am pleased to be of service to you, but if you would permit me now to read I should be greatly indebted."

"Professor Power, I will in a few minutes, but there are things I long to say to you. I want you to guide my weak and faltering steps. I am not really a young woman. I am thirty-five. But, compared to you, I am young; and then I have never been trained to think as you think, and I have been sadly thoughtless. I am endowed, Professor, with great wealth."

At this juncture the ticket-collector came round to ask for the different tickets. Miss Spring was obliged to show her first-class ticket. The Professor looked at her.

"Why did you buy a first-class ticket? and why are you travelling third?" he asked.

"For the pleasure of your company. Ah, Professor Power, you're a naughty man, and you don't understand the ways of women."

"Thank God, I don't!" said the Professor.

"I was talking about my wealth——"

"Money does not interest me, madam."

"Nevertheless, you must regard it as a gift."

"I should, according to the Bible, advise all rich

people to sell what they have and give to the poor; then they will have treasure in heaven," said the Professor.

"I have abjured osprey plumes—the feathers, in fact, of all birds, owing to your kind advice. I would go further if only you, who are so learned and so great, would help me."

"I don't know how much further you can go; and I never gave you advice: I simply pointed out the cruelties of fine ladies, some of whom are ignorant, some of whom are not. I am glad to feel that you belong to the ignorant portion of the community, madam, and were unaware, until I opened your eyes, of the horrors connected with the osprey trade."

"I would go further," murmured Miss Spring.

"Forgive me," said Professor Power: "when the train is in full motion I am a little deaf."

This was really a "poser." To raise one's voice to a shrill scream was not a likely way to bring two halves together. Miss Spring reflected that she could at least have the pleasure of looking at that manly head, of being within a stone's throw of that noble presence. Hitherto, her advances towards mankind had been received with toleration on account of her great wealth. This was the first time she had found a stubborn man who apparently did



not care to talk to her. But she put this down to the fact that the Professor was naturally shy, and that he was greatly attracted by her presence. He looked at her once or twice over the top of his paper, and her heart swelled within her. Once, when the journey was half over, he bent towards her and said:

“I regard most women as fools.”

This was very startling, but when she timidly inquired if she belonged to the category, he said: “No, you are in a worse one.”

This she chose to interpret as something really complimentary; and so the journey to Dartminster terminated.

Pevensey, now apparently restored to perfect health, had come to meet his visitors. A carriage was waiting for them, and they drove straight to the Rectory. There the Professor, divested of his hideous hat and long overcoat, looked decidedly more presentable. Betty's sweet voice and bright face attracted him enormously. He sat down close to her, and had eyes and ears for no one else. Miss Spring was attended to very politely by Pevensey himself, and Miss Hughes was given the most comfortable seat near the fire, while Betty from time to time, as she talked to the Professor, patted the tired secretary on her knee. Betty's eyes said plainly: “I

am so glad you have come!" and Miss Hughes, her heart warmed and refreshed, did not need anything more.

McDermot and Laura were coming down together by a later train, and Power expressed satisfaction at having Betty for a few hours to himself.

"I want to see a good deal of Dartminster," he said. "I have arranged with the editor of the *National Review* to write a series of papers on the great industries of England. Some of the largest mills are to be found here, and I trust your husband will take me round to some of them in order that I may make notes to-morrow morning. You, Miss Hughes, will of course accompany me."

"Oh, Mrs. Pevensey!" said Miss Spring at that moment, extricating herself from the low chair in which she had been seated at some little distance from the Professor, "you promised, didn't you, that I should see as much of the poor as possible?"

"Of course you must come with us," said Betty: "that will be delightful."

Miss Spring cast an arch glance at the Professor. Her eyes said: "Naughty man! you know you long to have me, although you pretend you don't." Then she tripped away obediently by the Rector's side, who had promised to show her some books in which she was not the least interested in his study.

“That is an awful woman!” said the Professor, when she had gone. “Why did you ask her, my dear?”

“Miss Spring!” said Betty. “Oh, but she is really quite nice.”

“Not to me,” said the Professor. “I consider her most repellent. Miss Hughes, I shall leave you fifty pounds in my will for burning that letter.”

“Oh, sir!” said Miss Hughes, coloring with delight—not at the thought of the money, but at her beloved Professor’s approbation.

“She is one of those blind fools,” said the Professor, “to whom no amount of ordinary talking does the least vestige of good. Those are the women I feel inclined to be rude to. I told her in the railway carriage that most women were fools. She asked if she was included in the category, and I said: ‘No, you are worse.’ You will scarcely believe me, Mrs. Pevensey, but she took it as a compliment.”

“Professor,” said Betty, in her pretty way, “you must not be rude to any of my guests: I can’t have it. Miss Spring means very well indeed—I know she does; and we must all be jolly together.”

“Let us hope that we may,” said the Professor; “it won’t be my fault, my dear young lady, if we are not, only, for goodness’ sake, keep me as far

from the woman as you decently can; she is what I consider aggressive."

Laura and McDermot arrived soon after dinner. Laura always wore tailor-made costumes, and had that frank, bright way—that sort of hail-fellow-well-met manner which caused men and women equally to like her.

She and McDermot had a very pleasant journey together, and both appeared on the scene in the best of spirits. Miss Spring was in full evening dress. She was happy, and yet not happy. The manners of her "other half" disturbed her a good deal, but since he had met her she had studied the subject carefully and from many points of view, and was delighted with certain observations which she had read in a recent novel—namely, to the effect that a very strong attraction often shows itself at first in a sort of defiance and distrust, and that there is no sign so fatal to the course of true love as a happy indifference. That the Professor was not indifferent to her she was convinced, for when he happened to meet her eye once or twice during dinner he looked away again so hastily that she knew she had some sort of niche in his inner consciousness. She must be satisfied with that to begin with. She felt that she might work wonders if only that terrible Miss Hughes was out of the way. How any man could prefer a

penniless, ugly woman like Miss Hughes, a woman of uncertain age—Miss Hughes was thirty, but Miss Spring put her down as forty—to herself seemed inconceivable. The Professor's indifference to her money was, of course, only a blind. When once his eyes were opened to the great, magnificent use of money he would feel that money, accompanied by Miss Spring, was something not to be lightly disregarded. Accordingly, when Laura, after running upstairs to take off her hat and jacket, came down again, Miss Spring sailed gracefully across the room to meet her.

Miss Spring was wearing a dress which caused the eyes to blink. It was, in one sense, a beautiful dress, but, in another, very aggravating. It annoyed the poor Professor inexpressibly. He could not make out what it was made of, for as she moved it made a sort of metallic, clinking sound. It clung to her lissom and really young figure like scales. It was, in fact, a dress entirely covered with black sequins, and only after great deliberation had Miss Spring arrayed herself in this gown. She felt sure that its quiet appearance combined with its brightness must draw attention to herself. Poor Miss Hughes, in a very badly-made costume, felt altogether in shadow beside the brilliant creature in her sparkling sequins.

Miss Hughes sat in a corner and designated Miss

Spring as a reptile. Miss Spring cared for none of these things. She went up to Laura.

"I have brought my violin. I should so like to play something. I feel in the mood: there are moments when it is irresistible. I should like to play something which would indicate the power of love and the victory of love."

"Oh, do: what fun!" said Laura. "Betty, I know, will accompany you. She is a very good musician."

Betty was only too pleased. She moved to the piano. Miss Spring tuned her violin and began to play. She knew that her beautiful figure looked at its best at these moments, and soon something happened. She forgot herself and immediately became interesting. The Professor dropped his *pince-nez* and stared fixedly at her out of his short-sighted eyes. Who was this woman? and what in the world was she playing? He really forgot for a time that she was his most objectionable travelling companion. He changed his comfortable seat by the fire for one nearer to the violin player, and now, putting on his glasses, once more stared hard at her.

Miss Hughes in her corner underwent agony. The Professor nodded his head in keen appreciation. He loved just the sort of sentimental music which Miss Spring played so well. He did not in the least fol-

low her hidden meaning, but he felt soothed and refreshed, and when she stopped he said:

“Good Heavens, madam! don’t put up your violin yet: give us some more.”

“Delicious!” thought the lady.

She smiled at his appreciation. He loathed her smile, but he loved her playing. She played one thing after another for over an hour. At last she stopped. She looked around her sweetly. She had won a victory. She had completely subdued her audience. Even Mr. McDermot, matter-of-fact man that he was, found himself impelled to listen to her melodies.

“You remind me of Switzerland,” he said.

She did not listen to him: she was waiting for Power’s verdict.

“You recall my childhood,” he said gallantly; “and I thank you, madam.”

He rose as he spoke, and going across the room bade his hostess good-night.

Miss Spring went to bed that evening feeling intensely happy. As to poor Miss Hughes, she watered her pillow with tears. Oh, if only she could steal or hide or injure that violin!

## CHAPTER XVII

EVERY moment of the visitors' time had been planned beforehand. They were only to spend two complete days at Hillside Rectory. The Rector had already arranged just what they were to see and just how each moment of every hour was to be occupied. Betty was anxious to obtain one or two lessons on the typewriter from Miss Hughes, and not having the slightest suspicion of the poor lady's agony of mind with regard to the Professor, suggested that she should have her first lesson on the following morning.

"What an excellent idea!" said Miss Spring, who, seated at breakfast in a most becoming tailor-made costume, looked brightly around her. "The Professor and you, Mr. Pevensey, and I, of course, are going to one of the great factories, are we not? and afterwards, perhaps, we might visit the poor in their homes. Betty, you must be sick of the poor."

"Indeed I am not!" replied Betty, with some indignation.

"I shall want Miss Hughes to take notes for me," said the Professor.



Miss Hughes looked up with a face of intense gratitude. Betty saw the look, and suddenly an inspiration came to her.

"Of course; I forgot," she said; "how stupid of me! Naturally Mr. Power will want you to help him, Miss Hughes, and you and I can have a lesson together quite well after tea. But I tell you what, Miss Spring. It is unnecessary for you to tire yourself going over the mills. What Geoffrey and I feel is that you should see the poor in their homes, and I will myself take you to some of the most deserving of our poor folk."

"I prefer to see the mill hands; then to-morrow I can go to the houses of the poor," said Miss Spring.

The arrangement finally ended in Miss Hughes, Miss Spring and Professor Power going off together to see the mills. They took a carriage and started on their expedition soon after breakfast.

Mr. McDermot and Laura found themselves alone for a few minutes. Mr. McDermot looked full into Laura's face.

"Are you inclined for a confidence?" he asked.

"If you wish to confide in me I am quite willing to listen to you," she said; "and if you want me to assure you that I never repeat things, I can say with truth that such is the case. But what is the matter?"

"I am not quite happy about your sister-in-law."

“About Betty?” said Laura.

“Yes. She has changed: she has gone through a great deal.”

Laura, who had been standing in one of the windows, now dropped into a chair, crossed her legs in a somewhat mannish way, and, looking up, stared hard at Mr. McDermot.

“I presume,” she said, after a pause, “that you imagine you have discovered why Betty is changed.”

“Yes,” he replied, after a very brief hesitation, “I have discovered the reason. Mrs. Pevensey loves her husband devotedly and is unhappy about him.”

“But you think Geoffrey looks well?”

“I do not.”

“Then you are anxious about them both?” said Laura.

“At the present moment I am more anxious about Mrs. Pevensey than about her husband. I wish I could get her to tell me everything.”

“I don’t think she will,” replied Laura. “Why should she?”

Mr. McDermot was silent for a minute. After a time he said slowly:

“You love Mrs. Pevensey very much, don’t you?”

“Oh, she’s a capital sort!” said Laura. “She is one of the best and finest girls I have ever met. Of course I love her.”

"Her husband isn't worthy of her," said the surgeon.

"Don't forget, please, Mr. McDermot, that you are talking about my brother."

"I don't forget. The fact matters very little. Pevensey is going downhill, and I cannot see any reason for it. He is a perfectly healthy man. Why does he give way to the drug habit?"

"The drug habit!" said Laura. She gave a start.

"Yes: that is what ails him. I cannot quite make out what form of drug he takes, but I believe I can give a shrewd guess as to its nature. The mere fact of his visiting Sir Preston Dykes gives me a sufficient clue. Has he a family history?"

"We all have a family history," said Laura, coloring slightly, "but I don't know of anything whatever to make Geoffrey alarmed. For instance, we have no insanity or anything of that sort in our family."

"I should not have thought you had. There are certain signs which the medical man always perceives in these cases and which are absent from Pevensey's face. Nevertheless, the fact remains that his young and affectionate wife is wearing herself out on his account. That she has received some sort of shock since I had the pleasure of meeting her in London I am convinced. I suspected even then

a thorn in the flesh, and, to tell you the truth, Miss Pevensey, I came here because I was interested in your sister-in-law and would help her. I perceived even then that there was something far from right with Pevensey. Since his return to his parish he has had a breakdown—I am certain of it. This is a delicate matter to speak about. You are a very wise young lady. Do you recommend me to have a straight talk with him or with Mrs. Pevensey?"

Laura thought for a minute.

"I'd have a talk with Geoffrey if I were you," she said.

"Then you would recommend me to say nothing to his wife?"

"Well, you are very wise, and you could be guided as to what was best to be done after having had your conversation with Geoffrey."

"I believe you are right. I will boldly ask Pevensey to have a smoke with me after tea to-day, and then introduce the subject. Will you, if at all in your power, pave the way for me?"

"I will certainly do so; for I will take that poor, abominable Miss Spring off everyone else's hands and devote myself to her. Greater sacrifice could not be expected of me, could it?"

The surgeon laughed, and at that moment Betty came into the room.

"I have done all my housekeeping duties," she said. "The day is going to be a lovely one—spring in winter. Shall we go into the garden?"

They went, and paced up and down. The sun shone out of a cloudless sky. Betty did not wear any hat, and Mr. McDermot, as he watched her young face, thought that he had seldom seen a more attractive woman.

They were walking in the garden, and chatting one to the other, when Dr. Spurgeon was suddenly seen coming across the lawn.

"Oh, that is our doctor!" said Betty, coloring slightly. "I must go and speak to him."

She went up to the young doctor's side.

"How is your husband?" asked Spurgeon.

"Quite well, for the present. We have many guests in the house now, and his attention is fully taken up."

Spurgeon looked at Betty anxiously.

"Has he slept well at night? Does he stay long in his study?"

"He has been very busy during Christmas, which you know must occupy every moment of his time. He has not come to bed very early, but when he has come he has slept well."

Spurgeon looked thoughtful.

“What is the matter?” asked Betty, suddenly, alarmed at his silence and his manner.

“I don’t want to make you unhappy,” he said; “and just now, too, when your friends are here.”

“Oh, if you have anything to say, do—do tell me!” said Betty, with impatience.

