

THE MAN

by

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FORE-GLIMPSE

'I would rather be an angel than God!'

The voice of the speaker sounded clearly through the hawthorn tree. The young man and the young girl who sat together on the low tombstone looked at each other. They had heard the voices of the two children talking, but had not noticed what they said; it was the sentiment, not the sound, which roused their attention.

The girl put her finger to her lips to impress silence, and the man nodded; they sat as still as mice whilst the two children went on talking.

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The scene would have gladdened a painter's heart. An old churchyard. The church low and square-towered, with long mullioned windows, the yellow-grey stone roughened by age and tender-hued with lichens. Round it clustered many tombstones tilted in all directions. Behind the church a line of gnarled and twisted yews.

The churchyard was full of fine trees. On one side a magnificent cedar; on the other a great copper beech. Here and there among the tombs and headstones many beautiful blossoming trees rose from the long green grass. The laburnum glowed in the June afternoon sunlight; the lilac, the hawthorn and the clustering meadowsweet which fringed the edge of the lazy stream mingled their heavy sweetness in sleepy fragrance. The yellow-grey crumbling walls were green in places with wrinkled harts-tongues, and were topped with sweet-williams and spreading house-leek and stone-crop and wild-flowers whose delicious sweetness made for the drowsy repose of perfect summer.

But amid all that mass of glowing colour the two young figures seated on the grey old tomb stood out conspicuously. The man was in conventional hunting-dress: red coat, white stock, black hat, white breeches, and top-boots. The girl was one of the richest, most glowing, and yet withal daintiest figures the eye of man could linger on. She was in riding-habit of hunting scarlet cloth; her black hat was tipped forward by piled-up masses red-golden hair. Round her neck was a white lawn scarf in the fashion of a man's hunting-stock, close fitting, and sinking into a gold-buttoned waistcoat of snowy twill. As she sat with the long skirt across her left arm her tiny black top-boots appeared underneath. Her gauntleted gloves were of white buckskin; her riding-whip was plaited of white leather, topped with ivory and banded with gold.

Even in her fourteenth year Miss Stephen Norman gave promise of striking beauty; beauty of a rarely composite character. In her the various elements of her race seemed to have cropped out. The firm-set jaw, with chin broader and more square than is usual in a woman, and the wide fine forehead and aquiline nose marked the high descent from Saxon through Norman. The glorious mass of red hair, of the true flame colour, showed the blood of another ancient ancestor of Northern race, and suited well with the voluptuous curves of the full, crimson lips. The purple-black eyes, the raven eyebrows and eyelashes, and the fine curve of the nostrils spoke of the Eastern blood of the far-back wife of the Crusader. Already she was tall for her age, with something of that lankiness which marks the early development of a really fine figure. Long-legged, long-necked, as straight as a lance, with head poised on the proud neck like a lily on its stem.

Stephen Norman certainly gave promise of a splendid womanhood. Pride, self-reliance and dominance were marked in every feature; in her bearing and in her lightest movement.

Her companion, Harold An Wolf, was some five years her senior, and by means of those five years and certain qualities had long stood in the position of her mentor. He was more than six feet two in height, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, long-armed and big-handed. He had that appearance strength, with well-poised neck and forward set of the head, which marks the successful athlete.

The two sat quiet, listening. Through the quiet hum of afternoon came the voices of the two children. Outside the lich-gate, under the shade of the spreading cedar, the horses stamped occasionally as the flies troubled them. The grooms were mounted; one held the delicate-limbed white Arab, the other the great black horse.

'I would rather be an angel than God!'

The little girl who made the remark was an ideal specimen of the village Sunday-school child. Blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, thick-legged, with her straight brown hair tied into a hard bunch with a much-creased, cherry-coloured ribbon. A glance at the girl would have satisfied the most sceptical as to her goodness. Without being in any way smug she was radiant with self-satisfaction and well-doing. A child of the people; an early riser; a help to her mother; a good angel to her father; a little mother to her brothers and sisters; cleanly in mind and body; self-reliant, full of faith, cheerful.

The other little girl was prettier, but of a more stubborn type; more passionate, less organised, and infinitely more assertive. Black-haired, black-eyed, swarthy, large-mouthed, snub-nosed; the very type and essence of unrestrained, impulsive, emotional, sensual nature. A seeing eye would have noted inevitable danger for the early years of her womanhood. She seemed amazed by the self-abnegation implied by her companion's statement; after a pause she replied:

'I wouldn't! I'd rather be up at the top of everything and give orders to the angels if I chose. I can't think, Marjorie, why you'd rather take orders than give them.'

'That's just it, Susan. I don't want to give orders; I'd rather obey them. It must be very terrible to have to think of things so much, that you want everything done your own way. And besides, I shouldn't like to have to be just!'

'Why not?' the voice was truculent, though there was wistfulness in it also.

'Oh Susan. Just fancy having to punish; for of course justice needs punishing as well as praising. Now an angel has such a nice time, helping people and comforting them, and bringing sunshine into dark places. Putting down fresh dew every morning; making the flowers grow, and bringing babies and taking care of them till their mothers find them. Of course God is very good and very sweet and very merciful, but oh, He must be very terrible.'

'All the same I would rather be God and able to do things!'

Then the children moved off out of earshot. The two seated on the tombstone looked after them. The first to speak was the girl, who said:

'That's very sweet and good of Marjorie; but do you know, Harold, I like Susie's idea better.'

'Which idea was that, Stephen?'

'Why, didn't you notice what she said: "I'd like to be God and be able to do things"?''

‘Yes,’ he said after a moment’s reflection. ‘That’s a fine idea in the abstract; but I doubt of its happiness in the long-run.’

‘Doubt of its happiness? Come now? what could there be better, after all? Isn’t it good enough to be God? What more do you want?’

The girl’s tone was quizzical, but her great black eyes blazed with some thought of sincerity which lay behind the fun. The young man shook his head with a smile of kindly tolerance as he answered:

‘It isn’t that—surely you must know it. I’m ambitious enough, goodness knows; but there are bounds to satisfy even me. But I’m not sure that the good little thing isn’t right. She seemed, somehow, to hit a bigger truth than she knew: “fancy having to be just.”’

‘I don’t see much difficulty in that. Anyone can be just!’

‘Pardon me,’ he answered, ‘there is perhaps nothing so difficult in the whole range of a man’s work.’ There was distinct defiance in the girl’s eyes as she asked:

‘A man’s work! Why a man’s work? Isn’t it a woman’s work also?’

‘Well, I suppose it ought to be, theoretically; practically it isn’t.’

‘And why not, pray?’ The mere suggestion of any disability of woman as such aroused immediate antagonism. Her companion suppressed a smile as he answered deliberately:

‘Because, my dear Stephen, the Almighty has ordained that justice is not a virtue women can practise. Mind, I do not say women are unjust. Far from it, where there are no interests of those dear to them they can be of a sincerity of justice that can make a man’s blood run cold. But justice in the abstract is not an ordinary virtue: it has to be considerate as well as stern, and above all interest of all kinds and of every one—’ The girl interrupted hotly:

‘I don’t agree with you at all. You can’t give an instance where women are unjust. I don’t mean of course individual instances, but classes of cases where injustice is habitual.’ The suppressed smile cropped out now unconsciously round the man’s lips in a way which was intensely aggravating to the girl.

‘I’ll give you a few,’ he said. ‘Did you ever know a mother just to a boy who beat her own boy at school?’ The girl replied quietly:

‘Ill-treatment and bullying are subjects for punishment, not justice.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean that kind of beating. I mean getting the prizes their own boys contended for; getting above them in class; showing superior powers in running or cricket or swimming, or in any of the forms of effort in which boys vie with each other.’ The girl reflected, then she spoke:

‘Well, you may be right. I don’t altogether admit it, but I accept it as not on my side. But this is only one case.’

‘A pretty common one. Do you think that Sheriff of Galway, who in default of a hangman hanged his son with his own hands, would have done so if he had been a woman?’ The girl answered at once:

‘Frankly, no. I don’t suppose the mother was ever born who would do such a thing. But that is not a common case, is it? Have you any other?’ The young man paused before he spoke:

‘There is another, but I don’t think I can go into it fairly with you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, because after all you know, Stephen, you are only a girl and you can’t be expected to know.’ The girl laughed:

‘Well, if it’s anything about women surely a girl, even of my tender age, must know something more of it, or be able to guess at, than any young man can. However, say what you think and I’ll tell you frankly if I agree—that is if a woman can be just, in such a matter.’

‘Shortly the point is this: Can a woman be just to another woman, or to a man for the matter of that, where either her own affection or a fault of the other is concerned?’

‘I don’t see any reason to the contrary. Surely pride alone should ensure justice in the former case, and the consciousness of superiority in the other.’ The young man shook his head:

‘Pride and the consciousness of superiority! Are they not much the same thing. But whether or no, if either of them has to be relied on, I’m afraid the scales of Justice would want regulating, and her sword should be blunted in case its edge should be turned back on herself. I have an idea that although pride might be a guiding principle with you individually, it would be a failure with the average. However, as it would be in any case a rule subject to many exceptions I must let it go.’

Harold looked at his watch and rose. Stephen followed him; transferring her whip into the hand which held up the skirt, she took his arm with her right hand in the pretty way

in which a young girl clings to her elders. Together they went out at the lich-gate. The groom drew over with the horses. Stephen patted hers and gave her a lump of sugar. Then putting her foot into Harold's ready hand she sprang lightly into the saddle. Harold swung himself into his saddle with the dexterity of an accomplished rider.

As the two rode up the road, keeping on the shady side under the trees, Stephen said quietly, half to herself, as if the sentence had impressed itself on her mind:

'To be God and able to do things!'

Harold rode on in silence. The chill of some vague fear was upon him.

CHAPTER I—STEPHEN

Stephen Norman of Normanstand had remained a bachelor until close on middle age, when the fact took hold of him that there was no immediate heir to his great estate. Whereupon, with his wonted decision, he set about looking for a wife.

He had been a close friend of his next neighbour, Squire Rowly, ever since their college days. They had, of course, been often in each other's houses, and Rowly's young sister—almost a generation younger than himself, and the sole fruit of his father's second marriage—had been like a little sister to him too. She had, in the twenty years which had elapsed, grown to be a sweet and beautiful young woman. In all the past years, with the constant opportunity which friendship gave of close companionship, the feeling never altered. Squire Norman would have been surprised had he been asked to describe Margaret Rowly and found himself compelled to present the picture of a woman, not a child.

Now, however, when his thoughts went womanward and wifeward, he awoke to the fact that Margaret came within the category of those he sought. His usual decision ran its course. Semi-brotherly feeling gave place to a stronger and perhaps more selfish feeling. Before he even knew it, he was head over ears in love with his pretty neighbour.

Norman was a fine man, stalwart and handsome; his forty years sat so lightly on him that his age never seemed to come into question in a woman's mind. Margaret had always liked him and trusted him; he was the big brother who had no duty in the way of scolding to do. His presence had always been a gladness; and the sex of the girl, first unconsciously then consciously, answered to the man's overtures, and her consent was soon obtained.

When in the fulness of time it was known that an heir was expected, Squire Norman took for granted that the child would be a boy, and held the idea so tenaciously that his wife, who loved him deeply, gave up warning and remonstrance after she had once tried to caution him against too fond a hope. She saw how bitterly he would be disappointed in case it should prove to be a girl. He was, however, so fixed on the point that she determined to say no more. After all, it might be a boy; the chances were equal. The Squire would not listen to any one else at all; so as the time went on his idea was more firmly fixed than ever. His arrangements were made on the base that he would have a son. The name was of course decided. Stephen had been the name of all the Squires of Normanstand for ages—as far back as the records went; and Stephen the new heir of course would be.

Like all middle-aged men with young wives he was supremely anxious as the time drew near. In his anxiety for his wife his belief in the son became passive rather than active. Indeed, the idea of a son was so deeply fixed in his mind that it was not disturbed even by his anxiety for the young wife he idolised.

When instead of a son a daughter was born, the Doctor and the nurse, who knew his views on the subject, held back from the mother for a little the knowledge of the sex. Dame Norman was so weak that the Doctor feared lest anxiety as to how her husband would bear the disappointment, might militate against her. Therefore the Doctor sought the Squire in his study, and went resolutely at his task.

‘Well, Squire, I congratulate you on the birth of your child!’ Norman was of course struck with the use of the word ‘child’; but the cause of his anxiety was manifested by his first question:

‘How is she, Doctor? Is she safe?’ The child was after all of secondary importance! The Doctor breathed more freely; the question had lightened his task. There was, therefore, more assurance in his voice as he answered:

‘She is safely through the worst of her trouble, but I am greatly anxious yet. She is very weak. I fear anything that might upset her.’

The Squire’s voice came quick and strong:

‘There must be no upset! And now tell me about my son?’ He spoke the last word half with pride, half bashfully.