“Only that I happen to know that Mr. Pevensey has secured a fresh supply of the tabloids.”

Betty clasped her hands. The color left her face.

“How can you tell?”

“You know Stevenson, the chemist, who used to make them up for him?—he is a great friend of Wrotham, who has a large chemist’s shop at the other side of Dartminster. Wrotham told Stevenson last night that your husband had been to see him, had explained the nature of the tabloids, and had, in fact, induced him to supply him with a bottle. It is contrary to etiquette, and Wrotham could be severely punished for giving such a strong medicine without a prescription; but the fact remains that he has done so, and that your husband is not without this pernicious drug to fall back upon.”

“Oh,” said Betty, “what is to be done?”

“He ought to be spoken to. He is not without strength of mind: he ought to give them up. I will myself see Wrotham and tell him that I can get his license taken away if he ever supplies any more of

these medicines. But there's the large bottle which your husband has now in his possession to be accounted for."

Betty stood still for a minute. She felt faint. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, and, notwithstanding her agony of a week ago, the hope that Geoffrey would have strength to resist his besetting sin was beginning to revive. He had been so well, so bright, so almost happy in preparing for his guests. But now—this terrible thing had befallen her. He was secretly indulging in the medicine which was undermining his life and his intellect.

"Dr. Spurgeon," said Betty, suddenly, "I have promised to introduce you to Mr. McDermot. Will you come with me now and I will do so. I do not mind Mr. McDermot knowing. Tell him what you have told me."

"Do you think I may?"

"Yes: please do. Tell him everything."

Betty made the necessary introduction between the two men, and then left them together. She slipped her hand through Laura's arm, and drew her to a distant part of the grounds.

"What is the matter with you?" said Laura.

"The sun has gone in; that is all," replied Betty.

"But it is shining brightly," said Laura, looking up at the cloudless sky.

“In my heart, I mean,” said Betty. “Oh, Laura! we shan’t succeed: we must fall: the burden is too terrible. Geoffrey cannot hold up against it.”

“You have made a great mistake in not telling me all your secret,” said Laura. “You have told me half, not all.”

“For your own sake I dare not tell you the whole; you must not ask me,” said Betty.

“Well, there is something I wish to say.”

“What is it, dear?”

“Mr. McDermot came down on purpose to have a talk with your husband.”

“Oh!—that nice, kind man!—did he tell you so, Laura?”

“Yes, a little time ago.”

“If anyone can help him, Mr. McDermot can,” said Betty. “Oh, Laura, I have had a terrible time!”

“I thought you were well and happy,” said Laura. “But Mr. McDermot sees deeper, and he told me he was quite certain you had received a shock of some sort. He means to speak to Geoffrey after tea to-night.”

“And Dr. Spurgeon is speaking to Mr. McDermot now. I wonder—oh, I wonder if it will do any good!”

“Mr. McDermot is a man in a thousand, Betty. And now, listen. There is nothing weak about me,



and I firmly believe that if you would confide your secret to me I could help you. No one can work for another in the dark. You told me that Geoffrey was addicted to the use of a certain drug, but you have not once told me why he takes it: that's just what I want to know."

"And that is just what I cannot tell you," said Betty.

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE visitors came back full of enthusiasm with regard to their morning's expedition. Miss Spring had picked up certain cant phrases with regard to the poor which she used *ad libitum*. In the middle of lunch she confessed her inability to eat, and suddenly burst into tears. She was seated next to Mr. Power, and as she gave way to her attack of hysteria, clutched his arm with sudden violence.

Miss Hughes looked at her with eyes that fairly shone with anger. Poor Mr. Power also looked across the table at his secretary with mute pathos. The indignant lady got up suddenly.

"Let me take you to your room," she said. "You have seen what has doubtless startled you. Come."

Miss Spring was forced to retire in Miss Hughes' company.

"What a queer woman!" said the Professor, beginning to occupy himself again with his veal cutlets.

"She means very well, and she is rich," said Betty. "She has never seen the realities of life before. I think her tears are quite genuine, and she ought to be respected for them."

"I respect her tears," said the Professor, "but I do not respect her seizing me by the arm. I object to such conduct on principle from any female."

Geoffrey and Laura could not help laughing, and the incident passed off without further remark.

In the afternoon Miss Spring had sufficiently recovered to go for a drive. They went into the country, far away from the haunts of men, and there the poor lady said that she felt better, and her sensitive heart was soothed.

"I always had a most sensitive heart," she remarked to Mrs. Pevensey. "Even the sufferings of a kitten or a dog have given me torture. On account of my fine and yet deep affections I have refused to have the company of either dog, cat or canary. You can imagine, therefore, my agony when I saw those poor, overworked creatures. Oh, it is a shame—a shame! If it had not been for Mr. Power's noble way of looking at things I don't think I could have gone through those mills and seen those overworked women—my sisters, as it were—in chains, in momentary danger of their lives, and with that dreadful hunted look on their faces. Mrs. Pevensey, I cannot understand how you can endure the life."

"If they can endure it, surely I can," replied Betty. "The thing is not to cry about it, but to

relieve it as far as possible. I should like to have all young married women prevented, by law, from working in the mills, all children excluded, and even women who are unmarried ought only to work for half time. But that law will never be carried, and the dreadful things that are going on will go on as long as men haste to get riches and don't think at all of their fellow-creatures."

"Well, let us talk of something else now," said Miss Spring. "This has got on my nerves. Is that Miss Hughes driving in the other carriage with the Professor? I cannot say I at all like the woman."

"You have no reason to dislike her," said Betty. "She was remarkably good to you during lunch."

"You mean she gave me her arm to take me out of the room? But it was the very last thing I wished. She is a terribly officious person, always thrusting herself between me and Professor Power. The dear man was just about to rise to take me delicately from the room; I could have slapped her."

"I am sure the Professor would not have taken you from the room," said Betty. "He is unaccustomed to women: he is in no sense a lady's man."

"Dear fellow!" murmured Miss Spring. "How infinitely I prefer him to those fleeting individuals who talk a lot of nonsense to all ladies—even to women of thirty-five—and who mean less than

nothing. One look from the Professor speaks a volume. Ah, Mrs. Pevensey, I have never told you the theory that I so strongly hold——”

“No?” said Betty. “Isn’t this view fine?” she interrupted.

“Yes; undoubtedly. But let me speak. I believe, according to the saying of a great philosopher whose name I have forgotten, that we are sent into the world in pairs—that each individual belongs exclusively to another individual, and that at birth we are parted, and sometimes never meet our other half during the whole of our existence. Thus we are stranded, either left to wither on the stalk unwed, unblessed, or we marry the wrong man. You know, dear, how rich I am. I have had many, many offers, but no one has touched my heart until the dear Professor came along.”

“And has he asked you to marry him?” said Betty, in some astonishment.

“Not yet, Mrs. Pevensey; and forgive me for saying that I consider such a remark just a little, a very little, indelicate. But I know well it is on his tongue; his heart is with me. I can see it in his glance; I can feel it in his touch. The whole thing is very agitating, for at thirty-five one’s feelings are acute. He is poor and I am rich; but what matters

that? He needs the comforts and the love that I long to bestow upon him."

"I don't believe he will ever marry," said Betty, "if you ask me. It seems frightfully unkind to say it, but I am almost sure you are mistaken. I know there must be heaps of men longing to marry, Miss Spring, but I do not honestly think Professor Power is one."

"Ah," said Miss Spring, "little you know. You are a very young girl, and exceedingly inexperienced. May I ask you a direct question? Have you married your other half?"

"You may put it as you like," said Betty. "I have married the man I love best on earth: I can never love another as I love him. I suppose he is my other half."

"Let us pray that it may be so. It would be a fearful thing if your other half came along and you found you were mistaken."

"We won't talk about it, if you don't mind," said Betty.

"Certainly not, if you don't wish it. But now, dear, let me ask you—I came here, dear, to help you in your noble work; the Professor and I are at one as regards that. He will write for you, and oh! how far the influence of his pen will be felt! But I can give you money down, and I will do it. Only mat-

ters will be much better and easier if the dear man would unburden himself and declare frankly to me what he really feels towards me. His restlessness in my presence declares his spirit, and I believe he would have spoken before now but for that Miss Hughes."

"She is his secretary: he is obliged to be with her," said Betty.

"Not as often as you imagine, Mrs. Pevensey. I consider Miss Hughes a most pushing, forward person. It's my opinion that the miserable creature is trying to secure the great Professor for herself. Little she knows; but, seeing him daily as she does, she has, of course, opportunities which I, alas! cannot compete with. Now I was wondering if by any chance you could help me to sever the connection between the Professor and Miss Hughes."

"I can do nothing of the sort," said Betty. "Miss Hughes suits Professor Power admirably. She is not thinking of marrying him; she is an honest, good, faithful woman: I like her extremely; and there is nothing whatever underhand about her. She is an excellent secretary, and you certainly, Miss Spring, will not aid your own cause by trying to put Professor Power against Miss Hughes."

"I suppose you are right," said Miss Spring, looking thoughtful. "I suppose I must bear with her.

She rouses the queerest sensations within me: it only shows how deep my feelings are: I really believe I am jealous of her. Isn't it frank and young of me to say a thing of that sort? But, you know, I really feel so young. You, of course, are a child. But believe me, I possess the child's heart."

"How old did you say you were?" asked Betty.

"Thirty-five my last birthday."

"Well," said Betty, a little maliciously, "Miss Hughes is only thirty; she told me so."

"I don't believe it for a moment. She looks close on fifty."

"She is not. She has had to work very hard, and is poor: but that is her age. Nothing would induce Miss Hughes to tell a lie."

"From the way you talk, Mrs. Pevensey, it seems you are trying to get up a match between the Professor and that plain, penniless, insignificant woman."

Betty colored hastily.

"It seems," she said, "very unfair to bring up anyone's poverty against her; and as to being plain—Geoffrey and I think she has such a nice face; and as to being insignificant—she is modest and retiring. Oh, Miss Spring, don't think anything about her at all: just do leave the poor thing alone. You don't



know how unpleasant it is to me when you talk like this."

"I will be silent if you wish me to, Mrs. Pevensey; but I trust to your honor not to repeat a word of what I have said."

"I certainly won't."

"And you will help me in any way in your power?"

"I can't promise that, for, as you say, I am very young. You are, according to your own showing, fifteen years older than I, and surely you ought to be able to manage your own affairs."

"So I can, and will, if you don't interfere."

"I certainly won't interfere."

By-and-by they reached home, Betty feeling a good deal ruffled by their conversation. Immediately after tea, Betty and Miss Hughes went into the Rector's study in order to have a lesson on the Remington typewriter. Miss Hughes said impulsively, as she took the cover from the machine and showed her pupil how to set to work:

"Oh, you cannot imagine how I love you, and what a happiness it is to be here!"

"I am glad to have you," said Betty. "We must always be friends," she added. "Will you write to me sometimes when you have time?"

“That would be a great pleasure. You treat me as no one has done since my mother died ten years ago.”

“Have you been working for your living for ten years?” said Betty, sympathy in her tone.

“Oh, longer than that,” replied Miss Hughes. “Since I was eighteen. My father died then, and left my dear mother and me very badly off. Short-hand and typing were thought a good profession twelve years ago, but now so many, many people have taken it up that it is difficult to get a well-paid post. After my mother died I had some sad times. I was very lonely, and had no friends or relations. My old friends would take no notice of me because I was poor. I went from one post to another, and broke down, and finally got into bad health. Then one day the manager of a large typewriting office—I won’t mention his name—sent me to Professor Power’s house to do some work for him. I was dreadfully paid at that office, and I suppose I was specially weak, for in the midst of the work I fainted away. When I came to myself I was lying on a horse-hair sofa, and the Professor was standing by me fanning me with an advertisement sheet of the *Times*. He looked frightfully scared, and ever so sorry. He would not let me stir, but sat down by me and got me to tell him my story.

“I did so in a few words. I think I have a certain penetration of character, and knew that he was not the sort of man to be worried by sentiment, although most undoubtedly his feelings would be roused by real distress. My story rang true, for it was the account of my own life. When I had finished, he said:

“‘How long were you engaged to Messrs. ——,’ naming the firm who had sent me to him. I said that mine was a weekly engagement. He told me to finish my week and then come to him. I went to him on the following Monday, and have never left him since. He pays me handsomely. I have enough for my modest requirements. I live for him, and for him alone. I think I do what he wants, for I am quick and adaptable. He is of use to me, and I am of use to him. Oh, Mrs. Pevensey, you surely don’t think that dreadful woman wants to take him from me!’”

“What dreadful woman?” asked Betty.

“You know the person I mean—Miss Spring.”

“I cannot answer that question, Miss Hughes, because it would not be fair; but the person to be considered is the Professor himself. I do not believe that anything would induce him to part with you.”

“Are you certain of what you say?”

“Yes, I am quite certain. He has praised you so much to us.”

“Mrs. Pevensey,” said Miss Hughes, “it seems so wrong, but I absolutely hate that woman.”

“Well, try not to,” said Betty. “Your visit here won’t last long, and when you get back to town you are not likely to see any more of her. Now, please, may I have my lesson?”

“Yes, yes; what a dear creature you are! Oh, if all women were like you!”

“It would be very tiresome for the world,” said Betty. “We want variety—endless variety: and Miss Spring is really very kind-hearted.”

“I don’t think she is,” said Miss Hughes. “I think she’s exceedingly clever, though; and that music of hers alarms me more than anything, for I heard the Professor humming some of the airs that she played last night when we were going over the factory to-day.”

“She plays beautifully,” said Betty; “but I think the Professor does not connect her with her music. Now, please, shall we begin?”

When dinner was over, and the ladies had gone into the drawing-room, McDermot meant to seize his opportunity to say some very plain words to Geoffrey Pevensey. He had noticed him during dinner, and was quite certain that his handsome

young host was not in an absolutely normal condition. In short, he was convinced that the Rector had again taken a certain amount of the pernicious drug—not a large dose, by any means, but sufficient to brighten his eyes and steady his nerves. An ordinary person would not have noticed anything peculiar about Pevensey, but McDermot was not a surgeon and physician for nothing. He felt well assured that for a man with such highly-strung nerves as the Rector's the downward fall must be rapid. The power to resist would grow daily and hourly weaker, and the man would die in his youth a slave to the worst habit in the world.

McDermot could not help glancing from the splendid-looking man to his noble young wife, and he vowed a vow under his breath that if anyone on earth could save that man he would do it for Betty's sake. Power was there with others of the company after dinner, but very soon he left the room, intending to go into the study.

"You will find me in the study by-and-by," he said. "I am going to take notes with the help of Miss Hughes."

He went straight to the drawing-room and called his secretary.

"Miss Hughes, can you give me a few minutes of your time?"

Miss Hughes sprang up with alacrity. She left the room. The Professor accompanied her, and Betty, Laura and Miss Spring were left alone. Miss Spring said at once to Betty:

"I have a great inspiration over me, and I must let it forth in music. My violin must speak. Where does that door lead?"

"It is the door into the study," said Betty.

"Then will you, Laura, have the kindness to open the door?"

"But why should I do so?" asked Laura; "the Professor wants to make notes with his secretary, and your music will only disturb him."

Miss Spring stepped gracefully across the room.

"I will open the door myself," she said.

Laura colored crimson, but would not enter into a contest with the extraordinary woman. Betty sat down to the piano and began to play. Her heart was very sad. She felt almost certain that McDermot at that moment was talking seriously to her husband, and she longed to be with them to help her husband, to assure him of her undying love. She forgot Miss Spring's small ambitions and silly desires, but she was a magnificent accompanist. Miss Spring played with her heart, and Miss Spring as a violin player was in her way inimitable. She drew forth sighs from the violin: she made it talk:

she made it weep: she made it laugh. Professor Power heard it in the distant study. There were very few things that could draw him from his philosophic writings, and he was absorbed now over a very interesting paper. But this music penetrated through his outer ears into his heart.

Miss Hughes, who was watching him and knew well the terrible magnetism of the music, noticed his want of concentration of thought as he paused between the sentences. At last he stopped altogether.

"I have finished, sir," said the secretary, waiting with her stylographic pen in hand.

"I have no more thoughts to-night," said the Professor. "That will do, thank you. What is that? Ah, it reminds me—it reminds me——" He turned and looked at Miss Hughes. "Once I was young," he said; "once I had a heart."

He went into the drawing-room. The secretary folded her note-book sadly and followed him. It was in the midst of this scene, and just when the violin was speaking in its most powerful and marvellous way, that there came a loud report like a great thunderclap on the night air. It was so startling that everyone rushed to the hall door and looked out. There was a great smoke rising high towards the heavens, and Betty clasped her hands in agony.

"There has been an explosion in the Farnham

factory," she said. "That is the direction. Oh, what can have happened? We must go there at once."

She looked wild with excitement. Forgetting her guests, she rushed into the dining-room to her husband.

"Did you hear it? did you hear it?" she asked.

McDermot turned a distressed face towards her. The dining-room was situated at the extreme back of the house: the noise of the explosion was therefore not half so plainly distinguished there as in the drawing-room. Betty rushed up to her husband.

"Come at once, Geoff! there is awful trouble—frightful! There has been an explosion at Farnham's factory. I know a number of the hands were going to work overtime to-night, and amongst them dear little Miriam Grey. You know she was to be married in a week. Oh, I trust—I hope nothing has happened to her! But I must go there at once."

"Are you certain what you say is right?" said the Rector.

"How can I doubt it? Did you not hear that noise?"

"I heard a very loud clap of thunder," said McDermot.

"It was not thunder: it was an explosion. Oh,



that deadly, deadly work! Please—please come with me, Geoff.”

“Of course I will, dear.”

Betty flew upstairs to her room. In a few minutes she came down again in a waterproof cloak and a small hat. Her husband had put on a light overcoat over his evening suit.

“I will come with you, of course,” said McDermot.

“That is good,” said Betty.

She was met in the hall by Laura, Power, Miss Spring and Miss Hughes. Miss Spring’s face was deadly white, and her teeth were chattering.

“Don’t go into scenes of horror: it is too much for you,” she said.

“What do you mean?” said Betty. She shook the woman’s hand off. “Come, Geoff, come,” she said; and she flew down the avenue. McDermot followed her.

“I am going, too,” said Mr. Power.

“You are not,” said Miss Spring.

“Yes, madam, I—am!”

Miss Spring considered for half a minute.

“Then I will go,” she said. “Yes, I must accustom myself to these things. You have opened my eyes. The lady who will never wear the aigrette again cannot prove herself a coward.”

“You will be terribly in the way,” said Power. But Miss Spring did not hear him. She was already upstairs getting ready to follow Betty and her husband and the surgeon to the factory.

The Farnham factory was one of the largest in Dartminster. It was largely devoted to the manufacture of glass of all kinds, and almost all the engines were worked by electricity. What had caused the explosion and what was the extent of the damage could not be ascertained until the party from the Rectory reached the place.

The Rector, who had lost all his depression, and was once more vigorous, anxious, full of zeal for his suffering parishioners, soon found a cab into which he, Betty and McDermot entered. In a very few minutes they arrived at the factory, where was a scene of terrible confusion. Half a dozen people had been killed, and at least twenty terribly injured. This happened to be a late night at the factory, and a great many people had been working overtime. Amongst these was Miriam Grey, the pretty young girl who was to be a bride in a few days' time.

Betty had seen her only that morning. She had come to the Rectory on a message for Betty, and had told her that she must be at the factory until midnight.

“But I don't mind,” said Miriam, looking at the

lady she loved out of her sweet, soft grey eyes, "for it will bring Jim in a few more shillings for our home. I'd do anything for Jim. Oh, I am so happy, ma'am! I wonder if God means me to be as happy always as I am now. Oh, I am so happy!"

It was about Miriam that Betty thought most as she took that rapid drive to the scene of the accident. There would doubtless be many sufferers, but if only Miriam had escaped she felt that she could thank God.

The foreman of the works was uninjured. He came out at once to speak to Pevensey. He explained that the explosion was caused by a moment's carelessness on the part of a trained worker; that a great deal of glass was irretrievably broken and destroyed, and, what was far more important, some lives were lost, and many injured.

"Is Miriam Grey safe?" burst from Betty's white lips.

The overseer looked at her kindly.

"You mean that pretty young woman who was so soon to be married to James Moore?"

"Yes, yes; tell me about her."

"She is not dead, madam, but she is amongst the injured."

"Take me to her at once," said Betty.

The man hesitated and looked at Pevensey. His

eyes seemed to say: "Is it right? Will the young lady bear it?" But Pevensey said in a peremptory tone:

"Yes; take my wife to Miriam; she wishes it."

Without a word the man turned. He asked Betty to follow him, and they went down the long passage and passed that part of the works which was absolutely destroyed by the explosion. It was now a blackened mass of ruin, drenched with water, for the explosion had been followed by fire, which had, however, been put out quickly.

"We have lost tens of thousands by this night's work," said the man. "I don't know what Messrs. Farnham will say. They won't know anything about it until the morning. They live at least ten miles away. They can do nothing; but I will myself go to them by the first train in the morning."

"What does the money matter?" said Betty. "It is the people who are killed—who are suffering."

"That is true," said the man. "There are three women dead—all mothers—and two men, and a boy. The girl you particularly want to see, madam, is very badly hurt. I don't think there is much hope of her recovery."

"Oh!" said Betty; "little Miriam!" She very nearly burst into tears. Then she restrained herself.

The man now turned into a room where those

who had most suffered from the explosion had been conveyed. Some were terribly blackened and injured in various ways. These were all men. The only woman who had suffered severely was Miriam Grey. She was laid on some cushions and rugs in a distant part of the great room, and Betty now bent over her. Her face was partly covered with a light and soft handkerchief which someone had put over it. She was lying on her side and moaning feebly. Betty sat down by her. She did not attempt to touch her. She felt a vague sense of comfort at being close to the girl. She wondered where Jim Moore was; if he was uninjured; if he would soon come to see Miriam.

He was a young giant, very handsome, a splendid fellow, and Miriam and he had been engaged for a year and a half. They loved each other devotedly, and the following Saturday would be their wedding-day.

The girl was very slightly made, but was quite a beautiful little thing in her way—so dainty, so neat, with a sweet, fresh, innocent face. She had been the mainstay of her mother during that mother's lifetime, and would not marry Jim while her mother lived, choosing to devote all her earnings to the old woman's comforts. The mother had died two months ago: the girl was free. She was to leave

the mill on Saturday for ever, for Jim would not hear of her remaining there as a worker after her marriage. He could earn enough for both, he said.

There were several doctors already on the scene, who were examining the other victims of the explosion, but no one had yet touched Miriam, who lay, faintly breathing, but otherwise quite still.

By-and-by Pevensey and McDermot appeared. McDermot bent down over the girl.

"Do you mind moving away?" he said to Betty.

"Come, dear," said her husband.

She saw that the surgeon would rather examine the girl without her presence, and, turning her back to Miriam, she clasped Pevensey's hand. McDermot came back in a few minutes.

"Well?" said Betty, eagerly.

"Thank God!" said McDermot.

"Why do you speak like that? Is she only slightly injured? Somehow, I felt—I felt that it was dreadful."

"She will not see the morning," was McDermot's answer. "She is suffering from paralysis of the spine—complete and absolute—and one side of her face is badly burnt."

"Then why did you say 'Thank God'?" said Betty, who began to tremble violently.

“Because that poor fellow, Jim Moore, is amongst the killed.”

“Oh, I understand!” said Betty. “They will not be parted. Oh, I am glad!”

“There is one consolation for you—one great consolation,” said McDermot; “she is not suffering the slightest pain. It is impossible after paralysis of the spine. She may recover for a few minutes just at the end, and then——”

“I will stay with her,” said Betty.

“Ought you to stay here all night, darling?” said her husband.

“I will stay,” said the girl. “I will tell her myself that she will meet Jim at the other side, where there is no chance of parting.”

Her voice trembled. She turned away from McDermot and sat on the floor by Miriam’s side. All during that long night Betty sat by Miriam Grey, who had no friends to come to see her; she was all alone. The one who loved her was dead. The girl herself was suffering nothing. She just breathed: no more. Nothing whatever could be done.

McDermot offered to keep Betty company, but she would not have him. “No,” she said, “there are others who may recover and who may need you.

Go to them: stay with them. I am so thankful—so thankful to be with her!”

Professor Power, Miss Spring, Laura and Miss Hughes all appeared presently on the scene. They were not allowed to approach Betty. A screen was put round that part of the room where the dying girl lay.

It was very early in the morning when the soul of Miriam Grey departed. She had, as the surgeon had predicted, a moment's consciousness. She looked around, with her wide-open grey eyes, smiled very faintly at Betty, and said:

“I've had a wonderful dream. Is this my wedding-day?”

“Yes, Miriam,” said Betty, suddenly.

“I am glad,” murmured Miriam. “I am about tired. I'll never have to work any more.”

“Never, Miriam; never again,” said Betty.

Suddenly Miriam looked past her, and her face lit up with intense joy.

“Why—Jim!” she said; “Jim!”

With love in her voice, with hope on her face, with ecstasy in her heart, the mill-girl went forth to meet her bridegroom.



## CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Betty went home that day she went straight to her room, and Pevensey stayed with her.

"I am quite happy," she said to him once or twice. "It would not have been really safe for them down here; it is quite safe for them up there. But I want to be alone; don't let the others come near me just for a little."

So her guests left Betty alone, and she slept, and thought of Miriam, and by the evening was sufficiently refreshed to come downstairs.

The terrible accident had caused a feeling of depression to steal over the entire party, and they were none of them sorry to think of returning to London on the following morning. Betty was too subdued to be any longer a vivacious hostess. If she could have spoken of the thing to others she could have borne it. But that was beyond her power. Once or twice she looked longingly at her husband, and it is possible that the thought entered her mind that she envied Miriam Grey and Jim Moore, for nothing could divide their wedded bliss.

Miss Spring went up to her once and said, in a gentle, changed sort of voice:

"I understand at last about the poor. Here is a check for five hundred pounds. Spend it as you think best."

"Thank you," replied Betty.

But she scarcely looked at Miss Spring, and the check, munificent as it was in amount, scarcely appealed to her.

Miss Hughes took Betty's hand and kissed it.

"I shall always think of you, Mrs. Pevensey, when I think of the angels," said poor Miss Hughes. "Oh, I am so sorry for you!"

"Don't be sorry for me at all," said Betty. "I am not quite myself to-night, but, believe me, I am not unhappy; and you will write to me now and then as you promised?"

"I will, certainly."

"And if you are in trouble at any time you will let me help you?"

"Indeed I will."

"You will always remember that I am your true, true friend?"

"I will always remember," said Miss Hughes.

The Professor's remark to Betty that evening was:

"Mrs. Pevensey, if all women were like you I'd

have taken one of them to wife many years before this. As it is, I am a confirmed old bachelor."

"But you have got a very faithful lady who is devoted to you, and who would do anything in her power to help you," said Betty.

"You mean Miss Hughes?" said the Professor.

"Yes."

"I could never expect to find anyone better. But if only she could play the violin——"

He went away after these last words, and Betty presently retired to her room. She would have no opportunity of saying a word to her guests in the morning, for they were all to leave by a very early train.

Meanwhile, Pevensey and McDermot had a long talk together.

"Now that I truly understand," said McDermot, "the nature of the drug, I am more than ever alarmed and distressed at your taking it. Are you not man enough to abstain?"

"At the present moment," said Pevensey, "I don't feel the slightest inclination to touch it."

"That is not to be marvelled at. You have just had a severe mental shock: but remember, that will pass off. Preston Dykes has told you the nature of the drug?"

"He has."

"I cannot possibly understand why a healthy man like you should deliberately set to work to wreck his constitution."

"I am subjected to great mental disquietude," said Pevensey.

"The drug causes that," was McDermot's remark.

"You will forgive me, but I had that disquietude before I touched the drug."

"Have you a reason for your trouble?"

"I have."

"Will you tell it to me?"

"It is a family matter. I told it to Preston Dykes: I also mentioned it to my wife. It can never be got over. Dykes says that I shall hasten the catastrophe and make it, in fact, an assured thing if I continue to take the drug, and yet I cannot abstain. There are times when I am nearly mad. If you knew my sufferings you would pity me."

"I do, from my heart," said McDermot. "You have all that man can wish for—a happy home, a good income, a most noble wife, and yet you fling everything away. You will die of——"

"Softening of the brain, of course," said Pevensey in a gloomy tone. "There, I think I have explained. Thank you for your advice. You are good; but you stand on a rock, whereas I flounder in the mire. If I could get a firm foundation under

my feet; if this ghastly, most ghastly fear was silent—if, in short, it did not exist, I should be as little influenced by that drug as you are, McDermot. As things are I cannot trust myself, that's the truth."

McDermot and Pevensey were both in the library—that room which had witnessed Pevensey's most terrible fall—and just at that moment a girl rose from her seat by the fire and came forward to meet them. It was Laura. Her face was pale as death.

"I overheard everything you said, Geoffrey," was her remark, "and I am not ashamed to say that I listened on purpose. Well, I think I know how to act now. We are going back to town to-morrow. You will hear from me—or of me—presently. Don't scold. It is a right good thing that I know at last what neither you nor Betty had courage to tell me."

Pevensey followed his sister and seized her arm.

"You dare not do anything!" he said. "You had no right to listen."

"I had—every possible right—as you will know before long."