‘Your son is a daughter!’ There was silence for so long that the Doctor began to be anxious. Squire Norman sat quite still; his right hand resting on the writing-table

before him became clenched so hard that the knuckles looked white and the veins red. After a long slow breath he spoke:

‘She, my daughter, is well?’ The Doctor answered with cheerful alacrity:

‘Splendid!—I never saw a finer child in my life. She will be a comfort and an honour to you!’ The Squire spoke again:

‘What does her mother think? I suppose she’s very proud of her?’

‘She does not know yet that it is a girl. I thought it better not to let her know till I had told you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because—because—Norman, old friend, you know why! Because you had set your heart on a son; and I know how it would grieve that sweet young wife and mother to feel your disappointment. I want your lips to be the first to tell her; so that on may assure her of your happiness in that a daughter has been born to you.’

The Squire put out his great hand and laid it on the other’s shoulder. There was almost a break in his voice as he said:

‘Thank you, my old friend, my true friend, for your thought. When may I see her?’

‘By right, not yet. But, as knowing your views, she may fret herself till she knows, I think you had better come at once.’

All Norman’s love and strength combined for his task. As he leant over and kissed his young wife there was real fervour in his voice as he said:

‘Where is my dear daughter that you may place her in my arms?’ For an instant there came a chill to the mother’s heart that her hopes had been so far disappointed; but then came the reaction of her joy that her husband, her baby’s father, was pleased. There was a heavenly dawn of red on her pale face as she drew her husband’s head down and kissed him.

‘Oh, my dear,’ she said, ‘I am so happy that you are pleased!’ The nurse took the mother’s hand gently and held it to the baby as she laid it in the father’s arms.

He held the mother’s hand as he kissed the baby’s brow.

The Doctor touched him gently on the arm and beckoned him away. He went with careful footsteps, looking behind as he went.

After dinner he talked with the Doctor on various matters; but presently he asked:

‘I suppose, Doctor, it is no sort of rule that the first child regulates the sex of a family?’

‘No, of course not. Otherwise how should we see boys and girls mixed in one family, as is nearly always the case. But, my friend,’ he went on, ‘you must not build hopes so far away. I have to tell you that your wife is far from strong. Even now she is not so well as I could wish, and there yet may be change.’ The Squire leaped impetuously to his feet as he spoke quickly:

‘Then why are we waiting here? Can nothing be done? Let us have the best help, the best advice in the world.’ The Doctor raised his hand.

‘Nothing can be done as yet. I have only fear.’

‘Then let us be ready in case your fears should be justified! Who are the best men in London to help in such a case?’ The Doctor mentioned two names; and within a few minutes a mounted messenger was galloping to Norchester, the nearest telegraph centre. The messenger was to arrange for a special train if necessary. Shortly afterwards the Doctor went again to see his patient. After a long absence he came back, pale and agitated. Norman felt his heart sink when he saw him; a groan broke from him as the Doctor spoke:

‘She is much worse! I am in great fear that she may pass away before the morning!’ The Squire’s strong voice was clouded, with a hoarse veil as he asked:

‘May I see her?’

‘Not yet; at present she is sleeping. She may wake strengthened; in which case you may see her. But if not—’

‘If not?’—the voice was not like his own.

‘Then I shall send for you at once!’ The Doctor returned to his vigil. The Squire, left alone, sank on his knees, his face in his hands; his great shoulders shook with the intensity of his grief.

An hour or more passed before he heard hurried steps. He sprang to the door:

‘Well?’

‘You had better come now.’

‘Is she better?’

'Alas! no. I fear her minutes are numbered. School yourself, my dear old friend! God will help you in this bitter hour. All you can do now is to make her last moments happy.'

'I know! I know!' he answered in a voice so calm that his companion wondered.

When they came into the room Margaret was dozing. When her eyes opened and she found her husband beside her bed there spread over her face a glad look; which, alas! soon changed to one of pain. She motioned to him to bend down. He knelt and put his head beside her on the pillow; his arms went tenderly round her as though by his iron devotion and strength he would shield her from all harm. Her voice came very low and in broken gasps; she was summoning all her strength that she might speak:

'My dear, dear husband, I am so sad at leaving you! You have made me so happy, and I love you so! Forgive me, dear, for the pain I know you will suffer when I am gone! And oh, Stephen, I know you will cherish our little one—yours and mine—when I am gone. She will have no mother; you will have to be father and mother too.'

'I will hold her in my very heart's core, my darling, as I hold you!' He could hardly speak from emotion. She went on:

'And oh, my dear, you will not grieve that she is not a son to carry on your name?' And then a sudden light came into her eyes; and there was exultation in her weak voice as she said:

'She is to be our only one; let her be indeed our son! Call her the name we both love!' For answer he rose and laid his hand very, very tenderly on the babe as he said:

'This dear one, my sweet wife, who will carry your soul in her breast, will be my son; the only son I shall ever have. All my life long I shall, please Almighty God, so love her—our little Stephen—as you and I love each other!'

She laid her hand on his so that it touched at once her husband and her child. Then she raised the other weak arm, and placed it round his neck, and their lips met. Her soul went out in this last kiss.

CHAPTER II—THE HEART OF A CHILD

For some weeks after his wife's death Squire Norman was overwhelmed with grief. He made a brave effort, however, to go through the routine of his life; and succeeded so far that he preserved an external appearance of bearing his loss with resignation. But within, all was desolation.

Little Stephen had winning ways which sent deep roots into her father's heart. The little bundle of nerves which the father took into his arms must have realised with all its senses that, in all that it saw and heard and touched, there was nothing but love and help and protection. Gradually the trust was followed by expectation. If by some chance the father was late in coming to the nursery the child would grow impatient and cast persistent, longing glances at the door. When he came all was joy.

Time went quickly by, and Norman was only recalled to its passing by the growth of his child. Seedtime and harvest, the many comings of nature's growth were such commonplaces to him, and had been for so many years, that they made on him no impressions of comparison. But his baby was one and one only. Any change in it was not only in itself a new experience, but brought into juxtaposition what is with what was. The changes that began to mark the divergence of sex were positive shocks to him, for they were unexpected. In the very dawn of babyhood dress had no special import; to his masculine eyes sex was lost in youth. But, little by little, came the tiny changes which convention has established. And with each change came to Squire Norman the growing realisation that his child was a woman. A tiny woman, it is true, and requiring more care and protection and devotion than a bigger one; but still a woman. The pretty little ways, the eager caresses, the graspings and holdings of the childish hands, the little roguish smiles and pantings and flirtings were all but repetitions in little of the dalliance of long ago. The father, after all, reads in the same book in which the lover found his knowledge.

At first there was through all his love for his child a certain resentment of her sex. His old hope of a son had been rooted too deeply to give way easily. But when the conviction came, and with it the habit of its acknowledgment, there came also a certain resignation, which is the halting-place for satisfaction. But he never, not then nor afterwards, quite lost the old belief that Stephen was indeed a son. Could there ever have been a doubt, the remembrance of his wife's eyes and of her faint voice, of her hope and her faith, as she placed her baby in his arms would have refused it a resting-place. This belief tinged all his after-life and moulded his policy with regard to his girl's upbringing. If she was to be indeed his son as well as his daughter, she must from the first be accustomed to boyish as well as to girlish ways. This, in that she was an only child, was not a difficult matter to accomplish. Had she had brothers and sisters, matters of her sex would soon have found their own level.

There was one person who objected strongly to any deviation from the conventional rule of a girl's education. This was Miss Laetitia Rowly, who took after a time, in so far as such a place could be taken, that of the child's mother. Laetitia Rowly was a young aunt of Squire Rowly of Norwood; the younger sister of his father and some sixteen

years his own senior. When the old Squire's second wife had died, Laetitia, then a conceded spinster of thirty-six, had taken possession of the young Margaret. When Margaret had married Squire Norman, Miss Rowly was well satisfied; for she had known Stephen Norman all her life. Though she could have wished a younger bridegroom for her darling, she knew it would be hard to get a better man or one of more suitable station in life. Also she knew that Margaret loved him, and the woman who had never found the happiness of mutual love in her own life found a pleasure in the romance of true love, even when the wooer was middle-aged. She had been travelling in the Far East when the belated news of Margaret's death came to her. When she had arrived home she announced her intention of taking care of Margaret's child, just as she had taken care of Margaret. For several reasons this could not be done in the same way. She was not old enough to go and live at Normanstand without exciting comment; and the Squire absolutely refused to allow that his daughter should live anywhere except in his own house. Educational supervision, exercised at such distance and so intermittently, could neither be complete nor exact.

Though Stephen was a sweet child she was a wilful one, and very early in life manifested a dominant nature. This was a secret pleasure to her father, who, never losing sight of his old idea that she was both son and daughter, took pleasure as well as pride out of each manifestation of her imperial will. The keen instinct of childhood, which reasons in feminine fashion, and is therefore doubly effective in a woman-child, early grasped the possibilities of her own will. She learned the measure of her nurse's foot and then of her father's; and so, knowing where lay the bounds of possibility of the achievement of her wishes, she at once avoided trouble and learned how to make the most of the space within the limit of her tether.

It is not those who 'cry for the Moon' who go furthest or get most in this limited world of ours. Stephen's pretty ways and unfailing good temper were a perpetual joy to her father; and when he found that as a rule her desires were reasonable, his wish to yield to them became a habit.

Miss Rowly seldom saw any individual thing to disapprove of. She it was who selected the governesses and who interviewed them from time to time as to the child's progress. Not often was there any complaint, for the little thing had such a pretty way of showing affection, and such a manifest sense of justified trust in all whom she encountered, that it would have been hard to name a specific fault.

But though all went in tears of affectionate regret, and with eminently satisfactory emoluments and references, there came an irregularly timed succession of governesses.

Stephen's affection for her 'Auntie' was never affected by any of the changes. Others might come and go, but there no change came. The child's little hand would steal into one of the old lady's strong ones, or would clasp a finger and hold it tight. And then the woman who had never had a child of her own would feel, afresh each time, as though the child's hand was gripping her heart.

With her father she was sweetest of all. And as he seemed to be pleased when she did anything like a little boy, the habit of being like one insensibly grew on her.

An only child has certain educational difficulties. The true learning is not that which we are taught, but that which we take in for ourselves from experience and observation, and children's experiences and observation, especially of things other than repressive, are mainly of children. The little ones teach each other. Brothers and sisters are more with each other than are ordinary playmates, and in the familiarity of their constant intercourse some of the great lessons, so useful in after-life, are learned. Little Stephen had no means of learning the wisdom of give-and-take. To her everything was given, given bountifully and gracefully. Graceful acceptance of good things came to her naturally, as it does to one who is born to be a great lady. The children of the farmers in the neighbourhood, with whom at times she played, were in such habitual awe of the great house, that they were seldom sufficiently at ease to play naturally. Children cannot be on equal terms on special occasions with a person to whom they have been taught to bow or courtesy as a public habit. The children of neighbouring landowners, who were few and far between, and of the professional people in Norcester, were at such times as Stephen met them, generally so much on their good behaviour, that the spontaneity of play, through which it is that sharp corners of individuality are knocked off or worn down, did not exist.

And so Stephen learned to read in the Book of Life; though only on one side of it. At the age of six she had, though surrounded with loving care and instructed by skilled teachers, learned only the accepting side of life. Giving of course there was in plenty, for the traditions of Normanstand were royally benevolent; many a blessing followed the little maid's footsteps as she accompanied some timely aid to the sick and needy sent from the Squire's house. Moreover, her Aunt tried to inculcate certain maxims founded on that noble one that it is more blessed to give than to receive. But of giving in its true sense: the giving that which we want for ourselves, the giving that is as a temple built on the rock of self-sacrifice, she knew nothing. Her sweet and

spontaneous nature, which gave its love and sympathy so readily, was almost a bar to education: it blinded the eyes that would have otherwise seen any defect that wanted altering, any evil trait that needed repression, any lagging virtue that required encouragement—or the spur.

CHAPTER III—HAROLD

Squire Norman had a clerical friend whose rectory of Carstone lay some thirty miles from Normanstand. Thirty miles is not a great distance for railway travel; but it is a long drive. The days had not come, nor were they ever likely to come, for the making of a railway between the two places. For a good many years the two men had met in renewal of their old University days. Squire Norman and Dr. An Wolf had been chums at Trinity, Cambridge, and the boyish friendship had ripened and lasted. When Harold An Wolf had put in his novitiate in a teeming Midland manufacturing town, it was Norman's influence which obtained the rectorship for his friend. It was not often that they could meet, for An Wolf's work, which, though not very exacting, had to be done single-handed, kept him to his post. Besides, he was a good scholar and eked out a small income by preparing a few pupils for public school. An occasional mid-week visit to Normanstand in the slack time of school work on the Doctor's part, and now and again a drive by Norman over to the rectory, returning the next day, had been for a good many years the measure of their meeting. Then An Wolf's marriage and the birth of a son had kept him closer to home. Mrs. An Wolf had been killed in a railway accident a couple of years after her only child had been born; and at the time Norman had gone over to render any assistance in his power to the afflicted man, and to give him what was under the circumstances his best gift, sympathy. After an interval of a few years the Squire's courtship and marriage, at which his old friend had assisted, had confined his activities to a narrower circle. The last time they had met was when An Wolf had come over to Norcester to aid in the burial of his friend's wife. In the process of years, however, the shadow over Norman's life had begun to soften; when his baby had grown to be something of a companion, they met again. Norman, 'who had never since his wife's death been able to tear himself, even for a night, away from Normanstand and Stephen, wrote to his old friend asking him to come to him. An Wolf gladly promised, and for a week of growing expectation the Squire looked forward to their meeting. Each found the other somewhat changed, in all but their old affection.