She wrenched her hand away from him and left the room. McDermot watched her for a minute.

"Your sister is a very fine and brave girl," he said. "I hope you won't be offended when I say that I wish you had half her character and spunk."

“Look here, McDermot,” said Pevensey, grasping his hand, “through a most unfortunate accident, or rather, through Laura’s determination, she has got upon the track of the thing which will wreck her peace as it will wreck mine. She must never, never know. I must go and see my mother. I will go up to town with you all to-morrow. Intolerable as this burden is, I would not have it fall upon Laura.”

## CHAPTER XX

BUT Pevensey was unable to go up to London on the following day owing to Betty's sudden collapse. She had held up bravely until the very last moment, but now her strength completely failed her. Her temperature was high. The doctor was sent for, and insisted on her remaining in bed. Pevensey could not possibly leave his wife, and Laura, who seemed possessed by a strange feeling which caused her to avoid her brother and sister-in-law, started off for London, to get her great relief, without him.

On her way to town she said a few words to Mr. McDermot.

"I consider," said Laura, "that Betty's illness is nothing short of providential."

He looked at her out of his shrewd eyes, and said suddenly:

"Why did you listen last night?"

"There are moments," replied Laura, "when one must be mean in order to be great. I have guessed for some time that Geoffrey is suffering from a wrong impression. I believe I can get to the bottom of that terrible thing which is worrying him,

but until I was quite certain of my ground I could not take any steps."

"You will be doing a noble work if you can relieve the poor fellow's mind," said Mr. McDermot.

"I do not mean to leave a stone unturned in order to effect my object," was her reply. Then she added suddenly: "In your vast experience of life, Mr. McDermot, have you not sometimes come to the discovery that women have greater courage than men?"

He looked at her almost quizzically, a cynical light in his eyes. Then their expression altered.

"Why do you ask me?" he said suddenly.

"Because," she said swiftly, "it is my firm intention to put myself into the fire in order to get Geoffrey out."

"I cannot understand you," was his reply.

She laughed, and her laugh was a little discordant.

"I have had my suspicions for some time," she said. "They will be realities before this night is over; but even at the worst there is no fear of my adopting that terrible source of relief which poor Geoffrey has had recourse to."

"Then you are stronger than he," said the surgeon. "I do not know enough to give you real advice, but if at any time I can help you, will you command me?"



“I will indeed; and I am so glad to know you,” she answered cheerfully.

During the journey back to town, Professor Power was also much exercised in his mind. He was in the same compartment with Laura and McDermot. Miss Spring sat facing him, and Miss Hughes was at his side. Between these two ladies there existed a feud which was very nearly an open one. The Professor, quite unconscious of any possible cause of disagreement between them, was wrapped in meditation. He did not speak to either. Miss Hughes pretended to bury herself in a book. Miss Spring was restless, and once or twice trod on the Professor's toes. He invariably started, with an “I beg your pardon,” which caused Miss Hughes to color hotly, and the Professor to wonder where he could put his feet so that they might not be in the way of the lady who was facing him. Miss Hughes did her very best to feel amiable, but there is no doubt whatever that those angry feelings which stir up strife were occupying her heart; and even the thought of Betty—the remembrance of her goodness and the feeling that she had left her sweet young hostess broken down and ill—could not altogether subdue that jealousy which was consuming her. Again and again she looked at Miss Spring, trying to apprise her various charms. She was rich,

but the Professor thought nothing at all of that. She was old: it was simply ludicrous for the woman to pose as only five-and-thirty. In that respect Miss Hughes had the advantage of Miss Spring. Besides, Miss Hughes saw the Professor daily, whereas Miss Spring could only manage to meet him at intervals.

On the whole, the secretary thought that the advantages lay with her. She had not the slightest idea of marrying her dear Professor, but she did want to keep him from becoming the husband of that atrocious old woman who sat opposite to him.

The journey had very nearly come to an end when something was said, however, by the Professor which raised poor Miss Hughes' jealousy to boiling point.

"There is the sweetest melody running in my head," said Professor Power. "I cannot recall the name, but it keeps repeating itself over and over again. It is like the babbling of a brook in summer, and there is something about it which reminds me of the sunshine in May, the primroses, and the cherry trees in full blossom. I can see those white cherry trees bending over the stream, and I hear the ripple of the water, and I am young once more. You brought it all back to me, dear lady, when you played the violin so exquisitely last night."

Miss Spring felt her heart leap into her mouth.

"I would play to you once again," she said. "It is a pleasure to me to find my simple music appreciated."

"She knows her music isn't a bit simple!" murmured Miss Hughes under her breath.

"I would play to you," continued Miss Spring, "either at my own house or at yours."

"I hardly ever go out; but I would come to you if you could make certain that I should meet no other visitors."

"You shall meet no one else; and I will play the violin unaccompanied. The sort of music you like will sound exquisite even without a pianoforte accompaniment."

"I can play the piano if it is necessary," said Miss Hughes.

The Professor looked at her.

"Can you fit the expression in?" he asked.

"I don't know," she murmured. She felt inclined to say: "Professor, I give you up; this is more than I can stand." But prudence forced her to hold her tongue. Miss Spring, on the contrary, was radiant.

"You will come to-morrow," she said, "at four o'clock to-morrow, and then I will play those melodies which you love. Afterwards you can go. I will not expect you to speak; but you will rest and I will

play to you. I know what music is to the tired brain."

"It conjures up pictures," said the Professor. "I thank you very heartily, and I will come."

If Laura felt anxious, if Betty's head ached incessantly, if poor Miss Hughes was reduced almost to despair, and if Pevensey, left alone, struggled fiercely with temptation, and McDermot wondered and wondered what it all meant, there were at least two happy people that day: one was Miss Spring; the other, Professor Power.

The Professor was in a queer predicament. He loved the music more than he hated the lady, therefore he would go to listen to it. He could shut his eyes so that he did not see her, and the pictures she would conjure up would appeal to him. His tired brain would be rested: he would be in Paradise once more.

Miss Spring was equally in a state of delight. She was an excellent musician, and truly loved music for itself; but she certainly preferred the man to the music. Therefore this pair were more or less playing at cross-purposes.

Miss Hughes, thoroughly miserable, went home to her lodgings and indulged in all those vagaries which the green-eyed monster causes to flare up in a woman's breast. What could she do to keep the

Professor and Miss Spring apart? She had known long ago of this great man's passion for music. If she could get someone else to play for him, perhaps her cause would be won. She guessed truly enough that he did not care for Miss Spring for herself, but that her music, being of a very excellent quality, appealed to a part of him which was always raised to full life by its influence. If she could only find a man to come to the Professor's house in Bloomsbury and play for him there! She knew well that Professor Power disliked going out, that he only dined out on sufferance, that he refused all invitations to afternoon tea, that he disliked fashionable "At Homes," and loathed fashionable ladies. She must not speak against Miss Spring, for that would be giving her own cause away; but if only she could supply her dear Professor with the one thing he needed—a little music in his quiet hours—all would be well.

Miss Hughes amongst her acquaintances numbered a young musical artist of the name of Halbert. He was twenty-five, and had never done much in the world. He was devoted to music, however, and had studied it exhaustively. As Miss Hughes thought of him now her hopes began to rise. She knew that in especial he played the violin. She knew that there was an old piano in one of the Professor's

rooms. She could accompany Halbert, and thus give the Professor the music his soul craved for when he required it. Thus Miss Spring would be forgotten, and the small influence she exercised over him would die out. Time, however, was of great value, for the appointment Miss Spring had made with Professor Power was for the next afternoon.

The good lady was tired and flurried, but she put on her hat once more, dressed, and went out. She was lucky enough to find Halbert at home, and immediately explained part of her mission.

"Are you very busy just now?" she asked.

"No, Miss Hughes," he replied: "I wish I were. It is difficult to get engagements in these days. Every nook and cranny seems crowded, and we who want employment are pushed aside."

"Then will you take a very small commission from me?" said Miss Hughes.

"From you?" said Halbert, staring at the lady in some astonishment.

"I can pay you," she replied, "and I will. I would not ask you to come for nothing. I want you tomorrow to call at Professor Power's house, 17 Keppel Street, and to bring your violin with you. Leave the rest to me, only make a selection of music which is not too deep or too difficult to understand. Will you be with us at half-past three in the afternoon?"

I will pay you five shillings an hour; and I will ask you to remain with us to-morrow for an hour and a half. You will come, will you not?"

"I will come with pleasure; but I cannot possibly take your money. It will be a pleasure for so great a man as Professor Power. Shall I have the felicity of meeting him?"

"That I cannot tell you. I propose that the music shall be conducted in the ante-room, so that he may feel quite free to pace up and down, or rest, just as it pleases him. But I cannot take your time for nothing. The matter is of importance to me. You will not fail me, will you?"

"Certainly I will not fail you; and I am to choose, you say, simple things?"

"Oh, yes; the sort of music that elderly men love—the music that recalls bygone days."

"I think I understand. Well, I can promise to be with you at the appointed time."

## CHAPTER XXI

MISS HUGHES was now comparatively happy, and being tired out with her various emotions and constant exertions, slept soundly that night. The next day there were two ladies busy after their own fashion. Miss Spring was making arrangements for the reception of the Professor. It happened to be her usual "At Home" day, but what mattered that? All visitors, with the exception of Professor Power, were to be denied. From four to six o'clock she would devote herself to him, and to him only.

She knew a young girl of a modest and very retiring disposition, who was a distant cousin of her own, and who could accompany her fairly well. She sent a note to her early in the morning, asking her to come to her house not later than three. This girl's name was Coralie Ransom. She was pretty, young and intelligent, and had a great admiration for Miss Spring. Miss Spring often bestowed some of those dresses she was tired of on little Miss Ransom, who was by no means too proud to accept them. She was clever with her needle, and remodelled them to fit her own juvenile figure. Coralie saw



charms in Miss Spring's faded and got-up face. She believed in her thirty-five years, and as to her music, she thought it simply divine.

When she arrived on the present occasion, Miss Spring met her in a wonderful robe of deep violet velvet. It was a sort of tea-gown, made to fit her really elegant figure, trimmed simply with very rich lace, and so designed as to exhibit the graceful curve of her arm.

Miss Spring had arranged that Coralie, her accompanist, was to be more or less invisible, and a curtain was drawn partly across the room so as to conceal the piano.

"But this is quite an innovation," said the girl. "Why this curtain?"

"I will tell you, dear," said Miss Spring, who was in a state of inward trepidation. "The dear man who is coming to-day to listen to my music"—("and mine," thought Coralie)—"has the greatest dislike to being watched. He is one of the deep thinkers of the age, and has, in short, such a dislike to women in general, and particularly to quite young women, that I do not want him to know that you are in the room. You will play my accompaniment, and he will be unaware of the fact that you are there. When the music is over you will discreetly withdraw by that door at the back of the curtain

and leave him alone with me. You quite understand, Coralie. Afterwards, you and I will have a nice little dinner together, and go to the Opera. They are playing *Lohengrin* to-night, and you will enjoy that."

"Oh, shan't I!" said Coralie, clasping her hands in ecstatic fashion. "How good you are to me, dear cousin!"

"Who would not be good to a pretty, dear little creature like yourself?" said Miss Spring, who was really fond of Coralie after her fashion. "Now, my child, we will go over our music together."

Miss Spring had made a very careful selection. She had avoided music which is termed classical, and had recourse to some settings of old ballads, and to passionate music of the olden times. She had watched the Professor to good purpose while she was at Hillside Rectory, and knew already what his tastes were. He was only musical in the sense that a man would be musical who heard the simple airs which brought back his early youth and childhood.

Miss Spring was an adept at improvisation, and Coralie Ransom had the power of accompanying her almost at will.

"The merest little touch, dear," said Miss Spring, "when I improvise—just a chord here and there to sustain the melody—nothing much, something very

quiet, very soothing. I will always tell you the right key, and you will get on, I know you will."

"Oh, of course," said Coralie: "how wonderful you are! But I should like to see the great Professor Power. I have read some of his books, and delight in them."

"You may look at him, if you like, through the curtain, love. I should be glad to have your opinion afterwards. His is a massive head and face. He is endowed with a great intellect, and it is my mission to soothe and sustain his weary soul."

"Yes, yes; I am sure of it," said Coralie, whose name suited her brilliant cheeks and red lips, and whose little round, fair, dimpled face was in itself like a ray of sunshine.

Coralie was decidedly very pretty, and being only just eighteen, Miss Spring was fully justified in keeping her charms hidden.

Meanwhile, Professor Power forgot all about Miss Spring and his engagement with her that afternoon. His few days' rest in the country had refreshed him, and made him all agog to be hard at work once more. There was a mass of letters to be attended to, and Miss Hughes was happy in replying to them. She had arranged that her friend, Mr. Halbert, should arrive at three o'clock. By that time the bulk of the Professor's work would be

over. He would be inclined for meditation. She could slip into the ante-room and accompany Halbert on the old piano. But—alack and alas! “The best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley.” At a quarter to three there came a note for Miss Hughes in Halbert’s writing.

She tore it open, and read, to her bitter disappointment, that a sudden engagement of a very lucrative nature which had only been offered to him that morning had obliged the musical *artiste* to leave London for Paris, and that he could not expect to be back for at least a fortnight.

Miss Hughes got very red and looked decidedly angry when she read this letter. She felt even inclined to stamp her foot. The Professor, who had finished his work, and was resting in a chair, observed her. He was never curious about anything, and he would not have been curious about her but for the fact that her face grew very red and she seemed much annoyed. He would not dream of asking her what her letter was about, for he considered letters sacred things that ought not to be pried into. But it suddenly occurred to him that in all probability she was tired and wanted rest.

“Now, my dear good soul,” he said, “there is nothing more for you to do for me this day. I have a—at least, I think I have an engagement for

this afternoon. Let me see: I always write things down in my memorandum book."

He rose from his seat. The memorandum book lay on the table near by. Miss Hughes felt inclined to snatch it away and put it into hiding. But where was the use? How much poor women have to endure! How dreadful for Halbert to disappoint her! Why had she only offered him five shillings an hour for his services?

She felt herself trembling on the brink of tears, for the Professor had looked in his book and noted his appointment with Miss Spring.

"Yes," he said, "we both need rest; you in your way, I in mine. I am going to listen to a little music—that simple music that gave me such intense pleasure when I was at Hillside Rectory—at four o'clock this afternoon. Miss—Miss—what is the lady's name? Oh, yes, I recall it—Miss Spring is going to play. Her playing is quite charming—not that I particularly care about the woman, but her playing is delightful. Now, you must go and have a holiday. Don't think of work any more to-day. Just forget me and all our toils together, and come back refreshed, like a dear good soul, to-morrow morning. I shan't need you again to-day. I expect to have a really very pleasant time."

"Oh," said Miss Hughes, "I——"

“What is it, my dear madam?”

“I—I can’t help it—I wish you wouldn’t go.”

“You—wish—that I should not hear a little music which recalls the past?”

“Forgive me,” said Miss Hughes, recovering herself: “I ought not to have said it.”

“You certainly ought not. But I can see that you are sadly overtired. Go and have a rest. I could even be induced to allow you a holiday to-morrow if the music is exceedingly attractive.”

“Oh, I know I shall be perfectly rested by to-morrow,” said Miss Hughes. “Please, Professor, don’t think that it is rest to me not to work for you.”

“My dear, good creature—but of course my work fatigues you. Now go: please do go. Your perturbed face is quite agitating.”

Miss Hughes went. The Professor sat for a little longer in his deep armchair. He had been working very hard, and was really tired. But he was puzzled. Women were kittle cattle. He did not at all like Miss Spring for herself, and he heartily liked Miss Hughes—that is, he found Miss Hughes quite an agreeable, useful, self-sacrificing, unobtrusive sort of person; whereas Miss Spring was a mass of affectation. But then, Miss Spring could rest him when he was tired, and Miss Hughes could not. He had never liked Miss Hughes less

than he liked her to-day when she begged him not to take the very simple enjoyment which he meant to give himself; and of course a gentleman never broke his word to a lady. He wondered a little; then forgot all about Miss Hughes, and at ten minutes to four got into a hansom and drove to Miss Spring's flat.

## CHAPTER XXII

PROFESSOR POWER prided himself on never keeping a lady waiting; and at four to the minute he was ushered into Miss Spring's presence.

Little Coralie Ransom, skilfully concealed behind the heavy plush curtain, was as though she did not exist. Miss Spring came forward.

"This is delightful, Professor!" she said. "And what a merit is punctuality!"

"It is essential, madam," said the Professor, "if one wants to do anything in life. The number of golden hours that are wasted by unpunctual people is past counting."

"How tired you look!" said Miss Spring; but she saw at a glance that her remark did not quite please the Professor, and added: "I will give you a cup of tea, and then we will begin." She poured out tea, which the Professor drank. As he did so, he became self-absorbed. He forgot all about Miss Spring and the room in which he found himself. Agitation stole into his face, and his lofty serene brow looked less serene than usual.

"Can you furnish me, madam," he said, "with a



note-book—any sort of note-book—and a pen and ink?”

Miss Spring was rather surprised at this request, but, ringing a bell, she desired the servant to bring the Professor what he required.

“I left out the whole of one side of an important argument in the dissertation I was writing this morning,” said Professor Power. “You will forgive me for a few minutes. I do wish I had a shorthand writer here. Do you by any chance understand the art?”

“Alas! no,” said Miss Spring.

“My secretary is an admirable shorthand writer,” said the Professor; and Miss Spring felt that she hated Miss Hughes with a deadly hatred.

The Professor looked at her meditatively.

“I wonder——” he began.

“This will never do,” thought Miss Spring. “In another moment he will desire me to send for the woman: that is more than I can stand. Really, great and delightful man that he is, it is tiresome of him to come to my house and to expect me to do shorthand for him.”

Miss Spring thought quickly. The Professor, leaning back in his deep chair, began to write. He was not accustomed to writing his own work. He could have dictated it with perfect ease; but then

there was no one to dictate it to. The woman in the velvet dress was, he said to himself, more or less of a fool. - But—what? The pen dropped from his hand. The paper on which he was writing slid to his knee. He gazed thoughtfully into the fire. The tired look fled from his face. He was back in the old days, for Miss Spring had begun to play very, very softly the gentlest, most soothing rendering of “Ye banks and braes of bonnie Doone.”

The Professor found a lump rising in his throat. He forgot his dissertation, the incomplete argument, the lapse which must have occurred in his memory that morning. He recalled old days, when he was a little boy, and his Scotch mother had walked with him by just such banks and braes. The smell of the heather was in his nostrils, and the sight of the babbling stream was before his eyes. It was as though the hand of bygone youth were laid once more upon his forehead. He was not a tired, overworked, oppressed, and, in many ways, disappointed man: he was a boy, with the rosy glow of hope and youth surrounding him.

Miss Spring glanced once or twice into his face, and smiled to herself. She played on, gliding insensibly from one charming melody to another; the songs of Ireland, the songs of Scotland, the best

known melodies of England were all rehearsed once again for the benefit of one rather tired old man.

Miss Spring had the facility of throwing her soul into what she did. In exercising her great gift of music she even forgot the fact that she was playing to her other half. She was playing for herself. At last the Professor put up his hand.

"It is enough, dear madam," he said. "I thank you."

He rose from his seat. But this was Miss Spring's opportunity. She could not let it pass. There was a swift signal to Coralie, who had really much aided the musical entertainment. Coralie slipped away from the room, and Miss Spring and her other half were alone. She sat down very quietly.

"Don't go yet," she said. "The echo of the music is still in my ears, and, I doubt not, it is in yours. Don't go into the noisy, crowded streets. Stay and rest a little longer."

"You have brought me back from a very long way," said Professor Power. "I thank you with all my heart."

He looked at her. She was a wonderful woman. She was sitting in such a position that only the rose-colored shade of a lamp cast a glow over her face,

and that glow seemed to obliterate her many wrinkles and to take years from her age.

"I don't know how to thank you," repeated the Professor.

"There is one way in which you can," replied the lady.

"And what is that?" he asked. "Is there any small thing I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is," she replied. "You can come again to-morrow. I will play for you again to-morrow."

"I will come," said the Professor. "But that seems a small way of thanking you. It only puts me under a deeper obligation."

"The obligation is on my side," said Miss Spring. "You can scarcely comprehend what it is to play for one who understands as you do. To very few is the true soul of music given."

"I was never considered musical," said Professor Power.

"Ah, my good sir, those who said such things of you knew very little."

"You have brought my love of music out," said the Professor. "Well, I must go now."

"At four o'clock to-morrow then," said Miss Spring.

"Yes, dear madam; at four to-morrow."

The Professor went away. He hailed a hansom and drove back to his house in Keppel Street. On the way home he whistled the air of "Annie Laurie" under his breath. He did not whistle well, but the exercise pleased him. During the rest of the evening he forgot all about that paper which he was writing for the *Edinburgh Review*. He could only think of old times.

During the night the melodies Miss Spring had played for him accompanied him through his dreams. He had never married, but he had in reality a big and tender heart. His mother had died when he was a comparatively elderly man, and in her lifetime he had never needed any other woman's society. He had a little sister once, who had now been in her grave for long years. He could not recall his father.

Since his mother's death domestic life had never appealed to him. He did not think of marriage at all. He did not think of women at all. The first woman who had really stirred his heart was Betty Pevensey. But now there was someone who caused the echoes of the past to return to him. They surrounded him. The veil was lifted. Old times had come back.

When Miss Hughes returned the next morning to her usual work, she found the Professor seated

in a tattered armchair by the unswept hearth, murmuring to himself some words written by a dead-and-gone poet. The words were these:

“Had we never loved so kindly,  
 Had we never loved so blindly;  
 Never met, or never parted,  
 We had ne'er been broken-hearted.”

The Professor had a deep, and sonorous voice, and the words of extraordinary meaning fell upon Miss Hughes' ears as a sort of knell. She came in briskly. The Professor turned to her.

“I feel sentimental to-day,” he said. “I am ever so much better—quite rested, in fact. I am going there again this afternoon—four to the minute. She is a wonderful woman. I never heard such music. It really is a divine gift. The rolling back of the curtain, the restoration of youth, to see oneself young, with all a man's experience to aid one in the vision, is a sight worth beholding. I must be there sharp at four. Had we never loved so blindly——”

“It occurred to me, Professor,” said Miss Hughes, trying to steady her voice, “that in your paper of yesterday you had not quite explained your new system of ethics with regard to——”

The Professor looked up at her. Scales seemed to drop from his eyes.

“Good Heavens!” he exclaimed. Miss Spring receded into the background. Once more he was the philosopher, the thinker, the writer, who unravelled the secret recesses of the human heart.

“Did you send that paper?” he said. “Did you post it?”

“I did not,” replied Miss Hughes. “I took the liberty, Professor Power, to keep it back. One day cannot greatly matter. On reading it over I saw that you had missed one side of the argument.”

“You are a good creature—excellent!” said Professor Power. “You shall sit here and read it aloud to me. Never met—and never parted—I must really rouse myself, Miss Hughes. I am absorbed with those old songs—those unforgotten, never-to-be-forgotten melodies. Yes, yes—begin, begin. My dear good friend, what should I do without you!”

“I—dear good friend indeed!” thought poor Miss Hughes; “and he is going to her again this afternoon! The thing becomes unbearable. I shall have to open his eyes—and yet—I dare not. The Professor is the best, the greatest of men, but there are liberties one dare not take in connection with him. Oh, what am I to do!”

The Professor and Miss Hughes spent a busy

morning. As soon as ever he became absorbed in his work he forgot Miss Spring and her music as completely as though these two important items in his present-day existence were not in the world. He was once again the absorbed thinker, the exalted writer. Miss Hughes exerted herself as she had seldom done before. But the morning's work came to an end, and there were no possible means by which she could prevent Professor Power from going to see Miss Spring. All her future was in jeopardy.

With a woman's penetration she saw that when Miss Spring had secured her prey she would render the dear Professor a miserable man. Miss Hughes said over and over to herself:

"I don't want him—not for a single moment: but, at the same time, *she* shall not have him—not if I can prevent it."

Suddenly Miss Hughes thought of Laura Pevensey. Could she help her? Was it worth while invoking her aid? She was not like Betty, but she was at least clever, and kind, and true. It occurred to Miss Hughes that she might go to see Laura that afternoon.



## CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN Laura Pevensey returned home she found her mother ill. She was suffering, in fact, from a sharp attack of influenza, and Laura's intention of "bearding the lioness in her den" was frustrated, for the time at least.

She was seated, therefore, in the drawing-room, feeling restless, dissatisfied, and with many anxious thoughts with regard to Geoffrey and his wife, when, to her great astonishment, Miss Hughes was announced.

Miss Hughes entered in that quick, somewhat agitated way which usually characterized her. She was absolutely indifferent with regard to dress, and had forgotten to smooth her hair, and had put on her neat toque a little crooked. But Laura was the sort of girl who preferred to see people not too immaculate in their appearance, or too fashionable. She liked Miss Hughes, and gave her a hearty welcome.

"How are you?" she said; "I am very glad to see you. My mother is not well, and I am staying indoors, although I long to be out. But the good

mater requires me to visit her from time to time, and I really don't want to be selfish. I wish her to get well, too, as fast as she can, because we have several matters to talk over together. I hope you are not afraid of influenza, for I think Lady Pevensey has had a slight attack."

"Not in the very least," said Miss Hughes. "I never take anything. I have no time," she added.

"Dear, dear!" said Laura. "How I envy you! What I suffer from is too much time. Miss Hughes, has it ever occurred to you—do take this comfortable chair by the fire—*has* it ever occurred to you that the world is pretty evenly divided after all? There are the dull, dull rich people, and the interesting, overworked poor people. Now which would you prefer to be? I know where my choice would lie."

"I am quite happy in my life," said Miss Hughes; "that is, if it is not taken from me."

"What can you mean by that? Your life taken from you! Is anyone preparing to assassinate you?"

Miss Hughes smiled faintly. Laura had served her with tea. The room was comfortable: the fire glowed warm: the lamp shed a soft light, and had it not been for the agonizing memory of what was

going on at Miss Spring's flat the poor lady might have been absolutely happy.

"There's the killing of the mind," she said; "there's the ruining of the heart."

"Oh, please don't talk in metaphors," said Laura. "What is wrong? Most people have a grievance, but I imagined that you were one of the few who did not indulge in the luxury."

"Nor did I. No, I was a happy woman; I worked hard; but I didn't mind that."

"You speak in the past tense: are not you still a happy woman?"

"That is just it: I am a very miserable one."

"What has happened?" asked Laura. "Do tell me. I find my life so dull that any story would be acceptable at the present moment."

"I have come to you, Miss Pevensey, for your help. It was in this house he met her."

"Now, indeed, this is truly exciting," said Laura. "He—met—*her*! Who is he; and who is she?"

"Can't you guess?" said Miss Hughes. "Did you not see for yourself when we were at Hillside Rectory how absorbed Professor Power was by Miss Spring's music, and what a dead set Miss Spring was making at him? Oh, Miss Pevensey, don't laugh at me! I have worked for long years now for that most saint-like, that kindest of men. She

will secure him if no one interferes. She is willing him to her by the fatal power of her music. When he is her husband he will be wretched; and I——” The poor lady burst into tears.

“Don’t cry,” said Laura. “Tears never do a scrap of good. Tell me everything, won’t you, from beginning to end. I always liked Miss Spring, although I thought her an oddity; but really you speak as though she were a siren. Now, remember, I am quite in the dark. I did not notice anything very special at the Rectory: in fact, my mind was quite absorbed by other matters. Now, what have you to tell me?”

Miss Hughes waxed eloquent. She described the Professor as he was before he knew Miss Spring. She described his condition that morning when she arrived to do her usual work. She told Laura where he was now disporting himself.

“She will get him,” said the poor woman.

“And would it be such a very dreadful thing if she did?” asked Laura.

“She would not make him happy—I know it! Please don’t think I am selfish. I suppose I could get something else to do. But already she hates me, and I must honestly say that I detest her.”

“This is really serious,” said Laura, after a pause. “But I think I can at least promise you that

if any such thing as you fear were to occur, my sister-in-law, Betty, could find work for you at the Rectory. You know Betty well—I think you love her?”

“Who would not?” said poor Miss Hughes, and the tired look suddenly left her face. “Are you telling me the truth?” she added.

“Yes, I believe I am—that is, were such an exceedingly remote thing to happen as that the Professor should marry Miss Spring. But I tell you what I will do. I will drive straight off now to see my friend, and I will bring the Professor back to dinner with me. He loves having an evening alone with me now and then. We have been friends for a long time; and if I don’t open his eyes a little, I will at least manage to find out for you in what direction the wind really blows. Now, don’t be nervous; of course I will never for a single moment reveal to him that you have been to see me.”

“You are a good soul—I knew you were good; and it occurred to me to-day that I could not do better than come to see you. As to your sister-in-law—she is one of the sweetest women in all the world: but, to tell you the truth, I should not like to give up the dear Professor.”

“I do not believe for a single moment that you will have to do so,” said Laura. “And now, good-

bye; for if I don't hurry I shall not catch Professor Power at Miss Spring's."

Miss Hughes, much relieved, took her departure; and Laura rang the bell and desired the servant to order a hansom. She went up to her mother for a few minutes before going out.