An Wolf was delighted with the little Stephen. Her dainty beauty seemed to charm him; and the child, seeming to realise what pleasure she was giving, exercised all her little winning ways. The rector, who knew more of children than did his friend, told her as she sat on his knee of a very interesting person: his own son. The child listened,

interested at first, then enraptured. She asked all kinds of questions; and the father's eyes brightened as he gladly answered the pretty sympathetic child, already deep in his heart for her father's sake. He told her about the boy who was so big and strong, and who could run and leap and swim and play cricket and football better than any other boy with whom he played. When, warmed himself by the keen interest of the little girl, and seeing her beautiful black eyes beginning to glow, he too woke to the glory of the time; and all the treasured moments of the father's lonely heart gave out their store. And the other father, thrilled with delight because of his baby's joy with, underlying all, an added pleasure that the little Stephen's interest was in sports that were for boys, looked on approvingly, now and again asking questions himself in furtherance of the child's wishes.

All the afternoon they sat in the garden, close to the stream that came out of the rock, and An Wolf told father's tales of his only son. Of the great cricket match with *Castra Puerorum* when he had made a hundred not out. Of the school races when he had won so many prizes. Of the swimming match in the Islam River when, after he had won the race and had dressed himself, he went into the water in his clothes to help some children who had upset a boat. How when Widow Norton's only son could not be found, he dived into the deep hole of the intake of the milldam of the great Carstone mills where Wingate the farrier had been drowned. And how, after diving twice without success, he had insisted on going down the third time though people had tried to hold him back; and how he had brought up in his arms the child all white and so near death that they had to put him in the ashes of the baker's oven before he could be brought back to life.

When her nurse came to take her to bed, she slid down from her father's knee and coming over to Dr. An Wolf, gravely held out her hand and said: 'Good-bye!' Then she kissed him and said:

'Thank you so much, Mr. Harold's daddy. Won't you come soon again, and tell us more?' Then she jumped again upon her father's knee and hugged him round the neck and kissed him, and whispered in his ear:

'Daddy, please make Mr. Harold's daddy when he comes again, bring Harold with him!'

After all it is natural for women to put the essence of the letter in the postscript!

Two weeks afterwards Dr. An Wolf came again and brought Harold with him. The time had gone heavily with little Stephen when she knew that Harold was coming with his father. Stephen had been all afire to see the big boy whose feats had so much

interested her, and for a whole week had flooded Mrs. Jarrold with questions which she was unable to answer. At last the time came and she went out to the hall door with her father to welcome the guests. At the top of the great granite steps, down which in time of bad weather the white awning ran, she stood holding her father's hand and waving a welcome.

'Good morning, Harold! Good morning, Mr. Harold's daddy!'

The meeting was a great pleasure to both the children, and resulted in an immediate friendship. The small girl at once conceived a great admiration for the big, strong boy nearly twice her age and more than twice her size. At her time of life the conveniences are not, and love is a thing to be spoken out at once and in the open. Mrs. Jarrold, from the moment she set eyes on him, liked the big kindly-faced boy who treated her like a lady, and who stood awkwardly blushing and silent in the middle of the nursery listening to the tiny child's proffers of affection. For whatever kind of love it is that boys are capable of, Harold had fallen into it. 'Calf-love' is a thing habitually treated with contempt. It may be ridiculous; but all the same it is a serious reality—to the calf.

Harold's new-found affection was as deep as his nature. An only child who had in his memory nothing of a mother's love, his naturally affectionate nature had in his childish days found no means of expression. A man child can hardly pour out his full heart to a man, even a father or a comrade; and this child had not, in a way, the consolations of other children. His father's secondary occupation of teaching brought other boys to the house and necessitated a domestic routine which had to be exact. There was no place for little girls in a boys' school; and though many of Dr. An Wolf's friends who were mothers made much of the pretty, quiet boy, and took him to play with their children, he never seemed to get really intimate with them. The equality of companionship was wanting. Boys he knew, and with them he could hold his own and yet be on affectionate terms. But girls were strange to him, and in their presence he was shy. With this lack of understanding of the other sex, grew up a sort of awe of it. His opportunities of this kind of study were so few that the view never could become rectified.

And so it was that from his boyhood up to his twelfth year, Harold's knowledge of girlhood never increased nor did his awe diminish. When his father had told him all about his visit to Normanstand and of the invitation which had been extended to him there came first awe, then doubt, then expectation. Between Harold and his father there was love and trust and sympathy. The father's married love so soon cut short found expression towards his child; and between them there had never been even the

shadow of a cloud. When his father told him how pretty the little Stephen was, how dainty, how sweet, he began to picture her in his mind's eye and to be bashfully excited over meeting her.

His first glimpse of Stephen was, he felt, one that he never could forget. She had made up her mind that she would let Harold see what she could do. Harold could fly kites and swim and play cricket; she could not do any of these, but she could ride. Harold should see her pony, and see her riding him all by herself. And there would be another pony for Harold, a big, big, big one—she had spoken about its size herself to Topham, the stud-groom. She had coaxed her daddy into promising that after lunch she should take Harold riding. To this end she had made ready early. She had insisted on putting on the red riding habit which Daddy had given her for her birthday, and now she stood on the top of the steps all glorious in hunting pink, with the habit held over her arms, with the tiny hunting-hoots all shiny underneath. She had no hat on, and her beautiful hair of golden red shone in its glory. But even it was almost outshone by the joyous flush on her cheeks as she stood waving the little hand that did not hold Daddy's. She was certainly a picture to dream of! Her father's eyes lost nothing of her dainty beauty. He was so proud of her that he almost forgot to wish that she had been a boy. The pleasure he felt in her appearance was increased by the fact that her dress was his own idea.

During luncheon Stephen was fairly silent; she usually chattered all through as freely as a bird sings. Stephen was silent because the occasion was important. Besides, Daddy wasn't all alone, and therefore had not to be cheered up. Also—this in postscript form—Harold was silent! In her present frame of mind Harold could do no wrong, and what Harold did was right. She was unconsciously learning already a lesson from his presence.

That evening when going to bed she came to say good-night to Daddy. After she had kissed him she also kissed 'old Mr. Harold,' as she now called him, and as a matter of course kissed Harold also. He coloured up at once. It was the first time a girl had ever kissed him.

The next day from early morning until bed-time was one long joy to Stephen, and there were few things of interest that Harold had not been shown; there were few of the little secrets which had not been shared with him as they went about hand in hand. Like all manly boys Harold was good to little children and patient with them. He was content to follow Stephen about and obey all her behests. He had fallen in love with her to the very bottom of his boyish heart.

When the guests were going, Stephen stood with her father on the steps to see them off. When the carriage had swept behind the farthest point in the long avenue, and when Harold's cap waving from the window could no longer be seen, Squire Norman turned to go in, but paused in obedience to the unconscious restraint of Stephen's hand. He waited patiently till with a long sigh she turned to him and they went in together.

That night before she went to bed Stephen came and sat on her father's knee, and after sundry pattings and kissings whispered in his ear:

'Daddy, wouldn't it be nice if Harold could come here altogether? Couldn't you ask him to? And old Mr. Harold could come too. Oh, I wish he was here!'

CHAPTER IV—HAROLD AT NORMANSTAND

Two years afterwards a great blow fell upon Harold. His father, who had been suffering from repeated attacks of influenza, was, when in the low condition following this, seized with pneumonia, to which in a few days he succumbed. Harold was heart-broken. The affection which had been between him and his father had been so consistent that he had never known a time when it was not.

When Squire Norman had returned to the house with him after the funeral, he sat in silence holding the boy's hand till he had wept his heart out. By this time the two were old friends, and the boy was not afraid or too shy to break down before him. There was sufficient of the love of the old generation to begin with trust in the new.

Presently, when the storm was past and Harold had become his own man again, Norman said:

'And now, Harold, I want you to listen to me. You know, my dear boy, that I am your father's oldest friend, and right sure I am that he would approve of what I say. You must come home with me to live. I know that in his last hours the great concern of your dear father's heart would have been for the future of his boy. And I know, too, that it was a comfort to him to feel that you and I are such friends, and that the son of my dearest old friend would be as a son to me. We have been friends, you and I, a long time, Harold; and we have learned to trust, and I hope to love, one another. And you and my little Stephen are such friends already that your coming into the house will be a joy to us all. Why, long ago, when first you came, she said to me the night you went away: "Daddy, wouldn't it be nice if Harold could come here altogether?"'

And so Harold An Wolf came back with the Squire to Normanstand, and from that day on became a member of his house, and as a son to him. Stephen's delight at his

coming was of course largely qualified by her sympathy with his grief; but it would have been hard to give him more comfort than she did in her own pretty way. Putting her lips to his she kissed him, and holding his big hand in both of her little ones, she whispered softly:

‘Poor Harold! You and I should love each other, for we have both lost our mother. And now you have lost your father. But you must let my dear daddy be yours too!’

At this time Harold was between fourteen and fifteen years old. He was well educated in so far as private teaching went. His father had devoted much care to him, so that he was well grounded in all the Academic branches of learning. He was also, for his years, an expert in most manly exercises. He could ride anything, shoot straight, fence, run, jump or swim with any boy more than his age and size.

In Normanstand his education was continued by the rector. The Squire used often to take him with him when he went to ride, or fish, or shoot; frankly telling him that as his daughter was, as yet, too young to be his companion in these matters, he would act as her locum tenens. His living in the house and his helping as he did in Stephen’s studies made familiarity perpetual. He was just enough her senior to command her childish obedience; and there were certain qualities in his nature which were eminently calculated to win and keep the respect of women as well as of men. He was the very incarnation of sincerity, and had now and again, in certain ways, a sublime self-negation which, at times, seemed in startling contrast to a manifestly militant nature. When at school he had often been involved in fights which were nearly always on matters of principle, and by a sort of unconscious chivalry he was generally found fighting on the weaker side. Harold’s father had been very proud of his ancestry, which was Gothic through the Dutch, as the manifestly corrupted prefix of the original name implied, and he had gathered from a constant study of the Sagas something of the philosophy which lay behind the ideas of the Vikings.

This new stage of Harold’s life made for quicker development than any which had gone before. Hitherto he had not the same sense of responsibility. To obey is in itself a relief; and as it is an actual consolation to weak natures, so it is only a retarding of the strong. Now he had another individuality to think of. There was in his own nature a vein of anxiety of which the subconsciousness of his own strength threw up the outcrop.

Little Stephen with the instinct of her sex discovered before long this weakness. For it is a weakness when any quality can be assailed or used. The using of a man’s weakness is not always coquetry; but it is something very like it. Many a time the little girl, who looked up to and admired the big boy who could compel her to anything

when he was so minded, would, for her own ends, work on his sense of responsibility, taking an elfin delight in his discomfiture.

The result of Stephen's harmless little coquetries was that Harold had occasionally either to thwart some little plan of daring, or else cover up its results. In either case her confidence in him grew, so that before long he became an established fact in her life, a being in whose power and discretion and loyalty she had absolute, blind faith. And this feeling seemed to grow with her own growth. Indeed at one time it came to be more than an ordinary faith. It happened thus:

The old Church of St. Stephen, which was the parish church of Normanstand, had a peculiar interest for the Norman family. There, either within the existing walls or those which had preceded them when the church was rebuilt by that Sir Stephen who was standard-bearer to Henry VI., were buried all the direct members of the line. It was an unbroken record of the inheritors since the first Sir Stephen, who had his place in the Domesday Book. Without, in the churchyard close to the church, were buried all such of the collaterals as had died within hail of Norchester. Some there were of course who, having achieved distinction in various walks of life, were further honoured by a resting-place within the chancel. The whole interior was full of records of the family. Squire Norman was fond of coming to the place; and often from the very beginning had taken Stephen with him. One of her earliest recollections was kneeling down with her father, who held her hand in his, whilst with the other he wiped the tears from his eyes, before a tomb sculptured beautifully in snowy marble. She never forgot the words he had said to her:

'You will always remember, darling, that your dear mother rests in this sacred place. When I am gone, if you are ever in any trouble come here. Come alone and open out your heart. You need never fear to ask God for help at the grave of your mother!' The child had been impressed, as had been many and many another of her race. For seven hundred years each child of the house of Norman had been brought alone by either parent and had heard some such words. The custom had come to be almost a family ritual, and it never failed to leave its impress in greater or lesser degree.