"Well, Madra, and how are you?" she asked. "Oh, I can see that you are much better. I want to have a little talk with you to-morrow morning—one of our straight talks, you understand; no getting out of it, dear. You know me well, don't you?"

Lady Pevensey looked up at her daughter with that silly, frightened expression in her eyes which often characterized her when she was alone with Laura.

"I wish you were not so masterful, and so man-nish," she said.

"My dear, good mother, I cannot help the way I am made. But, I assure you, I am quite enjoying my life lately. I have so much to do in helping others."

"Well, you don't spend much of your time with me," replied the invalid. "If it were not for my novels, and the services of my maid, I should have a very dull time."

"I will see you again this evening. I am off to get Professor Power to dine with me."

“Really and truly, Laura! That is not correct. You will have the Professor—an unmarried man—to dine with you alone!”

“Yes, darling, I think so,” replied Laura. “I believe we shall have a very pleasant evening. And now, adieu.”

Lady Pevensey sighed when her obstinate daughter left her; but she had learned long before now that it was absolutely useless to oppose Laura in any way whatsoever. Laura ran downstairs. A hansom was waiting for her, and she drove quickly to Miss Spring’s flat.

The time for the music was over, but the time for retrospect had not yet passed away. Coralie Ransom had just let herself out by the front door as Laura arrived.

“There’s no good in your telling me that your mistress is not at home,” said the determined young lady to the servant who opened the door. “I will find my own way to the drawing-room, so pray don’t announce me.”

This she speedily did, and pushed aside a velvet *portiere* as the Professor was rising from his seat and was in the act of taking his hostess’ fair hand in one of his. The shaded rose light, the softened rich color of the dress she wore, the faint flush of excitement on the faded cheeks of the spinster had

all an extremely becoming effect. Even Laura said to herself: "Caroline Spring looks *almost* like a girl."

She came in briskly.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said; "but I happened to hear that Professor Power was visiting you this afternoon, Caroline, and as I particularly want to see the Professor, I took the liberty of calling."

Laura's voice, so animated and clear and ringing, seemed to permeate the room with a breath of fresh air. The Professor looked from the woman who was no longer young to the girl who was in her first bloom. He liked Laura, but then all her world did like Laura Pevensey. He held out his hand at once.

"I have had a rare treat," he said. "Miss Spring has been so kind. She has been playing for me. We have been in the past together: have we not, Miss Spring?"

"In the delightful, the beautiful, the golden past," said Caroline Spring.

"Well, for my part," said Laura, "I don't care much about the past: I am so thoroughly happy in the present. And now, Professor, please, you've got to come home with me."

"Home with you—my dear lady?"

"Yes; you have got to dine with me alone. Caroline, there's no use in your opposing. The thing is



settled. Mumsie's in bed with the 'flue. I'm by myself. I won't ask you, Caroline, for really, any more of the music of the past would make our good Professor incapable of work. I have some important matters to talk over with him; and I know, Professor Power, you won't be so ungallant as to refuse a lady."

"But do you insinuate that I am to dine with you?" asked Professor Power.

"Most certainly you are: and I can promise that the dinner, although small, will be *recherche*."

"But my dress!" The Professor looked down at his very shabby toilet.

"I will excuse the dress," said Laura, "for the pleasure of your company. The fact is, I want to talk to you a little bit about Betty and her husband, and—and about other matters. Now please come at once; for although I have plenty of money, I don't care to keep a hansom driver waiting longer than is necessary. The fact is, he is too extortionate in his demands on such occasions."

"Oh, dear, dear!" said the Professor, who was a saving man, "that will never do. Yes, I will come immediately."

"And to-morrow I shall have the pleasure of seeing you," said Miss Spring.

"Yes, yes—at least, I think so."

"You have not heard the 'Lorelei' yet," said Miss Spring. "I have a special selection prepared for to-morrow."

"I will come, my good lady, if it is not trespassing too much on your time."

"That is impossible," she replied, "when we both love the same things."

She gave Laura a glance which that young lady received with a broad wink of intense amusement; and the next moment the Professor was hurried into the lift and downstairs where the hansom was waiting for him.

Laura, during her brief visit, had taken Miss Spring's measure.

"After all," she said to herself, "it is just a question as to which of those poor women want Professor Power the most. I am strongly inclined to think that Caroline Spring may find her other half in another direction, and I could promote that, if necessary. But although Miss Hughes might be intensely useful to Betty, her niche is with the Professor, and I don't mean her to be ousted from it. Yes, I think I can manage it."

Laura was a remarkably clever girl, and had her own way with regard to most things. She did not talk much in the hansom. What was the use of raising one's voice and shouting when you could not

be heard owing to the din of the traffic? But when they got into the house she gave the Professor every comfort, and a new book to read until dinner was ready. The solitude of two did not in the least discompose either the elderly Professor or the up-to-date young lady; and when the meal was over, and Laura had been to bid her mother good-night, she came downstairs resolved to put a spoke in Miss Spring's wheel and to aid Miss Hughes to the utmost of her ability.

## CHAPTER XXIII

LAURA generally succeeded with what she did because she was never the least afraid either of herself or of what she was about to say. She was frank, outspoken, and infinitely courageous. In consequence of these attributes everyone liked the high-spirited girl. There was not a scrap of affectation about her. Men were at ease in her presence, for she was absolutely free from self-consciousness. Women liked her because she was never jealous of them. Only a few, her mother amongst them, considered Laura little too mannish; but Laura had not the least idea of departing from her own standard of what she considered right and agreeable for anyone living.

Now when she drew her chair forward, she invited the Professor to smoke.

“Oh, not in your drawing-room, my dear Miss Laura,” was his remark.

“Yes, if I give you leave,” was her reply. “Mums is better, but won’t be down for a day or two. Long before she can manage to come downstairs again the little perfume of your fragrant tobacco will have

departed. So light a pipe, dear Professor—or have a cigar, just as you please.”

The Professor hated cigars, and loved his pipe. He never went anywhere without his pipe, and accordingly, ere long, he felt very nearly as blissful in Lady Pevensey's most elegant drawing-room as he had felt when Miss Spring was wafting him back to the “Banks and braes of bonnie Doone.” Laura watched him for a minute or two, then she said:

“You did not smoke, did you, when you were at Miss Spring's to-day?”

He started, and took the pipe from his mouth.

“Why, certainly not!” he answered. “I should not dream of smoking in the presence of a lady, unless, like yourself, my dear Miss Laura, she gave me leave.”

“I mean to have a cigarette with you,” said Laura.

She took a little box from the mantelpiece, proceeded to light one, and smoked daintily. After another pause, she said:

“I happen to know that Miss Spring detests the smell of tobacco.”

“Ah!” said the Professor. He made no further response of any kind, and Laura sat still, enjoying her own little whiff of the fragrant weed. After a time she said:

"I presume you smoke a good deal at home, and that you never consider dear, kind Miss Hughes."

"I!" said the Professor, starting. "But I consider her invariably. She is an excellent creature."

"But you smoke in her presence, don't you?"

"Yes—yes: she—she likes it."

"How lucky for you!" said Laura. "Some ladies can't bear it."

"To tell the truth," said the Professor, moving restlessly in his chair, "I have never consulted her. I have smoked for years when she was by, and she has not complained."

"I am sure she likes it," said Laura, with emphasis. "She is the sort of woman who would. I think I will send her by you a little box of cigarettes. I have some of a very mild sort."

"I don't think she would care for them," said the Professor. "I really feel as if I ought not to finish this pipe, my dear young lady."

"You will be a great goose if you don't, Professor, for I adore the smell, and the nice, cloudy sort of glamour which tobacco smoke makes in a room. The fact is, I am a very mannish girl, and mother doesn't at all appreciate me for it."

"You are a remarkably nice girl," said the Professor. Then he got very red, for it was not his way to pay compliments.

“What a charming woman Miss Spring is!” said Laura, after a pause.

The Professor looked at her with a puzzled expression between his eyes.

“Miss—Spring—*charming*?” he said.

“Yes, don’t you find Caroline Spring charming? I should have thought there was no doubt whatever with regard to your view on the matter.”

“I like her music very much,” said the Professor.

“But she—the lady herself,” continued Laura; “you cannot dissociate her from her music, can you?”

“The fact is—I do,” said the Professor. “Miss Spring, without her violin, is——”

“What?” asked Laura.

“A lady, my dear Miss Laura, of—well—of—of *uncertain age*.”

Laura laughed.

“And when she plays those ravishing airs?”

“I forget all about her; I only listen to the music.”

“That’s rather hard on her,” said Laura.

“Hard on her! She likes to play for me. I must give her the credit of being exceedingly good-natured.”

Laura rose from her seat.

“You are a very blind old man, Professor Power,” she said. “Now, why don’t you, when you want

music, go to Queen's Hall, or some other place where you will hear the finest music in the world?"

"But that's just what I don't want. I hate the finest music in the world. I want the simple lovely airs that Miss Spring renders so divinely."

"All right," said Laura. "You are quite right: she does play beautifully. Nevertheless, please remember that without her music she is a lady—of uncertain age: and—dear Professor—you can't go to see her every day, for you know that people—will——"

"That—what?" said the Professor. His face turned crimson. He dropped his pipe. Laura stooped, calmly took it up and gave it back to him.

"That Mrs. Grundy will have her little say," remarked the young lady in a cheerful tone. "But I don't suppose you mind that a bit, do you?"

The Professor resumed his smoke. He was absolutely silent. After a time he turned the conversation by asking Laura some question with regard to Betty and her husband. How was Pevensey? Was he better? What was wrong?

But Laura refused to tell him that anything was wrong.

"Things will be right very soon," she answered, and her young face grew grave as she uttered the words.



By-and-by Professor Power got up and made his adieu. He went back to his house in Keppel Street, and, truth to tell, did not go to bed until a late hour that night. On the contrary, he paced up and down his study, deep in meditation.

“Mrs. Grundy!—a lady of uncertain age!” He must not go to see her every day. People would—would talk, talk—talk—about him!

Before he retired for the night, he wrote a brief letter to Miss Spring.

“DEAR MADAM:—I thank you for the pleasure I have enjoyed in listening to your divine gift, but find it impossible, owing to stress of work, to come to see you again.”

He thought for a little time of adding the words “for the present,” but finally left them out. He signed the letter, “Yours sincerely, JAMES POWER.”

The next morning, when Miss Hughes arrived on the scene, he said to her, in a casual manner:

“By the way, I have not all these years once asked you if you objected to my constant habit of smoking.”

“I love you to smoke,” said Miss Hughes.

“Then that is all right. I happened to dine yesterday with young Laura Pevensey. What a fine

girl she is; but a little advanced—don't you think?—in her views. She absolutely smoked a tiny cigarette herself, and sent a packet to you through me. There it is."

"Oh, I have a horror of women smoking," said Miss Hughes. "It was very kind of Miss Pevensey, of course, but——"

"By the way, Miss Hughes, you can leave the cigarettes unsmoked. I agree with you; I prefer the lady who does not smoke, but who likes her male companions to indulge in the luxury. I mean to be very busy for some little time, and shall require your services until five o'clock for the next week. We will make some difference in the pay, my good soul. Now, not a word. How admirably you suit me, Miss Hughes!"

## CHAPTER XXV

LADY PEVENSEY was quite aware that Laura wanted to say something to her. She was very much afraid of her daughter at these times. There were often moments when grim Fear knocked at the heart of this worldly-minded woman. She could manage most people, but she had never yet been quite able to manage the bright, independent, gay young daughter who was so unlike herself in character.

On the morning after the day when Laura had, as she hoped, arranged matters satisfactorily for Professor Power, she entered her mother's bedroom, desired the maid to go away, and faced her parent.

"I have been down at the Rectory. You know that, don't you?"

"Why, of course, Laura. How can you doubt it? You came back and found your poor old mother ill."

"Yes; but you are quite well enough to hear me now. Geoff is in a most unsatisfactory state. The

promise which I made to you I don't intend to keep any longer."

"Laura, you would not make a promise and break it?"

"Under the circumstances—yes," said Laura, in her defiant voice. "You had no right ever to ask me to keep the secret which I obtained from you by a mere accident. Geoffrey shall see the photograph, and read the letter, before many hours are over. Oh, yes, mother, you can bear it: don't tell me that you can't. The thing is killing Geoff, but it shall never kill me. Geoff will be all right when his mind is relieved of an intolerable load. I mean to set his mind at rest, and I am going out now in my motor-car to wire for them both to come to stay with us for a couple of nights. I will send such a message that Betty will get her husband to come; so prepare for a scene, my dearest mother. You will have a little bit of unpleasantness to go through, but you will be much happier when this is over."

"Laura! Laura!" called out her distracted mother; "you will not play me false? You know quite, quite well that you would never have got that secret but through an accident."

"I keep my word," said Laura. "If you had not done what I know you did before Geoffrey's mar-

riage I should never have troubled about it—there seemed no necessity. But as you acted in the way you did, there is nothing for it now but to tell Geoff and Betty the simple truth. There, mother, I have made up my mind. I will save Geoffrey, come what may.”

Laura left the room. Lady Pevensey lay back on her pillows. Her heart was beating fast. What was she to do with such a terrible, such a tempestuous, such a determined daughter?

## CHAPTER XXVI

“GEOFF,” said Betty, early in the afternoon of that same day, “here’s a telegram from Laura.”

The Rev. Geoffrey Pevensey was in his study. He had fought so far with grim temptation, and had not failed, but each moment the power to abstain from the one thing which gave his tortured mind relief seemed to grow weaker and weaker. The very fact of being more or less occupied with the poor and suffering added to his own mental distress. But for Betty, who walked with him, talked to him, read with him, was always bright, and always apparently happy, he must have succumbed long since.

Now she came briskly forward.

“This is from Laura,” she said. “Read it.”

The message was short, as telegraphic messages mostly are. It ran as follows:

“Please come to town by next train. Have something very important to tell you both.—LAURA PEVENSEY.”

"We can't possibly go, Betty," said the Rector.

"But why not?" said Betty.

Pevensey mentioned several important engagements which he had for that evening.

"We must think first of my duty here," he said. "It seems no time since I was in town. Whatever happens, I hope I shall never neglect my parish."

"Nevertheless," said Betty, speaking in her quick, earnest way, "I think this telegram ought to be attended to. Laura is the last person to wire for nothing at all. She wants us; and we ought to go."

"Well, darling," said her husband; "you can go."

"No, Geoffrey," she replied. She laid her hand on his shoulder. "I will not leave you alone; you must come with me."

"But there's the choir practice, and the new organist is the reverse of satisfactory, and Mr. Jessop, our fresh curate, is to preach for the first time at our evening service. I promised to be present in order to introduce him afterwards to some of the sidesmen. It is very inconvenient. Another day will do. After all, I know Laura better than you do, Betty."