Whenever Harold had in the early days paid a visit to Normanstand, the church had generally been an objective of their excursions. He was always delighted to go. His love for his own ancestry made him admire and respect that of others; so that Stephen's enthusiasm in the matter was but another cord to bind him to her.

In one of their excursions they found the door into the crypt open; and nothing would do Stephen but that they should enter it. To-day, however, they had no light; but they

arranged that on the morrow they would bring candles with them and explore the place thoroughly. The afternoon of the next day saw them at the door of the crypt with a candle, which Harold proceeded to light. Stephen looked on admiringly, and said in a half-conscious way, the half-consciousness being shown in the implication:

‘You are not afraid of the crypt?’

‘Not a bit! In my father’s church there was a crypt, and I was in it several times.’ As he spoke the memory of the last time he had been there swept over him. He seemed to see again the many lights, held in hands that were never still, making a grim gloom where the black shadows were not; to hear again the stamp and hurried shuffle of the many feet, as the great oak coffin was borne by the struggling mass of men down the steep stairway and in through the narrow door . . . And then the hush when voices faded away; and the silence seemed a real thing, as for a while he stood alone close to the dead father who had been all in all to him. And once again he seemed to feel the recall to the living world of sorrow and of light, when his inert hand was taken in the strong loving one of Squire Norman.

He paused and drew back.

‘Why don’t you go on?’ she asked, surprised.

He did not like to tell her then. Somehow, it seemed out of place. He had often spoken to her of his father, and she had always been a sympathetic listener; but here, at the entrance of the grim vault, he did not wish to pain her with his own thoughts of sorrow and all the terrible memories which the similarity of the place evoked. And even whilst he hesitated there came to him a thought so laden with pain and fear that he rejoiced at the pause which gave it to him in time. It was in that very crypt that Stephen’s mother had been buried, and had they two gone in, as they had intended, the girl might have seen her mother’s coffin as he had seen his father’s, but under circumstances which made him shiver. He had been, as he said, often in the crypt at Carstone; and well he knew the sordidness of the chamber of death. His imagination was alive as well as his memory; he shuddered, not for himself, but for Stephen. How could he allow the girl to suffer in such a way as she might, as she infallibly would, if it were made apparent to her in such a brutal way? How pitiful, how meanly pitiful, is the aftermath of death. Well he remembered how many a night he woke in an agony, thinking of how his father lay in that cold, silent, dust-strewn vault, in the silence and the dark, with never a ray of light or hope or love! Gone, abandoned, forgotten by all, save perhaps one heart which bled . . . He would save little Stephen, if he could, from such a memory. He would not give any reason for refusing to go in.

He blew out the candle, and turned the key in the lock, took it out, and put it in his pocket.

‘Come, Stephen!’ he said, ‘let us go somewhere else. We will not go into the crypt to-day!’

‘Why not?’ The lips that spoke were pouted mutinously and the face was flushed. The imperious little lady was not at all satisfied to give up the cherished project. For a whole day and night she had, whilst waking, thought of the coming adventure; the thrill of it was not now to be turned to cold disappointment without even an explanation. She did not think that Harold was afraid; that would be ridiculous. But she wondered; and mysteries always annoyed her. She did not like to be at fault, more especially when other people knew. All the pride in her revolted.

‘Why not?’ she repeated more imperiously still.

Harold said kindly:

‘Because, Stephen, there is really a good reason. Don’t ask me, for I can’t tell you. You must take it from me that I am right. You know, dear, that I wouldn’t willingly disappoint you; and I know that you had set your heart on this. But indeed, indeed I have a good reason.’

Stephen was really angry now. She was amenable to reason, though she did not consciously know what reason was; but to accept some one else’s reason blindfold was repugnant to her nature, even at her then age. She was about to speak angrily, but looking up she saw that Harold’s mouth was set with marble firmness. So, after her manner, she acquiesced in the inevitable and said:

‘All right! Harold.’

But in the inner recesses of her firm-set mind was a distinct intention to visit the vault when more favourable circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER V—THE CRYPT

It was some weeks before Stephen got the chance she wanted. She knew it would be difficult to evade Harold’s observation, for the big boy’s acuteness as to facts had impressed itself on her. It was strange that out of her very trust in Harold came a form of distrust in others. In the little matter of evading him she inclined to any one in whom there was his opposite, in whose reliability she instinctively mistrusted. ‘There is nothing bad or good but thinking makes it so!’ To enter that crypt, which had seemed so small a matter at first, had now in process of thinking and wishing and

scheming become a thing to be much desired. Harold saw, or rather felt, that something was in the girl's mind, and took for granted that it had something to do with the crypt. But he thought it better not to say anything lest he should keep awake a desire which he hoped would die naturally.

One day it was arranged that Harold should go over to Carstone to see the solicitor who had wound up his father's business. He was to stay the night and ride back next day. Stephen, on hearing of the arrangement, so contrived matters that Master Everard, the son of a banker who had recently purchased an estate in the neighbourhood, was asked to come to play with her on the day when Harold left. It was holiday time at Eton, and he was at home. Stephen did not mention to Harold the fact of his coming; it was only from a chance allusion of Mrs. Jarrold before he went that he inferred it. He did not think the matter of sufficient importance to wonder why Stephen, who generally told him everything, had not mentioned this.

During their play, Stephen, after pledging him to secrecy, told Leonard of her intention of visiting the crypt, and asked him to help her in it. This was an adventure, and as such commended itself to the schoolboy heart. He entered at once into the scheme *con amore*; and the two discussed ways and means. Leonard's only regret was that he was associated with a little girl in such a project. It was something of a blow to his personal vanity, which was a large item in his moral equipment, that such a project should have been initiated by the girl and not by himself. He was to get possession of the key and in the forenoon of the next day he was to be waiting in the churchyard, when Stephen would join him as soon as she could evade her nurse. She was now more than eleven, and had less need of being watched than in her earlier years. It was possible, with strategy, to get away undiscovered for an hour.

* * * * *

At Carstone Harold got though what he had to do that same afternoon and arranged to start early in the morning for Normanstand. After an early breakfast he set out on his thirty-mile journey at eight o'clock. Littlejohn, his horse, was in excellent form, notwithstanding his long journey of the day before, and with his nose pointed for home, put his best foot foremost. Harold felt in great spirits. The long ride the day before had braced him physically, though there were on his journey times of great sadness when the thought of his father came back to him and the sense of loss was renewed with each thought of his old home. But youth is naturally buoyant. His visit to the church, the first thing on his arrival at Carstone, and his kneeling before the stone made sacred to his father's memory, though it entailed a silent gush of tears, did him good, and even seemed to place his sorrow farther away. When he came

again in the morning before leaving Carstone there were no tears. There was only a holy memory which seemed to sanctify loss; and his father seemed nearer to him than ever.

As he drew near Normanstand he looked forward eagerly to seeing Stephen, and the sight of the old church lying far below him as he came down the steep road over Alt Hill, which was the short-cut from Norcester, set his mind working. His visit to the tomb of his own father made him think of the day when he kept Stephen from entering the crypt.

The keenest thought is not always conscious. It was without definite intention that when he came to the bridle-path Harold turned his horse's head and rode down to the churchyard. As he pushed open the door of the church he half expected to see Stephen; and there was a vague possibility that Leonard Everard might be with her.

The church was cool and dim. Coming from the hot glare the August sunshine it seemed, at the first glance, dark. He looked around, and a sense of relief came over him. The place was empty.

But even as he stood, there came a sound which made his heart grow cold. A cry, muffled, far away and full of anguish; a sobbing cry, which suddenly ceased.

It was the voice of Stephen. He instinctively knew where it came from; the crypt. Only for the experience he had had of her desire to enter the place, he would never have suspected that it was so close to him. He ran towards the corner where commenced the steps leading downward. As he reached the spot a figure came rushing up the steps. A boy in Eton jacket and wide collar, careless, pale, and agitated. It was Leonard Everard. Harold seized him as he came.

'Where is Stephen?' he cried in a quick, low voice.

'In the vault below there. She dropped her light and then took mine, and she dropped it too. Let me go! Let me go!' He struggled to get away; but Harold held him tight.

'Where are the matches?'

'In my pocket. Let me go! Let me go!'

'Give me them—this instant!' He was examining the frightened boy's waistcoat pockets as he spoke. When he had got the matches he let the boy go, and ran down the steps and through the open door into the crypt, calling out as he came:

'Stephen! Stephen dear, where are you? It is I—Harold!' There was no response; his heart seemed to grow cold and his knees to weaken. The match spluttered and

flashed, and in the momentary glare he saw across the vault, which was not a large place, a white mass on the ground. He had to go carefully, lest the match should be blown out by the wind of his passage; but on coming close he saw that it was Stephen lying senseless in front of a great coffin which rested on a built-out pile of masonry. Then the match went out. In the flare of the next one he lit he saw a piece of candle lying on top of the coffin. He seized and lit it. He was able to think coolly despite his agitation, and knew that light was the first necessity. The bruised wick was slow to catch; he had to light another match, his last one, before it flamed. The couple of seconds that the light went down till the grease melted and the flame leaped again seemed of considerable length. When the lit candle was placed steadily on top of the coffin, and a light, dim, though strong enough to see with, spread around, he stooped and lifted Stephen in his arms. She was quite senseless, and so limp that a great fear came upon him that she might be dead. He did not waste time, but carried her across the vault where the door to the church steps stood out sharp against the darkness, and bore her up into the church. Holding her in one arm, with the other hand he dragged some long cushions from one of the pews and spread them on the floor; on these he laid her. His heart was smitten with love and pity as he looked. She was so helpless; so pitifully helpless! Her arms and legs were doubled up as though broken, disjoined; the white frock was smeared with patches of thick dust. Instinctively he stooped and pulled the frock down and straightened out the arms and feet. He knelt beside her, and felt if her heart was still beating, a great fear over him, a sick apprehension. A gush of thankful prayer came from his heart. Thank God! she was alive; he could feel her heart beat, though faintly underneath his hand. He started to his feet and ran towards the door, seizing his hat, which lay on a seat. He wanted it to bring back some water. As he passed out of the door he saw Leonard a little distance off, but took no notice of him. He ran to the stream, filled his hat with water, and brought it back. When he came into the church he saw Stephen, already partially restored, sitting up on the cushions with Leonard supporting her.

He was rejoiced; but somehow disappointed. He would rather Leonard had not been there. He remembered—he could not forget—the white face of the boy who fled out of the crypt leaving Stephen in a faint within, and who had lingered outside the church door whilst he ran for water. Harold came forward quickly and raised Stephen, intending to bring her into the fresh air. He had a shrewd idea that the sight of the sky and God's greenery would be the best medicine for her after her fright. He lifted her in his strong arms as he used to do when she was a very little child and had got tired in their walks together; and carried her to the door. She lent herself unconsciously to the movement, holding fast with her arm round his neck as she used to do. In her clinging

was the expression of her trust in him. The little sigh with which she laid her head on his shoulder was the tribute to his masculine power, and her belief in it. Every instant her senses were coming back to her more and more. The veil of oblivion was passing from her half-closed eyes, as the tide of full remembrance swept in upon her. Her inner nature was expressed in the sequence of her emotions. Her first feeling was one of her own fault. The sight of Harold and his proximity recalled to her vividly how he had refused to go into the crypt, and how she had intentionally deceived him, negatively, as to her intention of doing that of which he disapproved. Her second feeling was one of justice; and was perhaps partially evoked by the sight of Leonard, who followed close as Harold brought her to the door. She did not wish to speak of herself or Harold before him; but she did not hesitate to speak of him to Harold:

‘You must not blame Leonard. It was all my fault. I made him come!’ Her generosity appealed to Harold. He was angry with the boy for being there at all; but more for his desertion of the girl in her trouble.

‘I’m not blaming him for being with you!’ he said simply. Leonard spoke at once. He had been waiting to defend himself, for that was what first concerned that young gentleman; next to his pleasure, his safety most appealed to him.

‘I went to get help. You had let the candle drop; and how could I see in the dark? You would insist on looking at the plate on the coffin!’

A low moan broke from Stephen, a long, low, trembling moan which went to Harold’s heart. Her head drooped over again on his shoulder; and she clung close to him as the memory of her shock came back to her. Harold spoke to Leonard over his shoulder in a low, fierce whisper, which Stephen did not seem to hear:

‘There! that will do. Go away! You have done enough already. Go! Go!’ he added more sternly, as the boy seemed disposed to argue. Leonard ran a few steps, then walked to the lich-gate, where he waited.

Stephen clung close to Harold in a state of agitation which was almost hysterical. She buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing brokenly:

‘Oh, Harold! It was too awful. I never thought, never for a moment, that my poor dear mother was buried in the crypt. And when I went to look at the name on the coffin that was nearest to where I was, I knocked away the dust, and then I saw her name: “Margaret Norman, aetat 22.” I couldn’t bear it. She was only a girl herself, only just twice my age—lying there in that terrible dark place with all the thick dust and the spiders’ webs. Oh, Harold, Harold! How shall I ever bear to think of her lying there, and that I shall never see her dear face? Never! Never!’