"The messenger is waiting for a reply," said Betty; "I do wish you would come; and I can easily look up a train," she continued. "We can just hear

whatever Laura wants to say and return to-morrow morning."

The Rector looked disturbed. He did not want to disappoint his wife, but he wondered why she was so anxious that he should go to London. Just at that moment, while they were debating over the reply to the telegram, there came again the swift and familiar telegraphic knock at the Rectory front door, and Helen entered, bearing two fresh little yellow missives on a salver.

"It never rains but it pours," said Betty.

The Rector desired the last telegraph messenger to wait. Helen left the room, and he tore open the yellow envelopes. One was from McDermot.

"Your sister has met with an accident. Come to London by next train."

The second telegram was from Lady Pevensey.

"Awful trouble. Laura very ill. Come immediately, both of you."

Pevensey looked at Betty. Her face had grown white. She was clinging to the rail of a chair. Now she sank into her seat.

"I have had dreadful dreams of late about Laura," she said. "Oh, Geoffrey, dear, we must give up everything and go."

"Of course we will go," said the Rector. "This



alters matters. Get the time-table, Betty. We'll look up the first possible train to London."

While Betty was searching for the time-table, the Rector himself answered the two telegrams. He assured the surgeon, McDermot, and also his mother, that they would be at Lady Pevensey's house that evening. Betty called out the trains.

"If we start in an hour from now we can get to London by ten o'clock to-night," she said.

The messages were despatched, and the Rector went off to make what arrangements he could with regard to his clerical duties. It seemed to him as he walked through the dismal streets of Dartminster that a change, unexpected, impossible to define, was about to take place, and that the hand of his gay, brilliant young sister was to achieve it. Temptation seemed far off and remote. A new sense of manliness was already inspiring him. He could not help thinking: "Oh, if I could get rid of that intolerable fear, that maddening curse, and devote myself with all my best energies to the work of this great parish." He was not really nervous about Laura, but he now wanted indescribably to be with her.

When he came back to Betty he looked more like himself than she had seen him for a long time.

"The accident cannot be much," he said, as they were being whirled to town.

Betty said nothing. She did not agree with Geoffrey. McDermot would not have wired if there was no cause. Lady Pevensey's telegram might doubtless be an exaggerated statement, but the surgeon's view of the illness was fraught, to Betty's sensitive heart, with disaster.

"Dear Laura," she kept saying constantly to herself.

It so happened that there had been a long delay in the delivery of the first telegram, consequently all three had reached the Rectory practically at the same time. But neither Pevensey nor his wife knew anything about that.

When, between ten and eleven that night, they arrived at Lady Pevensey's house in Mayfair, the poor lady, who had come downstairs and forgotten her influenza, met them.

"Ah, here you are!" she said, and she took the hand, first of her son, then of her daughter-in-law. "Come in! come in! I knew of course you would come. This is too awful. When I last saw Laura she was well and strong as I have seldom seen her; very obstinate, too—but that she always was. Oh, how mysterious are the dealings of Providence!"

Lady Pevensey's dress was in great disorder. Her hair, generally so beautifully arranged, was untidy. Her face was flushed. Pevensey, who in moments

of trouble was always at his best, took his mother's hand and led her into the drawing-room.

"Betty and I have come," he said. "You don't look well yourself."

"Well," said poor Lady Pevensey, bursting into tears, "I have been at death's door: but what can one do when one's own child—one's very *own* child—is—is—dying?"

"Dying, mother!—what can you mean?" said Pevensey.

Betty's face turned very white.

"How can I bear it!" said the poor woman. "I am nearly distracted. Laura would go out in her motor, and of course the horrid thing skidded. The accident took place close to St. George's Hospital, and she was carried there at once. Mr. McDermot has been here—you know he is on the staff at St. George's—and told me that her spine was injured. She came to herself almost directly, however, and said that on no account was she to be brought home. She is the very queerest girl. It seemed so strange to me that a child of mine should be ill and in hospital."

"But it is the very best place for her," said Pevensey. "Tell me all you can about her quickly, mother. Betty will look after you; but I must go to Laura at once."

“That queer Mr. McDermot thinks badly of her,” said Lady Pevensey; “not that he has said it in so many words, but I am convinced that he does think very badly of her. I have the very strangest thing of all to tell you now. She has been asking over and over to see you, Geoff, and she also inquired for Betty, but she won’t see me—she won’t see her own mother. Ill as I was, I went in my brougham to the hospital, but the only reply I got was that the doctors have strictly forbidden her to be excited. You will go to her, late as it is, Geoff. I don’t know whether you will be allowed to see her, but if you are admitted, speak to her on account of her conduct. It is so unnatural of her not to wish to have her own mother with her when she is so alarmingly, so dangerously ill.”

“Of course I will do my best, mother,” said Pevensey. “Can you get a hansom called for me? It is late, and I ought not to delay.”

Betty looked at her husband in wonder. He had looked so ill and worn during the journey, but now his dejection had vanished. There was the most terrible news, and yet that very news had roused him, had caused him to cast off the mantle of intense depression which had rendered his life such a burden. He was once more the stalwart young Briton, the brave, noble, sympathizing priest who had won

her young affections. His eyes were bright and steady. In his thought about Laura he had forgotten himself. Betty felt at that moment that she almost blessed Laura for having an accident.

“Had I not better go with you, Geoffrey?” she said.

“No, no, my dear! you must remain with me,” said Lady Pevensey. “I am weak and ill, and I have been alone all day, and I simply cannot bear things any longer. Geoffrey will go, and if he can he will see the poor child. I suppose he will be allowed to, as she has been calling for him from the first.”

As Lady Pevensey spoke, she opened the door of Laura’s boudoir. It was not furnished in the young-lady style. It was bare of all attempt at ornamentation, and contained cricket bats, tennis rackets, hockey sticks, and other indications of manly sport.

“You know Laura’s character,” began Lady Pevensey. “She would have a motor-car. How the accident occurred I cannot possibly tell, but it seems that when the car skidded it came in collision with a huge dray, and one of the wheels went over the poor child’s body. They say that her spine is injured.”

“What?” cried Pevensey.

"They say it is paralyzed, and Mr. McDermot quite hinted that there was danger." Lady Pevensey's voice shook. "I don't believe it," she continued. "No one as bright and full of life as Laura always is could be in danger. She has just got a bad shock and will get over it in a few days. Besides, the nurse says she is quite cool and collected. Since the first minute or two she has been conscious. That shows that her brain is not affected. Poor child, she was always different from others, and she shows her queerness now in refusing to see me, her mother. But go to her, Geoffrey. You must not mind any odd things she says. You ought not to allow her to speak much; but just persuade her to see me. Tell her, if you like, that I have something important to say to her."

"You understand, of course, what this means?" said Geoffrey.

"Oh, now you're beginning to look solemn; you want to frighten me out of my wits," said Lady Pevensey.

"No, I do not," replied her son, sternly; "but you must know the truth. If Laura's spine is paralyzed there is no hope of her life. To conceal the truth would be wrong, mother, and I, for one, cannot do it."

Just for an instant his flashing dark eyes met those of Betty.

"I will go to Laura at once," he continued, "and come back and tell you what McDermot thinks and what the opinion of the other doctors is. Betty, dear, you had better stay with mother."

"Very well," said Betty.

Lady Pevensey sank into a chair and began to weep feebly.

"My poor Laura!" she said. "I don't believe it. Do you, Betty?"

"Oh, people always exaggerate things, don't they?" said Betty, trying to speak cheerfully.

Lady Pevensey was a woman who could not endure gloom. She could talk for hours about her own ailments, but the ailments of other people were a trial she could not sustain. The small flag of hope which Betty held out was enough to cause her to smile.

"Yes," she said; "you are quite right. I am glad you are with me. You're a very, very nice girl. I always admired you immensely. Your face is so bright, too, and you have such a pretty color. Dear Laura and I admire you greatly. Laura will be back with us in a few days, I am sure of that. But, Betty, there's just one thing I should say: how can

you stand Geoffrey in some of his *moods*? Poor fellow—alas! he must expect to be the victim . . .”

Betty, who had been sitting down, now rose and went swiftly towards her mother-in-law. She took both her hands and held them firmly.

“Never say those words again!”

“What do you mean?” said Lady Pevensey. She looked at Betty in alarm.

“You know what I mean. Whatever you may happen to think about my husband, you are not to say your thoughts aloud either to him or to me. Do you hear?”

“You frighten me,” said the lady.

“Promise,” said Betty.

Lady Pevensey began to cry.

“Promise,” said Betty again. She held the two weak white hands with firmness. “I must have your promise,” she continued. “I will leave you if you don’t give it. I will go straight to St. George’s Hospital. I will follow Geoffrey. Laura has asked for me as well as for Geoffrey. Laura is worth fifty of you.”

“Oh, but you dare not leave me all alone!” said the miserable woman. “Yes, I promise; of course, of course I promise. Poor, dear, brave Laura said that I ought never to have told. Well, yes, I promise I won’t speak of it. Don’t flash your eyes at



me. Dear Laura was so angry with me only this morning. But now let us come into the next room and have some food."

"Thank you," replied Betty. "I am very hungry: I should like food."

Lady Pevensey took Betty's hand and led her into the dining-room.

## CHAPTER XXVII

PEVENSEY could not account for his own sensations. Perhaps, next to his wife, he loved Laura better than anyone in the world. She had been his friend, his best friend all his life. He remembered their childhood together, their happy times. She was younger than he by three years, but had always been somewhat old for her age, full of spirit, endowed with the essence of pure love for adventure. It seemed to him impossible that one so gay, so bright, should be lying now at the point of death. He could not realize it, and yet he did realize it fully.

He had bade her good-bye a day or two ago with scarcely a thought, for that overmastering fear which possessed him kept him from thinking much of others. He was absorbed in himself. Now, that farewell seemed removed by a long cycle of time, put away, in fact, into immeasurable distance, and the present hour occupied the whole of the clergyman's horizon. Only that morning he lived altogether for himself. He himself, in monster form, seemed to fill the great world. To-night there was no room for his own personality to come in at all. Laura

filled the world; Betty filled the world; his poor, weak mother, after a fashion, filled the world. Those who suffered, those who were about to die, required him, as a priest of the most high God, to come to their aid. He was coming; he would not hold back. He had no room for personalities, nor for fear in his breast. In short, the sudden blow had put Geoffrey Pevensey on his feet. He was himself—his own self once more—the self he had been before his mother had poisoned his mind and blotted out all hope from his horizon.

He was taken at once to the private ward where Laura was lying. It was a cheerful room, well furnished, and with a bright fire in the grate. When Pevensey saw his sister he started, and the color flew into his cheeks. She looked bright, as though she were quite well; her eyes filled with a smile when she saw him.

“Oh, there you are, you old darling!” she said. “I was just longing for you; come and sit by me, won’t you? Nurse, this is my brother; I should like to be alone with him for a little.”

“Certainly, ma’am,” replied the nurse, withdrawing at once, and closing the door of the ward behind her.

“Ah!” said Laura, with a sigh of exquisite pleasure, “I am so delighted to see you!”

Pevensey was still conscious of the peculiar shock which the sight of his sister had caused him. He noticed with almost terror the color in her cheeks and the bright light in her eyes. She was ill—in danger—and yet she looked in radiant health. She was lying flat on her back, and lay very still.

“Sit down by me, Geoff,” she said.

He drew a chair forward and sat down without a word.

“Why don’t you speak?” she said, her gay, brave eyes smiling at him.

“My dearest Laura,” he said then. “My dear, dearest sister, this is quite too terrible. But, my dear, you don’t *look* ill, you look well—very well.”

She gave a radiant smile.

“I have no pain,” she said; “I feel nothing whatever of discomfort, except that I cannot move, but I am paralyzed from below the waist. My back is, I believe, broken. There’s no hope for me. I got Mr. McDermot to tell me. I said I wished for the truth. He replied that I might linger for a day or two, but the paralysis was complete, and—rather high up. It has but to reach my heart, and then—then it will be all over, Geoff dear. Isn’t it a perfectly splendid sort of death! not an ache or pain—and to go away in your youth when you’re so full of enjoyment. I will say, on the whole, that I’ve

had a right good time in life. I have been so strong, and so able for everything, and now nothing can possibly hurt me again, and I'll be able to set you free, old boy."

"To set me free?" said her brother. "I don't understand."

"Never mind: I won't talk of it now," said Laura; "only just rest assured that I am as happy as happy can be! I am sure you never thought me a really religious girl, but somehow, I used to think a lot of your sermons, and when I was at Hillside Rectory I was so struck and amazed by your devotion to your cause, and more still by Betty's way of going on. I do think, Geoff, she is a perfect brick! I never met anyone like her. The magnificent way she behaved the day poor Jack Hinton died, and that evening of the explosion. Oh, I cannot possibly tell you what I think of your Betty."

"She is one of the finest creatures in the world," said her husband, "but, after all, not finer than you are yourself, Laura."

"Oh, yes, she is," said Laura. "She's the sort who ought to live, who ought to be the mother of splendid sons and daughters, who ought to grow old, with her children and grandchildren surrounding her. Whereas I—well, I am right glad to go while I am young and fresh. I never could get

half enough life out of this old world, good as it is. I want to fly and do all sorts of things—impossible things in this life, but I believe they'll be possible in the Land to which I am going. You see, Geoff, old boy, the doctors put it before me very plainly, and they really made me feel intensely thankful. They say that *if* the injury to the spine had taken place a few inches lower down I might have lived on for years, but never, never be able to stir again. Think of such a fate for me—for me! who never could keep still all my life for half an hour. Oh, I was thankful—I am thankful! God has been good! To tell you the truth, Geoff, I feel almost inclined to laugh to get life over like this, and to—be—so glad about it, and then, it sets you free.”

It was wonderful to hear Laura talk on in her bright voice, with a gay, half-mocking accent, and know that she was really dying. Geoffrey Pevensey, as a priest of the Church of England, had stood by many death-beds, but he had never seen anyone die as his own gay young sister Laura was dying. He felt the queerest mingling of intense, passionate regret, and yet of relief. Laura was never wrong about herself. Why should she be wrong now? Was not the best possible thing happening to her

when she was about to go away in her youth and strength without pain and without a struggle?

But suddenly the Rector remembered his mother.

“Mother wants to see you,” he said. “She is troubled at your refusal to have her with you.”

Laura’s face changed at these words.

“You know what my mother is to me, Geoffrey?” she said, after a pause.

“I know, darling,” replied her brother, “that you have always been very, very good to her.”

“I have tolerated her until yesterday morning,” answered the girl; “now I——”

“Don’t say it,” replied Geoffrey, with a quick movement; “don’t soil your soul with unkind thoughts just on the eve of going to God.”