He tried to soothe her by patting and holding her hands. For a good while the resolution of the girl faltered, and she was but as a little child. Then her habitual strength of mind asserted itself. She did not ask Harold how she came to be out in the church instead of in the crypt when she recovered her senses. She seemed to take it for granted that Leonard had carried her out; and when she said how brave it had been of him, Harold, with his customary generosity, allowed her to preserve the belief. When they had made their way to the gate Leonard came up to them; but before he could speak Stephen had begun to thank him. He allowed her to do so, though the sight of Harold's mouth set in scorn, and his commanding eyes firmly fixed on him, made him grow hot and cold alternately. He withdrew without speaking; and took his way home with a heart full of bitterness and revengeful feelings.

In the park Stephen tried to dust herself, and then Harold tried to assist her. But her white dress was incurably soiled, the fine dust of the vault seemed to have got ingrained in the muslin. When she got to the house she stole upstairs, so that no one might notice her till she had made herself tidy.

The next day but one she took Harold for a walk in the afternoon. When they were quite alone and out of earshot she said:

'I have been thinking all night about poor mother. Of course I know she cannot be moved from the crypt. She must remain there. But there needn't be all that dust. I want you to come there with me some time soon. I fear I am afraid to go alone. I want to bring some flowers and to tidy up the place. Won't you come with me this time? I know now, Harold, why you didn't let me go in before. But now it is different. This is not curiosity. It is Duty and Love. Won't you come with me, Harold?'

Harold leaped from the edge of the ha-ha where he had been sitting and held up his hand. She took it and leaped down lightly beside him.

'Come,' he said, 'let us go there now!' She took his arm when they got on the path again, and clinging to him in her pretty girlish way they went together to the piece of garden which she called her own; there they picked a great bunch of beautiful white flowers. Then they walked to the old church. The door was open and they passed in. Harold took from his pocket a tiny key. This surprised her, and heightened the agitation which she naturally suffered from revisiting the place. She said nothing whilst he opened the door to the crypt. Within, on a bracket, stood some candles in glass shades and boxes of matches. Harold lit three candles, and leaving one of them on the shelf, and placing his cap beside it, took the other two in his hands. Stephen, holding her flowers tightly to her breast with her right hand, took Harold's arm with the left, and with beating heart entered the crypt.

For several minutes Harold kept her engaged, telling her about the crypt in his father's church, and how he went down at his last visit to see the coffin of his dear father, and how he knelt before it. Stephen was much moved, and held tight to his arm, her heart beating. But in the time she was getting accustomed to the place. Her eyes, useless at first on coming out of the bright sunlight, and not able to distinguish anything, began to take in the shape of the place and to see the rows of great coffins that stood out along the far wall. She also saw with surprise that the newest coffin, on which for several reasons her eyes rested, was no longer dusty but was scrupulously clean. Following with her eyes as well as she could see into the further corners she saw that there the same reform had been effected. Even the walls and ceiling had been swept of the hanging cobwebs, and the floor was clean with the cleanliness of ablution. Still holding Harold's arm, she moved over towards her mother's coffin and knelt before it. Harold knelt with her; for a little while she remained still and silent, praying inwardly. Then she rose, and taking her great bunch of flowers placed them lovingly on the lid of the coffin above where she thought her mother's heart would be. Then she turned to Harold, her eyes flowing and her cheeks wet with tears, and laid her head against his breast. Her arms could not go round his neck till he had bent his head, for with his great height he simply towered above her. Presently she was quiet; the paroxysm of her grief had passed. She took Harold's hand in both hers, and together they went to the door. With his disengaged hand, for he would not have disturbed the other for worlds, Harold put out the lights and locked the door behind them.

In the church she held him away from her, and looked him fairly in the face. She said slowly:

'Harold, was it you who had the crypt cleaned?' He answered in a low voice:

'I knew you would want to go again!'

She took the great hand which she held between hers, and before he knew what she was doing and could prevent her, raised it to her lips and kissed it, saying lovingly:

'Oh, Harold! No brother in all the wide world could be kinder. And—and—' this with a sob, 'we both thank you; mother and I!'

CHAPTER VI—A VISIT TO OXFORD

The next important move in the household was Harold's going to Cambridge. His father had always intended this, and Squire Norman had borne his wishes in mind. Harold joined Trinity, the college which had been his father's, and took up his residence in due course.

Stephen was now nearly twelve. Her range of friendships, naturally limited by her circumstances in life, was enlarged to the full; and if she had not many close friends there were at least of them all that was numerically possible. She still kept up to certain degree the little gatherings which in her childhood were got together for her amusement, and in the various games then instituted she still took a part. She never lost sight of the fact that her father took a certain pleasure in her bodily vigour. And though with her growing years and the conscious acceptance of her womanhood, she lost sight of the old childish fancy of being a boy instead of a girl, she could not lose sight of the fact that strength and alertness are sources of feminine as well as of masculine power.

Amongst the young friends who came from time to time during his holidays was Leonard Everard, now a tall, handsome boy. He was one of those boys who develop young, and who seem never to have any of that gawky stage so noticeable in the youth of men made in a large pattern. He was always well-poised, trim-set, alert; fleet of foot, and springy all over. In games he was *facile princeps*, seeming to make his effort always in the right way and without exertion, as if by an instinct of physical masterdom. His universal success in such matters helped to give him an easy debonair manner which was in itself winning. So physically complete a youth has always a charm. In its very presence there is a sort of sympathetic expression, such as comes with the sunshine.

Stephen always in Leonard's presence showed something of the common attitude. His youth and beauty and sex all had their influence on her. The influence of sex, as it is understood with regard to a later period of life, did not in her case exist; Cupid's darts are barbed and winged for more adult victims. But in her case Leonard's masculine superiority, emphasised by the few years between their age, his sublime self-belief, and, above all, his absolute disregard for herself or her wishes or her feelings, put him on a level at which she had to look up to him. The first step in the ladder of pre-eminence had been achieved when she realised that he was not on her level; the second when she experienced rather than thought that he had more influence on her than she had on him. Here again was a little morsel of hero worship, which, though based on a misconception of fact, was still of influence. In that episode of the crypt she had always believed that it was Leonard who had carried her out and laid her on the church floor in light and safety. He had been strong enough and resolute enough to do this, whilst she had fainted! Harold's generous forbearance had really worked to a false end.

It was not strange, therefore, that she found occasional companionship with the handsome, wilful, domineering boy somewhat of luxury. She did not see him often

enough to get tired of him; to find out the weakness of his character; to realise his deep-seated, remorseless selfishness. But after all he was only an episode in a young life which was full of interests. Term after term came and went; the holidays had their reasonable pleasures, occasionally shared in common. That was all.

Harold's attitude was the same as ever. He was of a constant nature; and now that manhood was within hail the love of his boyhood was ripening to a man's love. That was all. He was with regard to Stephen the same devoted, worshipping protector, without thought of self; without hope of reward. Whatever Stephen wished Harold did; and Stephen, knowing their old wishes and their old pleasures, was content with their renewal. Each holiday between the terms became mainly a repetition of the days of the old life. They lived in the past.

Amongst the things that did not change was Stephen's riding dress. The scarlet habit had never been a thing for everyday wear, but had from the first been kept for special occasions. Stephen herself knew that it was not a conventional costume; but she rather preferred it, if on that account alone. In a certain way she felt justified in using it; for a red habit was a sort of tradition in the family.

It was on one of these occasions that she had gone with Harold into the churchyard where they had heard the discussion regarding God and the Angels.

* * * * *

When Stephen was about sixteen she went for a short visit to Oxford. She stayed at Somerville with Mrs. Egerton, an old friend of her mother's, who was a professor at the college. She sent back her maid who had travelled with her, as she knew that the college girls did not have servants of their own. The visit was prolonged by mutual consent into a duration of some weeks. Stephen fell in love with the place and the life, and had serious thoughts of joining the college herself. Indeed she had made up her mind to ask her father to allow her, knowing well that he would consent to that or to any other wholesome wish of hers. But then came the thought that he would be all alone at home; and following that came another thought, and one of more poignant feeling. He was alone now! Already, for many days, she had left him, for the first time in her life! Stephen was quick to act; well she knew that at home there would be no fault found with her for a speedy return. Within a few hours she had brought her visit to an end, and was by herself, despite Mrs. Egerton's protest, in the train on the way back to Norchester.

In the train she began to review, for the first time, her visit to the university. All had been so strange and new and delightful to her that she had never stopped for

retrospect. Life in the new and enchanting place had been in the moving present. The mind had been receptive only, gathering data for later thought. During her visit she had had no one to direct her thought, and so it had been all personal, with the freedom of individuality at large. Of course her mother's friend, skilled in the mind-workings of average girls, and able to pick her way through intellectual and moral quagmires, had taken good care to point out to her certain intellectual movements and certain moral lessons; just as she had in their various walks and drives pointed out matters of interest—architectural beauties and spots of historic import. And she had taken in, loyally accepted, and thoroughly assimilated all that she had been told. But there were other lessons which were for her young eyes; facts which the older eyes had ceased to notice, if they had ever noticed them at all. The self-content, the sex-content in the endless tide of young men that thronged the streets and quads and parks; the all-sufficing nature of sport or study, to whichever their inclinations tended. The small part which womankind seemed to have in their lives. Stephen had had, as we know, a peculiar training; whatever her instincts were, her habits were largely boy habits. Here she was amongst boys, a glorious tide of them; it made now and again her heart beat to look at them. And yet amongst them all she was only an outsider. She could not do anything better than any of them. Of course, each time she went out, she became conscious of admiring glances; she could not be woman without such consciousness. But it was as a girl that men looked at her, not as an equal. As well as personal experience and the lessons of eyes and ears and intelligence, there were other things to classify and adjust; things which were entirely from the outside of her own life. The fragments of common-room gossip, which it had been her fortune to hear accidentally now and again. The half confidences of scandals, borne on whispered breaths. The whole confidences of dormitory and study which she had been privileged to share. All were parts of the new and strange world, the great world which had swum into her ken.

As she sat now in the train, with some formulation of memory already accomplished in the two hours of solitude, her first comment, spoken half audibly, would have surprised her teachers as much as it would have surprised herself, if she had been conscious of it; for as yet her thinking was not self-conscious:

‘Surely, I am not like that!’

It was of the women she had been thinking, not of the men. The glimpse which she had had of her own sex had been an awakening to her; and the awakening had not been to a pleasant world. All at once she seemed to realise that her sex had defects—littlenesses, meannesses, cowardices, falsenesses. That their occupations were apt to be trivial or narrow or selfish; that their desires were earthly, and their tastes

coarse; that what she held to be goodness was apt to be realised only as fear. That innocence was but ignorance, or at least baffled curiosity. That . . .

A flood of shame swept over her, and instinctively she put her hands before her burning face. As usual, she was running all at once into extremes.

And above all these was borne upon her, and for the first time in her life, that she was herself a woman!

For a long time she sat quite still. The train thrilled and roared on its way. Crowded stations took and gave their quantum of living freight; but the young girl sat abstracted, unmoved, seemingly unconscious. All the dominance and energy of her nature were at work.

If, indeed, she was a woman, and had to abide by the exigencies of her own sex, she would at least not be ruled and limited by woman's weakness. She would plan and act and manage things for herself, in her own way.

Whatever her thoughts might be, she could at least control her acts. And those acts should be based not on woman's weakness, but on man's strength!

CHAPTER VII—THE NEED OF KNOWING

When Stephen announced her intention of going with her father to the Petty Sessions Court, there was consternation amongst the female population of Normanstand and Norwood. Such a thing had not been heard of in the experiences of any of them. Courts of Justice were places for men; and the lower courts dealt with a class of cases . . . It was quite impossible to imagine where any young lady could get such an idea . . .

Miss Laetitia Rowly recognised that she had a difficult task before her, for she was by now accustomed to Stephen's quiet method of having her own way.

She made a careful toilet before driving over to Normanstand. Her wearing her best bonnet was a circumstance not unattended with dread for some one. Behold her then, sailing into the great drawing-room at Normanstand with her mind so firmly fixed on the task before her as to be oblivious of minor considerations. She was so fond of Stephen, and admired so truly her many beauties and fine qualities, that she was secure and without flaw in her purpose. Stephen was in danger, and though she doubted if she would be able to effect any change, she was determined that at least she should not go into danger with her eyes unopened.

Stephen entered hastily and ran to her. She loved her great-aunt; really and truly loved her. And indeed it would have been strange if she had not, for from the earliest hour which she could recollect she had received from her nothing but the truest, fondest affection. Moreover she deeply respected the old lady, her truth, her resolution, her kindness, her genuine common-sense ability. Stephen always felt safe with her aunt. In the presence of others she might now and again have a qualm or a doubt; but not with her. There was an abiding calm in her love, answering love realised and respected. Her long and intimate knowledge of Laetitia made her aware of her moods. She could read the signs of them. She knew well the meaning of the bonnet which actually seemed to quiver as though it had a sentience of its own. She knew well the cause of her aunt's perturbation; the pain which must be caused to her was perhaps the point of most resistance in herself—she having made up her mind to her new experience. All she could do would be to try to reconcile her by the assurance of good intention; by reason, and by sweetness of manner. When she had kissed her and sat beside her, holding her hand after her pretty way, she, seeing the elder woman somewhat at a loss, opened the subject herself:

'You look troubled, auntie! I hope it is nothing serious?'

'It is, my dear! Very serious! Everything is serious to me which touches you.'

'Me, Auntie!' Hypocrisy is a fine art.

'Yes! yes, Stephen. Oh! my dear child, what is this I hear about your going to Petty Sessions with your father?'

'Oh, that! Why, Auntie dear, you must not let that trouble you. It is all right. That is necessary!'

'Necessary!' the old lady's figure grew rigid and her voice was loud and high. 'Necessary for a young lady to go to a court house. To hear low people speaking of low crimes. To listen to cases of the most shocking kind; cases of low immorality; cases of a kind, of a nature of a—a—class that you are not supposed to know anything about. Really, Stephen! . . . ' She was drawing away her hand in indignation. But Stephen held it tight, as she said very sweetly:

'That is just it, Auntie. I am so ignorant that I feel I should know more of the lives of those very people!' Miss Laetitia interrupted:

'Ignorant! Of course you are ignorant. That is what you ought to be. Isn't it what we have all been devoting ourselves to effect ever since you were born? Read your third

chapter of Genesis and remember what came of eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.'

'I think the Tree of Knowledge must have been an orange tree.' The old lady looked up, her interest aroused:

'Why?'

'Because ever since Eden other brides have worn its blossom!' Her tone was demure. Miss Rowly looked sharply at her, but her sharpness softened off into a smile.

'H'm!' she said, and was silent. Stephen seized the opportunity to put her own case:

'Auntie dear, you must forgive me! You really must, for my heart is set on this. I assure you I am not doing it merely to please myself. I have thought over the whole matter. Father has always wished me to be in a position—a position of knowledge and experience—to manage Normanstand if I should ever succeed him. From the earliest time I can remember he has always kept this before me, and though of course I did not at first understand what it meant, I have seemed in the last few years to know better. Accordingly I learned all sorts of things under his care, and sometimes even without his help. I have studied the estate map, and I have been over the estate books and read some of the leases and all such matters which they deal with in the estate office. This only told me the bones of the thing. I wanted to know more of our people; and so I made a point of going now and again to each house that we own. Of seeing the people and talking with them familiarly; as familiarly as they would let me, and indeed so far as was possible considering my position. For, Auntie dear, I soon began to learn—to learn in a way there was no mistaking—what my position is. And so I want to get to know more of their ordinary lives; the darker as well as the lighter side. I would like to do them good. I can see how my dear daddy has always been a sort of power to help them, and I would like to carry on his work; to carry it further if I may. But I must know.'

Her aunt had been listening with growing interest, and with growing respect too, for she realised the intense earnestness which lay behind the girl's words and her immediate purpose. Her voice and manner were both softened:

'But, my dear, surely it is not necessary to go into the Court to know these things. The results of each case become known.'

'That is just it, Auntie,' she answered quickly. 'The magistrates have to hear the two sides of the case before even they can make up their minds. I want to hear both sides,

too! If people are guilty, I want to know the cause of their guilt. If they are innocent, I want to know what the circumstances can be which make innocence look like guilt. In my own daily life I may be in the way of just such judgments; and surely it is only right that judgment should be just!’

Again she paused; there rose before her mind that conversation in the churchyard when Harold had said that it was difficult for women to be just.

Miss Rowly reflected too. She was becoming convinced that in principle the girl was right. But the details were repugnant as ever to her; concentrating her mind on the point where she felt the ground firm under her, she made her objection:

‘But, Stephen dear, there are so many cases that are sordid and painful!’

‘The more need to know of sordid things; if sordidness plays so important a part in the tragedy of their lives!’

‘But there are cases which are not within a woman’s province. Cases that touch sin . . .’

‘What kind of sin do you mean? Surely all wrong-doing is sin!’ The old lady was embarrassed. Not by the fact, for she had been for too many years the mistress of a great household not to know something of the subject on which she spoke, but that she had to speak of such a matter to the young girl whom she so loved.

‘The sin, my dear, of . . . of woman’s wrong-doing . . . as woman . . . of motherhood, without marriage!’ All Stephen’s nature seemed to rise in revolt.

‘Why, Auntie,’ she spoke out at once, ‘you yourself show the want of the very experience I look for!’

‘How? what?’ asked the old lady amazed and bristling. Stephen took her hand and held it affectionately as she spoke:

‘You speak of a woman’s wrong-doing, when surely it is a man’s as well. There does not seem to be blame for him who is the more guilty. Only for poor women! . . . And, Auntie dear, it is such poor women that I should like to help . . . Not when it is too late, but before! But how can I help unless I know? Good girls cannot tell me, and good women won’t! You yourself, Auntie, didn’t want to speak on the subject; even to me!’

‘But, my dear child, these are not things for unmarried women. I never speak of them myself except with matrons.’ Stephen’s answer flashed out like a sword; and cut like one:

‘And yet you are unmarried! Oh, Auntie dear, I did not and I do not mean to be offensive, or to hurt you in any way. I know, dear, your goodness and your kindness to all. But you limit yourself to one side!’ The elder lady interrupted:

‘How do you mean? one side! which side?’

‘The punishment side. I want to know the cause of that which brings the punishment. There surely is some cross road in a girl’s life where the ways part. I want to stand there if I can, with warning in one hand and help in the other. Oh! Auntie, Auntie, can’t you see that my heart is in this . . . These are our people; Daddy says they are to be my people; and I want to know their lives right through; to understand their wants, and their temptations, and their weakness. Bad and good, whatever it be, I must know it all; or I shall be working in the dark, and may injure or crush where I had looked to help and raise.’

As she spoke she looked glorified. The afternoon autumn sun shone full through the great window and lighted her up till she looked like a spirit. Lighted her white diaphanous dress till it seemed to take shape as an ethereal robe; lighted her red hair till it looked like a celestial crown; lighted her great dark eyes till their black beauty became swept in the tide of glory.

The heart of the old woman who loved her best heaved, and her bosom swelled with pride. Instinctively she spoke:

‘Oh, you noble, beautiful creature! Of course you are right, and your way is God’s way!’ With tears that rained down her furrowed cheeks, she put her arms round the girl and kissed her fondly. Still holding her in her arms she gave her the gentle counsel which was the aftermath of her moment of inspiration.

‘But Stephen dear, do be careful! Knowledge is a two-edged sword, and it is apt to side with pride. Remember what was the last temptation of the serpent to Eve: “Your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”’

‘I shall be very careful,’ she said gravely; and then added as if by an afterthought, ‘of course you understand that my motive is the acquisition of knowledge?’

‘Yes?’ the answer was given interrogatively.

‘Don’t you think, dear, that Eve’s object was not so much the acquisition of knowledge as the gratification of curiosity?’

‘That may be,’ said the elder lady in a doubtful tone; ‘but my dear, who is to enlighten us as to which is which? We are apt in such matters to deceive ourselves. The more

we know, the better are we able to deceive others; and the better we are able to deceive others the better we are able to deceive ourselves. As I tell you, dear, knowledge is two-edged and needs extra carefulness in its use!’

‘True!’ said Stephen reflectively. Long after her aunt had gone she sat thinking.

* * * * *

Once again did Miss Rowly try to restrain Stephen from a project. This was when a little later she wished to go for a few days to the University Mission House in the East end of London. Ever since her visit to Oxford she had kept up a correspondence with her mother’s old friend. It was this lady’s habit to spend a part of vacation in the Mission; and Stephen had had much correspondence with her regarding the work. At last she wrote that if she might, she would like to come and see for herself. The answer was a cordial invitation, armed with which she asked her father to allow her to go. He at once assented. He had been watching keenly the development of her character, and had seen with pride and satisfaction that as time went on she seemed to acquire greater resolution, larger self-dependence. She was becoming more and more of his ideal. Without losing any of her womanhood, she was beginning to look at things more from a man’s point of view than is usually done by, or possible to, women.

When she returned at the end of a week she was full of new gravity. After a while this so far changed that her old lighter moods began to have their place, but it seemed that she never lost, and that she never would lose, the effect of that week of bitter experience amongst the ‘submerged tenth.’

The effect of the mental working was shown by a remark made by Harold when home on his next college vacation. He had been entering with her on a discussion of an episode on the estate:

‘Stephen, you are learning to be just!’

At the moment she was chagrined by the remark, though she accepted it in silence; but later, when she had thought the matter over, she took from it infinite pleasure. This was indeed to share man’s ideas and to think with the workings of man’s mind. It encouraged her to further and larger ideas, and to a greater toleration than she had hitherto dreamed of.

Of all those who loved her, none seemed to understand so fully as Laetitia Rowly the change in her mental attitude, or rather the development of it. Now and again she tried to deflect or modify certain coming forces, so that the educational process in which she had always had a part would continue in the right direction. But she

generally found that the girl had been over the ground so thoroughly that she was able to defend her position. Once, when she had ventured to remonstrate with her regarding her attitude of woman's equality with man, she felt as if Stephen's barque was indeed entering on dangerous seas. The occasion had arisen thus: Stephen had been what her aunt had stigmatised as 'laying down the law' with regard to the position a married woman, and Miss Rowly, seeing a good argumentative opening, remarked:

'But what if a woman does not get the opportunity of being married?' Stephen looked at her a moment before saying with conviction:

'It is a woman's fault if she does not get the opportunity!' The old lady smiled as she answered:

'Her fault? My dear, what if no man asks her?' This seemed to her own mind a poser.

'Still her own fault! Why doesn't she ask him?' Her aunt's lorgnon was dropped in horrified amazement.

Stephen went on impassively.

'Certainly! Why shouldn't she? Marriage is a union. As it is in the eye of the law a civil contract, either party to it should be at liberty to originate the matter. If a woman is not free to think of a man in all ways, how is she to judge of the suitability of their union? And if she is free in theory, why not free to undertake if necessary the initiative in a matter so momentous to herself?' The old lady actually groaned and wrung her hands; she was horrified at such sentiments. They were daring enough to think; but to put them in words! . . .

'Oh, my dear, my dear!' she moaned, 'be careful what you say. Some one might hear you who would not understand, as I do, that you are talking theory.' Stephen's habit of thought stood to her here. She saw that her aunt was distressed, and as she did not wish to pain her unduly, was willing to divert the immediate channel of her fear. She took the hand which lay in her lap and held it firmly whilst she smiled in the loving old eyes.

'Of course, Auntie dear, it is theory. But still it is a theory which I hold very strongly!' . . . Here a thought struck her and she said suddenly:

'Did you ever . . . How many proposals did you have, Auntie?' The old lady smiled; her thoughts were already diverted.

'Several, my dear! It is so long ago that I don't remember!'

‘Oh yes, you do, Auntie! No woman ever forgets that, no matter what else she may or may not remember! Tell me, won’t you?’ The old lady blushed slightly as she answered:

‘There is no need to specify, my dear. Let it be at this, that there were more than you could count on your right hand!’

‘And why did you refuse them?’ The tone was wheedling, and the elder woman loved to hear it. Wheedling is the courtship, by the young of the old.

‘Because, my dear, I didn’t love them.’

‘But tell me, Auntie, was there never any one that you did love?’

‘Ah! my dear, that is a different matter. That is the real tragedy of a woman’s life.’ In flooding reminiscent thought she forgot her remonstrating; her voice became full of natural pathos:

‘To love; and be helpless! To wait, and wait, and wait; with your heart all aflame! To hope, and hope; till time seems to have passed away, and all the world to stand still on your hopeless misery! To know that a word might open up Heaven; and yet to have to remain mute! To keep back the glances that could enlighten; to modulate the tones that might betray! To see all you hoped for passing away . . . to another! . . . ’

Stephen bent over and kissed her, then standing up said:

‘I understand! Isn’t it wrong, Auntie, that there should be such tragedies? Should not that glance be given? Why should that tone be checked? Why should one be mute when a single word might, would, avert the tragedy? Is it not possible, Auntie, that there is something wrong in our social system when such things can happen; and can happen so often?’