She looked at him fixedly. Her face became very grave. After a time she said:

“In no case is it possible for the end to come for several hours, but I shall do all that is necessary in the next few hours. Please come to me yourself early in the morning, and to-morrow night will you and mother and Betty come to me again? I want to rest until then. I don’t know why, exactly, it hurts me to talk, but when I talk long I get breathless: I should like to rest between now and to-morrow evening. Will you all come to me then? and afterwards will you, Geoffrey, give me the Last Supper

of our Lord—the Feast of Feasts? I shall drink it new with you in the kingdom next time.”

Geoffrey suddenly sank on his knees. He hid his dark head against his sister's shoulder.

“Oh, Laura!” he said, a sob in his throat. “The old days—the children's life—the little joys! The old, old nursery! Oh, my little Laura—if I only might go with you!”

“You will follow me, dearest, when your work is done,” she answered, still in that bright, triumphant voice. “Now go, darling. Go back to Betty.”

Geoffrey left the room. He saw the nurse in the corridor.

“Ah, poor young lady!” she said to him. “You are her brother, sir?”

“Yes,” said Pevensey.

“We never had such a patient before,” said the nurse, “so magnificently courageous, and so bright.”

“Is there indeed no hope?” asked the clergyman.

“No, sir; not the slightest; and perhaps, fortunately for Miss Pevensey, the end is very near, for the paralysis is high up. The wheel of the dray went right over the centre of her back; her lungs are already affected. When the paralysis touches the heart she must die.”

“And nothing can be done?” said Pevensey.



"Impossible, sir, when, as you understand, the back is broken."

"How long?" asked the clergyman, in a smothered tone.

"She may live for twenty-four hours," replied the nurse.

"She has asked me to come again," said Pevensey. "I must be with her before the end; is it safe to leave her?"

"If you will give me your address, sir, I will wire to you if there is the slightest change, but I know the doctors think that Miss Pevensey will live for several hours."

Pevensey left the hospital and went home. He found his mother and Betty together in the drawing-room. Betty's face was pale, and notwithstanding her brave spirit, her eyes had a tired expression. Pevensey, on the contrary, looked quite fresh, and more like himself than Betty had known him for several months. He came in briskly.

"Well," said Lady Pevensey, "and did you see her? I hope the poor darling has repented of her strange prejudice against seeing me."

"She wishes to see you to-morrow night, mother, in company with Betty and myself."

"Not until then?" said the mother. "Why this delay?"

"It is her wish. She owned to being a little tired."

"How did she look?" asked Betty.

"Bright as I have ever seen her," replied Pevensey, "with a good color in her cheeks, and her eyes so brilliant—not a bit feverish, either—in excellent spirits."

Lady Pevensey rose from her low position by the fire.

"There," she said, "didn't I say so? What a fuss these doctors do make about nothing! My dear, dear child isn't hurt at all. What—*what* are you saying, Geoffrey?"

Geoffrey Pevensey went up to his mother, and laid his strong hand on her shoulder.

"Mother!" he said, "poor mother! You must bear it; you must learn to. Laura was indeed never like other girls, and she is dying—yes, dying as unlike them in the hour of death as in life. There is not the slightest hope of her recovery. Oh, Betty, my darling, don't cry!" For Betty, strangely overcome, her nerves strained to the utmost, had flung herself on her knees by a sofa and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, I can't bear it!" she moaned, "I can't bear it!"

"Take her away, Geoffrey," said Lady Pevensey. Her tone was cold, altered, frightened.

“Take her away at once,” she continued. “I can’t stand that girl’s grief; I can’t stand that other people should make a fuss. Take her out of the room.”

Geoffrey led Betty upstairs. They entered their bedroom, which poor Laura had taken such pains to render bright and attractive for them. The fire was lit, and the flowers, which Laura had herself arranged, stood on a little table near the sofa.

“Oh, Geoffrey!” said Betty. “Why am I so weak? But I can’t help it. This is so fearful, so sudden.”

“When you see her you will be quite calm,” said her husband. “I never saw anyone quite so splendid. Oh, we shall miss her; but she will be in the best world of all for her. She really has a magnificent nature, quite above all petty things. Betty, we must be thankful. Had the accident been a little less severe she might have lived to be old, but could never have moved again. Now, God is going to take her to Himself.”

Betty covered her face, and trembled from head to foot. Geoffrey went downstairs to his mother.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

THE next day Geoffrey sat alone with Lady Pevensey. All his depression with regard to himself had completely vanished. He was so absorbed in others that his own life story, his own temptations, his own ultimate fate, were forgotten as though they had never been.

Lady Pevensey was in a queer and nervous state. She refused to see Betty, but clung to Geoffrey.

"I don't believe it!" she kept saying, "and what is more, I won't believe it. No girl—no girl on earth could look well and yet be about to die. You saw her again this morning, and you say she has color in her cheeks?"

"Yes; her own splendid color, and her eyes are bright, very bright."

"And she is cheerful?"

"Yes, mother; almost gay."

"Now, you don't suppose, Geoffrey, that I can stand any nonsense of that sort. You talk in a ridiculous fashion when you pretend to me that my Laura is dying. Geoffrey, dear, I have always loved her better—better than you know."

The young man felt inclined to say, "What a pity you did not show it to her more!"

"I am not naturally an affectionate woman," continued Lady Pevensey. "I have the character of being cold by nature, and perhaps I am; but I love Laura—I have always loved her. I—I have been proud of you, Geoffrey; anyone would be, for you are so handsome, and have such splendid gifts; but it was to Laura that I gave my love."

"Show it to her when you go to see her to-night," said the young man. Then he added: "Poor mother! I pity you from my very heart."

"Don't say that, and don't pity me, and don't call me '*mother*,'" she said, in a high-pitched voice of almost hysteria.

The hours passed dismally. Betty in their room wondered how she could live through them. If she might only have her way! If only she might go to St. George's Hospital to see her sister-in-law! But no; neither her husband nor Lady Pevensey wished it.

About five o'clock in the afternoon there came a message from the hospital which evidently distressed Lady Pevensey much. It was a letter written by one of the nurses, and contained a brief message from Laura: "Bring the photograph and letter with you when you come."

“What is it, mother?” said her son, who was standing not far off. “Is—is Laura worse?”

“No, dear; no,” said Lady Pevensey, looking up at him with ill-concealed terror in her eyes. “She has sent me a private message, dear child. I will write a line to her, reassuring her.”

Lady Pevensey went to her davenport, wrote a word or two, fastened the note into an envelope, and desired the messenger to take it back to the hospital.

As evening approached Lady Pevensey got more and more nervous. She refused to take any dinner, and finally said that she would rather Betty and her husband went to see Laura alone.

“Why should I go?” she said. “Why should I go? You had best see her by yourselves. I would rather keep the image of her in her radiance and health than see her as she is now.”

“Oh, but you will be sorry if you don’t come. You will come, won’t you?” said Betty, who had now entered the room. And Lady Pevensey, strange to say, with her fitful and erratic nature, seemed to find more consolation from her than from her son.

At a quarter to eight the little party entered Lady Pevensey’s carriage and were driven to St. George’s Hospital. Pevensey had brought with him all need-

ful preparations for that sacred service which Laura desired. The nurse met them in the corridor.

"I am glad you have come, sir," she said, just glancing at Betty and then at Lady Pevensey. "Miss Pevensey is sinking fast, and the doctors do not think she can last many hours. But she is in no pain, and is anxiously expecting you. She wants you, please, sir, to ask the good lady, her mother, to come to her first."

"Oh—I—I can't," said Lady Pevensey, shrinking close to Pevensey, and even grasping his arm.

"Please, madam, come; that is, if you can keep quite calm," said the nurse. "The young lady wishes for you; there is nothing at all to be afraid of in seeing her."

"Of course you will go," said Betty; "and we will follow when we are sent for."

Lady Pevensey made a great effort to enter the sick-room alone. The door was closed behind her. Laura greeted her with that bright, frank smile which was all her own.

"You see, mumsie," she said, "it is no use, and now you will *have* to set him free."

Lady Pevensey fell on her knees and began to sob.

"Poor mother!" said the girl. "I wish I could put my hand on your head, for it always did soothe

you. But I—can't—move it. I have not got—much strength. I just—want—your—promise."

"I—Laura—I—cannot!"

"Did you bring the photograph and letter, mother?"

"Yes, I have them."

"You will put the envelope on the bed, won't you? Just lay it near me—by my pillow."

Lady Pevensey obeyed.

"You'll feel ever so much better when you have made a clean breast of it," said Laura. "You can tell Geoffrey and Betty in your own way; they will understand, and they'll be always good to you. They will forgive. Oh, mother, Geoff is such a splendid fellow! and you—you nearly wrecked him. When you told him that awful lie you nearly wrecked him body and soul. I guessed something was wrong when we were at the Rectory, and still more by his face when he came to see us in town. I questioned you, darling, and—I *found out*. Oh, why did you do it? I think I went nearly mad. Then—*this* happened. I am going, and there is nothing to keep the cloud over him any longer. Promise, mother."

Oh, how weak was the voice, but how courageous the face! how brilliant and beautiful the eyes!

Lady Pevensey bent down and kissed the girl.



That kiss was a promise. A minute later she went blindly out of the room.

When Pevensey entered, accompanied by Betty, he saw at once that Laura was almost past words. Her interview with her mother had deprived her of her small remaining strength. He asked Betty to call the nurse, and then immediately administered those sacred rites of the Last Supper of our Lord. It was just when Laura was breathing almost her last breath that her eyes turned imploringly upon Betty, and those same eyes caused Betty to glance at the little packet lying on her pillow. When Betty saw the packet, Laura said:

“Take it; open it—when you go home.” Betty took it, and Laura smiled.

. . . . .  
Laura Pevensey was dead. They called it death, although Pevensey was inclined to use another word with regard to it. It was, according to him, more like *translation*—a passing without pain, or fear, or terror, out of a land of many sorrows into one of perfect joy.

“She died as she lived,” he said to his wife, as they were driving home.

Lady Pevensey had got back some time before. They both forgot the little packet which Betty held in her hand. When they got to the house Betty went

straight to her own room, and Pevensey tapped at his mother's door. There was no reply. He tried to turn the handle, but the door was locked. He then went back to his wife.

Betty was standing by the fire, the most amazed expression on her face. She had opened the envelope, and from within had dropped out a photograph and a closely-written letter. The photograph was of a dark-eyed handsome girl who could not have been twenty years of age. On the back of the photograph was written, in a handwriting which Betty had never seen before:

"My dear wife, Gwendolyn, and mother of my son, Geoffrey, passed from this life to a better—February 18th, 18——, aged nineteen years."

"*Geoffrey!*" said his wife.

Geoffrey stared at the letter. His feelings were almost unfathomable. After a time Betty said:

"There is a mystery which we have got to learn. Perhaps it is contained in this letter. Come, Geoff, let us read it. Oh, what a marvellous, marvellous, extraordinary day this is!"

With their heads close together, the husband and wife read the letter, which was addressed to Lady Pevensey by Pevensey's father:

"MY DEAR WIFE:—I die far from you" (the let-

ter was dated from Calcutta), "and I wish you to give this letter to Geoffrey when he comes of age. The sad circumstances of his own mother's death can then be revealed to him. I have yielded to your wish and concealed the fact that I was ever the husband of Gwendolyn Moss. She was the simple daughter of a simple farmer—a good, honest Scotchman, healthy in mind and body. But, considering all things, I wish my little Geoffrey to learn his true parentage when he comes of age. I know that, by so doing, I cut him off from inheriting his share of your large fortune, but on the whole I think that the knowledge of truth is better for him than the possession of gold. I send you with this letter the last photograph I ever had taken of Gwendolyn. Do not be jealous of her, dear. She was beautiful, bright and good. Your pride of birth and your dislike to her relations cannot alter the fact that in every respect she herself was a perfect lady, wonderful for her years. She died at the birth of our boy; and my sorrow for him is that he never knew, and never can know, a real mother's love.

"You will bring Geoffrey up as I directed that he should be brought up, and will do your very best for my sweet little daughter, Laura. You will not be angry, dear, if I tell you now, as a dying man, the very truth—that I loved Gwendolyn as I never

loved any other woman. I hope to meet her in that place to which I am going so soon. Nevertheless, dear, my feelings for you are those of deep affection and absolute trust.—Your faithful and affectionate husband,  
GEOFFREY PEVENSEY.”

“Oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey!” cried Betty. “There is no dreadful curse hanging over your head, and you have nothing to fear. Oh, Geoffrey!”

“She said this morning when I saw her,” remarked the Rector, after a long pause, “that by her death she would set me free. But what an extraordinary, fearful thing for my mother to do!”

“Not your mother, remember,” said Betty. “This is the picture of your mother.”

She raised the photograph of the gallant-looking young Scotch girl to her lips. The Rector looked long at the face in the photograph and tears filled his eyes.

At an early hour on the following day Lady Pevensey sent for Geoffrey. She made a full confession. She had always hated her husband’s first young wife. She was particularly proud of Geoffrey, who as a little boy was strikingly handsome, and she and her husband agreed that he was to be brought up as her own son. Neither Laura nor Geoffrey had any idea but that they were brother

and sister. Lady Pevensey was a very rich woman, but her husband was comparatively poor. Gwendolyn, Geoffrey's real mother, was also without fortune.

"I am going to leave England now," said Lady Pevensey, in conclusion, "that is, immediately after dear Laura's funeral. What I told you about my family is perfectly true; the fatal malady only affects the male side of the house; nothing has ever occurred to the women. It is true, that had Laura lived and married she might have gone through the agony of seeing the terrible curse perpetuated in her sons. As that is the case, doubtless there is consolation in her early death. My dear Geoffrey, I loved Laura best, but all my ambitions were centred on you. I hoped you would marry a girl of very high family—a girl who, I believe, was attracted to you. When you told me that you were engaged to Betty I was wild with fury, and it suddenly occurred to me that if I told you my family history you might break off the engagement. By-and-by, when Betty was married to someone else, I could unsay my cruel words. There, think of me as badly as you like; that is the story. I yielded to temptation, and I have been a wretched woman ever since; but you are saved. Laura has saved you and Betty. She suspected something, and when she returned from

Dartminster forced the truth from my lips. I cannot express to you—I never will tell you what she said. I believe I was unworthy of your father; of you, of her. I am a miserable, wicked woman. May God forgive me!”

“He will; He will, as I do, as Laura did,” said Pevensey; and, kneeling by his stepmother, he swept his strong arms round her neck.

. . . . .

Lady Pevensey has left England. At Hillside Rectory Pevensey and his wife live happily, and work hard, and rejoice in the peace of God, and the love of God, which passeth all understanding. Their hearts are knit to each other, and they have nothing to fear, either in this world or the next.

Miss Spring has not yet secured her other half, and Miss Hughes continues to give Professor Power endless satisfaction.

THE END

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