She looked remorseless as well as irresistible in the pride of her youthful strength as with eyes that blazed, not flashing as in passion but with a steady light that seemed to burn, she continued:

‘Some day women must learn their own strength, as well as they have learned their own weakness. They are taught this latter from their cradles up; but no one ever seems to teach them wherein their power lies. They have to learn this for themselves; and the process and the result of the self-teaching are not good. In the University Settlement I learned much that made my heart ache; but out of it there seemed some lesson for good.’ She paused; and her aunt, wishing to keep the subject towards higher things, asked:

‘And that lesson, Stephen dear?’ The blazing eyes turned to her so that she was stirred by them as the answer came:

‘It is bad women who seem to know men best, and to be able to influence them most. They can make men come and go at will. They can turn and twist and mould them as they choose. And *they* never hesitate to speak their own wishes; to ask for what they want. There are no tragedies, of the negative kind, in *their* lives. Their tragedies have come and gone already; and their power remains. Why should good women leave power to such as they? Why should good women’s lives be wrecked for a convention? Why in the blind following of some society fetish should life lose its charm, its possibilities? Why should love eat its heart out, in vain? The time will come when women will not be afraid to speak to men, as they should speak, as free and equal. Surely if a woman is to be the equal and lifelong companion of a man, the closest to him—nay, the only one really close to him: the mother of his children—she should be free at the very outset to show her inclination to him just as he would to her. Don’t be frightened, Auntie dear; your eyes are paining me! . . . There! perhaps I said too much. But after all it is only theory. Take for your comfort, Auntie dear, that I am free an heart-whole. You need not fear for me; I can see what your dear eyes tell me. Yes! I am very young; perhaps too young to think such things. But I have thought of them. Thought them all over in every way and phase I can imagine.’

She stopped suddenly; bending over, she took the old lady in her arms and kissed her fondly several times, holding her tight. Then, as suddenly releasing her, she ran away before she could say a word.

CHAPTER VIII—THE T-CART

When Harold took his degree, Stephen’s father took her to Cambridge. She enjoyed the trip very much; indeed, it seemed under conditions that were absolutely happy.

When they had returned to Normanstand, the Squire took an early opportunity of bringing Harold alone into his study. He spoke to him with what in a very young man would have seemed diffidence:

‘I have been thinking, Harold, that the time has come when you should be altogether your own master. I am more than pleased, my boy, with the way you have gone through college; it is, I am sure, just as your dear father would have wished it, and as it would have pleased him best.’ He paused, and Harold said in a low voice:

‘I tried hard, sir, to do what I thought he would like; and what you would.’ The Squire went on more cheerfully:

‘I know that, my boy! I know that well. And I can tell you that it is not the least of the pleasures we have all had in your success, how you have justified yourself. You have won many honours in the schools, and you have kept the reputation as an athlete which your father was so proud of. Well, I suppose in the natural order of things you would go into a profession; and of course if you so desire you can do that. But if you can see your way to it I would rather that you stayed here. My house is your home as long as I live; but I don’t wish you to feel in any way dependent. I want you to stay here if you will; but to do it just because you wish to. To this end I have made over to you the estate at Camp which was my father’s gift to me when I came of age. It is not a very large one; but it will give you a nice position of your own, and a comfortable income. And with it goes my blessing, my dear boy. Take it as a gift from your father and myself!’

Harold was much moved, not only by the act itself but by the gracious way of doing it. There were tears in his eyes as he wrung the Squire’s hand; his voice thrilled with feeling as he said:

‘Your many goodnesses to my father’s son, sir, will, I hope, be justified by his love and loyalty. If I don’t say much it is because I do not feel quite master of myself. I shall try to show in time, as I cannot say it all at once, all that I feel.’

Harold continued to live at Normanstand. The house at Camp was in reality a charming cottage. A couple of servants were installed, and now and again he stayed there for a few days as he wished to get accustomed to the place. In a couple of months every one accepted the order of things; and life at Normanstand went on much as it had done before Harold had gone to college. There was a man in the house now instead of a boy: that was all. Stephen too was beginning to be a young woman, but the relative positions were the same as they had been. Her growth did not seem to make an ostensible difference to any one. The one who might have noticed it most, Mrs. Jarrold, had died during the last year of Harold’s life at college.

When the day came for the quarterly meeting of the magistrates of the county of Norchester, Squire Rowly arranged as usual to drive Squire Norman. This had been their habit for good many years. The two men usually liked to talk over the meeting as they returned home together. It was a beautiful morning for a drive, and when Rowly came flying up the avenue in his T-cart with three magnificent bays, Stephen ran out on the top of the steps to see him draw up. Rowly was a fine whip, and his horses felt it. Squire Norman was ready, and, after a kiss from Stephen, climbed into the high cart. The men raised their hats and waved good-bye. A word from Rowly; with a bound the horses were off. Stephen stood looking at them delighted; all was so

sunny, so bright, so happy. The world was so full of life and happiness to-day that it seemed as if it would never end; that nothing except good could befall.

Harold, later on that morning, was to go into Norchester also; so Stephen with a lonely day before her set herself to take up loose-ends of all sorts of little personal matters. They would all meet at dinner as Rowly was to stop the night at Normanstand.

Harold left the club in good time to ride home to dinner. As he passed the County Hotel he stopped to ask if Squire Norman had left; and was told that he had started only a short time before with Squire Rowly in his T-cart. He rode on fast, thinking that perhaps he might overtake them and ride on with them. But the bays knew their work, and did it. They kept their start; it was only at the top of the North hill, five miles out of Norchester, that he saw them in the distance, flying along the level road. He knew he would not now overtake them, and so rode on somewhat more leisurely.

The Norchester highroad, when it has passed the village of Brackling, turns away to the right behind the great clump of oaks. From this the road twists to the left again, making a double curve, and then runs to Norling Parva in a clear stretch of some miles before reaching the sharp turn down the hill which is marked 'Dangerous to Cyclists.' From the latter village branches the by-road over the hill which is the short cut to Normanstand.

When Harold turned the corner under the shadow of the oaks he saw a belated road-mender, surrounded by some gaping peasants, pointing excitedly in the distance. The man, who of course knew him, called to him to stop.

'What is it?' he asked, reining up.

'It be Squire Rowly's bays which have run away with him. Three on 'em, all in a row and comin' like the wind. Squire he had his reins all right, but they 'osses didn't seem to mind 'un. They was fair mad and bolted. The leader he had got frightened at the heap o' stones theer, an' the others took scare from him.'

Without a word Harold shook his reins and touched the horse with his whip. The animal seemed to understand and sprang forward, covering the ground at a terrific pace. Harold was not given to alarms, but here might be serious danger. Three spirited horses in a light cart made for pace, all bolting in fright, might end any moment in calamity. Never in his life did he ride faster than on the road to Norling Parva. Far ahead of him he could see at the turn, now and again, a figure running. Something had happened. His heart grew cold: he knew as well as though he had seen it, the high cart swaying on one wheel round the corner as the maddened

horses tore on their way; the one jerk too much, and the momentary reaction in the crash! . . .

With beating heart and eyes aflame in his white face he dashed on.

It was all too true. By the side of the roadway on the inner curve lay the cart on its side with broken shafts. The horses were prancing and stamping about along the roadway not recovered from their fright. Each was held by several men.

And on the grass two figures were still lying where they had been thrown out. Rowly, who had of course been on the off-side, had been thrown furthest. His head had struck the milestone that stood back on the waste ground before the ditch. There was no need for any one to tell that his neck had been broken. The way his head lay on one side, and the twisted, inert limbs, all told their story plainly enough.

Squire Norman lay on his back stretched out. Some one had raised him to a sitting posture and then lowered him again, straightening his limbs. He did not therefore look so dreadful as Rowly, but there were signs of coming death in the stertorous breathing, the ooze of blood from nostrils and ears as well as mouth. Harold knelt down by him at once and examined him. Those who were round all knew him and stood back. He felt the ribs and limbs; so far as he could ascertain by touch no bone was broken.

Just then the local doctor, for whom some one had run, arrived in his gig. He, too, knelt beside the injured man, a quick glance having satisfied him that there was only one patient requiring his care. Harold stood up and waited. The doctor looked up, shaking his head. Harold could hardly suppress the groan which was rising in his throat. He asked:

‘Is it immediate? Should his daughter be brought here?’

‘How long would it take her to arrive?’

‘Perhaps half an hour; she would not lose an instant.’

‘Then you had better send for her.’

‘I shall go at once!’ answered Harold, turning to jump on his horse, which was held on the road.

‘No, no!’ said the doctor, ‘send some one else. You had better stay here yourself. He may become conscious just before the end; and he may want to say something!’ It seemed to Harold that a great bell was sounding in his ears.—‘Before the end! Good God! Poor Stephen!’ . . . But this was no time for sorrow, or for thinking of it. That

would come later. All that was possible must be done; and to do it required a cool head. He called to one of the lads he knew could ride and said to him:

‘Get on my horse and ride as fast as you can to Normanstand. Send at once to Miss Norman and tell her that she is wanted instantly. Tell her that there has been an accident; that her father is alive, but that she must come at once without a moment’s delay. She had better ride my horse back as it will save time. She will understand from that the importance of time. Quick!’

The lad sprang to the saddle, and was off in a flash. Whilst Harold was speaking, the doctor had told the men, who, accustomed to hunting accidents, had taken a gate from its hinges and held it in readiness, to bring it closer. Then under his direction the Squire was placed on the gate. The nearest house was only about a hundred yards away; and thither they bore him. He was lifted on a bed, and then the doctor made fuller examination. When he stood up he looked very grave and said to Harold:

‘I greatly fear she cannot arrive in time. That bleeding from the ears means rupture of the brain. It is relieving the pressure, however, and he may recover consciousness before he dies. You had better be close to him. There is at present nothing that can be done. If he becomes conscious at all it will be suddenly. He will relapse and probably die as quickly.’

All at once Norman opened his eyes, and seeing him said quietly, as he looked around:

‘What place is this, Harold?’

‘Martin’s—James Martin’s, sir. You were brought here after the accident.’

‘Yes, I remember! Am I badly hurt? I can feel nothing!’

‘I fear so, sir! I have sent for Stephen.’

‘Sent for Stephen! Am I about to die?’ His voice, though feeble, was grave and even.

‘Alas! sir, I fear so!’ He sank on his knees as he spoke and took him, his second father, in his arms.

‘Is it close?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then listen to me! If I don’t see Stephen, give her my love and blessing! Say that with my last breath I prayed God to keep her and make her happy! You will tell her this?’

'I will! I will!' He could hardly speak for the emotion which was choking him. Then the voice went on, but slower and weaker:

'And Harold, my dear boy, you will look after her, will you not? Guard her and cherish her, as if you were indeed my son and she your sister!'

'I will. So help me God!' There was a pause of a few seconds which seemed an interminable time. Then in a feebler voice Squire Norman spoke again:

'And Harold—bend down—I must whisper! If it should be that in time you and Stephen should find that there is another affection between you, remember that I sanction it—with my dying breath. But give her time! I trust that to you! She is young, and the world is all before her. Let her choose . . . and be loyal to her if it is another! It may be a hard task, but I trust you, Harold. God bless you, my other son!' He rose slightly and listened. Harold's heart leaped. The swift hoof-strokes of a galloping horse were heard . . . The father spoke joyously:

'There she is! That is my brave girl! God grant that she may be in time. I know what it will mean to her hereafter!'

The horse stopped suddenly.

A quick patter of feet along the passage and then Stephen half dressed with a peignoir thrown over her, swept into the room. With the soft agility of a leopard she threw herself on her knees beside her father and put her arms round him. The dying man motioned to Harold to raise him. When this had been done he laid his hand tenderly on his daughter's head, saying:

'Let now, O Lord, Thy servant depart in peace! God bless and keep you, my dear child! You have been all your life a joy and a delight to me! I shall tell your mother when I meet her all that you have been to me! Harold, be good to her! Good-bye—Stephen! . . . Margaret! . . .'

His head fell over, and Harold, laying him gently down, knelt beside Stephen. He put his arm round her; and she, turning to him, laid her hand on his breast and sobbed as though her heart would break.

* * * * *

The bodies of the two squires were brought to Normanstand. Rowly had long ago said that if he died unmarried he would like to lie beside his half-sister, and that it was fitting that, as Stephen would be the new Squire of Norwood, her dust should in time lie by his. When the terrible news of her nephew's and of Norman's death came to

Norwood, Miss Laetitia hurried off to Normanstand as fast as the horses could bring her.

Her coming was an inexpressible comfort to Stephen. After the first overwhelming burst of grief she had settled into an acute despair. Of course she had been helped by the fact that Harold had been with her, and she was grateful for that too. But it did not live in her memory of gratitude in the same way. Of course Harold was with her in trouble! He had always been; would always be.

But the comfort which Aunt Laetitia could give was of a more positive kind.

From that hour Miss Rowly stayed at Normanstand. Stephen wanted her; and she wanted to be with Stephen.

After the funeral Harold, with an instinctive delicacy of feeling, had gone to live in his own house; but he came to Normanstand every day. Stephen had so long been accustomed to consulting him about everything that there was no perceptible change in their relations. Even necessary business to be done did not come as a new thing.

And so things went on outwardly at Normanstand very much as they had done before the coming of the tragedy. But for a long time Stephen had occasional bursts of grief which to witness was positive anguish to those who loved her.

Then her duty towards her neighbours became a sort of passion. She did not spare herself by day or by night. With swift intuition she grasped the needs of any ill case which came before her, and with swift movement she took the remedy in hand.

Her aunt saw and approved. Stephen, she felt, was in this way truly fulfilling her duty as a woman. The old lady began to secretly hope, and almost to believe, that she had laid aside those theories whose carrying into action she so dreaded.

But theories do not die so easily. It is from theory that practice takes its real strength, as well as its direction. And did the older woman whose life had been bound under more orderly restraint but know, Stephen was following out her theories, remorselessly and to the end.

CHAPTER IX—IN THE SPRING

The months since her father's death spread into the second year before Stephen began to realise the loneliness of her life. She had no companion now but her aunt; and though the old lady adored her, and she returned her love in full, the mere years between them made impossible the companionship that youth craves. Miss Rowly's

life was in the past. Stephen's was in the future. And loneliness is a feeling which comes unbidden to a heart.

Stephen felt her loneliness all round. In old days Harold was always within hail, and companionship of equal age and understanding was available. But now his very reticence in her own interest, and by her father's wishes, made for her pain. Harold had put his strongest restraint on himself, and in his own way suffered a sort of silent martyrdom. He loved Stephen with every fibre of his being. Day by day he came toward her with eager step; day by day he left her with a pang that made his heart ache and seemed to turn the brightness of the day to gloom. Night by night he tossed for hours thinking, thinking, wondering if the time would ever come when her kisses would be his . . . But the tortures and terrors of the night had their effect on his days. It seemed as if the mere act of thinking, of longing, gave him ever renewed self-control, so that he was able in his bearing to carry out the task he had undertaken: to give Stephen time to choose a mate for herself. Herein lay his weakness—a weakness coming from his want of knowledge of the world of women. Had he ever had a love affair, be it never so mild a one, he would have known that love requires a positive expression. It is not sufficient to sigh, and wish, and hope, and long, all to oneself. Stephen felt instinctively that his guarded speech and manner were due to the coldness—or rather the trusting abated worship—of the brotherhood to which she had been always accustomed. At the time when new forces were manifesting and expanding themselves within her; when her growing instincts, cultivated by the senses and the passions of young nature, made her aware of other forces, new and old, expanding themselves outside her; at the time when the heart of a girl is eager for new impressions and new expansions, and the calls of sex are working within her all unconsciously, Harold, to whom her heart would probably have been the first to turn, made himself in his effort to best show his love, a *quantité négligeable*.

Thus Stephen, whilst feeling that the vague desires of budding womanhood were trembling within her, had neither thought nor knowledge of their character or their ultimate tendency. She would have been shocked, horrified, had that logical process, which she applied so freely to less personal matters, been used upon her own intimate nature. In her case logic would of course act within a certain range; and as logic is a conscious intellectual process, she became aware that her objective was man. Man—in the abstract. 'Man,' not 'a man.' Beyond that, she could not go. It is not too much to say that she did not ever, even in her most errant thought, apply her reasoning, or even dream of its following out either the duties, the responsibilities, or the consequences of having a husband. She had a vague longing for younger

companionship, and of the kind naturally most interesting to her. There thought stopped.

One only of her male acquaintances did not at this time appear. Leonard Everard, who had some time ago finished his course at college, was living partly in London and partly on the Continent. His very absence made him of added interest to his old play-fellow. The image of his grace and comeliness, of his dominance and masculine force, early impressed on her mind, began to compare favourably with the actualities of her other friends; those of them at least who were within the circle of her personal interest. 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder.' In Stephen's mind had been but a very mustard-seed of fondness. But new lights were breaking for her; and all of them, in greater or lesser degree, shone in turn on the memory of the pretty self-willed dominant boy, who now grew larger and more masculine in stature under the instance of each successive light. Stephen knew the others fairly well through and through. The usual mixture of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of purpose and vacillation, was quite within the scope of her own feeling and of her observation. But this man was something of a problem to her; and, as such, had a prominence in her thoughts quite beyond his own worthiness.

In movement of some form is life; and even ideas grow when the pulses beat and thought quickens. Stephen had long had in her mind the idea of sexual equality. For a long time, in deference to her aunt's feelings, she had not spoken of it; for the old lady winced in general under any suggestion of a breach of convention. But though her outward expression being thus curbed had helped to suppress or minimise the opportunities of inward thought, the idea had never left her. Now, when sex was, consciously or unconsciously, a dominating factor in her thoughts, the dormant idea woke to new life. She had held that if men and women were equal the woman should have equal rights and opportunities as the man. It had been, she believed, an absurd conventional rule that such a thing as a proposal of marriage should be entirely the prerogative of man.

And then came to her, as it ever does to woman, opportunity. Opportunity, the cruelest, most remorseless, most unsparing, subtlest foe that womanhood has. Here was an opportunity for her to test her own theory; to prove to herself, and others, that she was right. They—'they' being the impersonal opponents of, or unbelievers in, her theory—would see that a woman could propose as well as a man; and that the result would be good.

It is a part of self-satisfaction, and perhaps not the least dangerous part of it, that it has an increasing or multiplying power of its own. The desire to do increases the

power to do; and desire and power united find new ways for the exercise of strength. Up to now Stephen's inclination towards Leonard had been vague, nebulous; but now that theory showed a way to its utilisation it forthwith began to become, first definite, then concrete, then substantial. When once the idea had become a possibility, the mere passing of time did the rest.

Her aunt saw—and misunderstood. The lesson of her own youth had not been applied; not even of those long hours and days and weeks at which she hinted when she had spoken of the tragedy of life which by inference was her own tragedy: 'to love and to be helpless. To wait, and wait, and wait, with your heart all aflame!'

Stephen recognised her aunt's concern for her health in time to protect herself from the curiosity of her loving-kindness. Her youth and readiness and adaptability, and that power of play-acting which we all have within us and of which she had her share, stood to her. With but little effort, based on a seeming acquiescence in her aunt's views, she succeeded in convincing the old lady that her incipient feverish cold had already reached its crisis and was passing away. But she had gained certain knowledge in the playing of her little part. All this self-protective instinct was new; for good or ill she had advanced one more step in not only the knowledge but the power of duplicity which is so necessary in the conventional life of a woman.

Oh! did we but see! Could we but see! Here was a woman, dowered in her youth with all the goods and graces in the power of the gods to bestow, who fought against convention; and who yet found in convention the strongest as well as the readiest weapon of defence.

For nearly two weeks Stephen's resolution was held motionless, neither advancing nor receding; it was veritably the slack water of her resolution. She was afraid to go on. Not afraid in sense of fear as it is usually understood, but with the opposition of virginal instincts; those instincts which are natural, but whose uses as well as whose powers are unknown to us.

CHAPTER X—THE RESOLVE

The next few days saw Stephen abnormally restless. She had fairly well made up her mind to test her theory of equality of the sexes by asking Leonard Everard to marry her; but her difficulty was as to the doing it. She knew well that it would not do to depend on a chance meeting for an opportunity. After all, the matter was too serious to allow of the possibility of levity. There were times when she thought she would write to him and make her proffer of affection in this way; but on every occasion when such thought recurred it was forthwith instantly abandoned. During the last few days,

however, she became more reconciled to even this method of procedure. The fever of growth was unabated. At last came an evening which she had all to herself. Miss Laetitia was going over to Norwood to look after matters there, and would remain the night. Stephen saw in her absence an opportunity for thought and action, and said that, having a headache, she would remain at home. Her aunt offered to postpone her visit. But she would not hear of it; and so she had the evening to herself.

After dinner in her boudoir she set herself to the composition of a letter to Leonard which would convey at least something of her feelings and wishes towards him. In the depths of her heart, which now and again beat furiously, she had a secret hope that when once the idea was broached Leonard would do the rest. And as she thought of that 'rest' a languorous dreaminess came upon her. She thought how he would come to her full of love, of yearning passion; how she would try to keep towards him, at first, an independent front which would preserve her secret anxiety until the time should come when she might yield herself to his arms and tell him all. For hours she wrote letter after letter, destroying them as quickly as she wrote, as she found that she had but swayed pendulum fashion between overtness and coldness. Some of the letters were so chilly in tone that she felt they would defeat their own object. Others were so frankly warm in the expression of—regard she called it, that with burning blushes she destroyed them at once at the candle before her.

At last she made up her mind. Just as she had done when a baby she realised that the opposing forces were too strong for her; she gave in gracefully. It would not do to deal directly in a letter with the matter in hand. She would write to Leonard merely asking him to see her. Then, when they were together without fear of interruption, she would tell him her views.

She got as far as 'Dear Mr. Leonard,' when she stood up, saying to herself:

'I shall not be in a hurry. I must sleep on it before I write!' She took up the novel she had been reading in the afternoon, and read on at it steadily till her bedtime.

That night she did not sleep. It was not that she was agitated. Indeed, she was more at ease than she had been for days; she had after much anxious thought made up her mind to a definite course of action. Therefore her sleeplessness was not painful. It was rather that she did not want to sleep, than that she could not. She lay still, thinking, thinking; dreaming such dreams as are the occasions of sanctified privacy to her age and sex.

In the morning she was no worse for her vigil. When at luncheon-time Aunt Laetitia had returned she went into all the little matters of which she had to report. It was after

tea-time when she found herself alone, and with leisure to attend to what was, she felt, directly her own affair. During the night she had made up her mind exactly what to say to Leonard; and as her specific resolution bore the test of daylight she was satisfied. The opening words had in their inception caused her some concern; but after hours of thought she had come to the conclusion that to address, under the circumstance, the recipient of the letter as 'Dear Mr. Everard' would hardly do. The only possible justification of her unconventional act was that there existed already a friendship, an intimacy of years, since childhood; that there were already between them knowledge and understanding of each other; that what she was doing, and about to do, was but a further step in a series of events long ago undertaken.

She thought it better to send by post rather than messenger, as the latter did away with all privacy with regard to the act.

The letter was as follows:

'Dear Leonard,—Would it be convenient for you to meet me to-morrow, Tuesday, at half-past twelve o'clock on the top of Caester Hill? I want to speak about a matter that may have some interest to you, and it will be more private there than in the house. Also it will be cooler in the shade on the hilltop.—

Yours sincerely, Stephen Norman.'

Having posted the letter she went about the usual routine of her life at Normanstand, and no occasion of suspicion or remark regarding her came to her aunt.

In her room that night when she had sent away her maid, she sat down to think, and all the misgivings of the day came back. One by one they were conquered by one protective argument:

'I am free to do as I like. I am my own mistress; and I am doing nothing that is wrong. Even if it is unconventional, what of that? God knows there are enough conventions in the world that are wrong, hopelessly, unalterably wrong. After all, who are the people who are most bound by convention? Those who call themselves "smart!" If Convention is the god of the smart set, then it is about time that honest people chose another!'

* * * * *

Leonard received the letter at breakfast-time. He did not give it any special attention, as he had other letters at the same time, some of which were, if less pleasant, of more immediate importance. He had of late been bombarded with dunning letters from tradesmen; for during his University life, and ever since, he had run into debt. The

moderate allowance his father made him he had treated as cash for incidental expenses, but everything else had been on credit. Indeed he was beginning to get seriously alarmed about the future, for his father, who had paid his debts once, and at a time when they were by comparison inconsiderable, had said that he would not under any circumstances pay others. He was not sorry, therefore, for an opportunity of getting away for a few hours from home; from himself—from anxieties, possibilities. The morning was a sweltering one, and he grumbled to himself as he set out on his journey through the woods.

* * * * *

Stephen rose fresh and in good spirits, despite her sleepless night. When youth and strength are to the fore, a night's sleep is not of much account, for the system once braced up is not allowed to slacken. It was a notable sign of her strong nature that she was not even impatient, but waited with calm fixity the hour at which she had asked Leonard Everard to meet her. It is true that as the time grew closer her nerve was less marked. And just before it she was a girl—and nothing more; with all girl's diffidence, a girl's self-distrust, a girl's abnegation, a girl's plasticity.

In the more purely personal aspect of her enterprise Stephen's effort was more conscious. It is hardly possible for a pretty woman to seek in her study of perfection the aid of her mirror and to be unconscious of her aims. There must certainly be at least one dominant purpose: the achievement of success. Stephen did not attempt to deny her own beauty; on the contrary she gave it the fullest scope. There was a certain triumph in her glance as she took her last look in her mirror; a gratification of her wish to show herself in the best way possible. It was a very charming picture which the mirror reflected.

It may be that there is a companionship in a mirror, especially to a woman; that the reflection of oneself is an emboldening presence, a personality which is better than the actuality of an unvalued stranger. Certainly, when Stephen closed the door and stood in the wainscoted passage, which was only dimly lit by the high window at either end, her courage seemed at once to ooze away.

Probably for the first time in her life, as she left the shade of the long passage and came out on the staircase flooded with the light of the noonday sun, Stephen felt that she was a girl—'girl' standing as some sort of synonym for weakness, pretended or actual. Fear, in whatever form or degree it may come, is a vital quality and must move. It cannot stand at a fixed point; if it be not sent backward it must progress. Stephen felt this, and, though her whole nature was repugnant to the task, forced herself to the effort of repression. It would, she felt, have been to her a

delicious pleasure to have abandoned all effort; to have sunk in the lassitude of self-surrender.

The woman in her was working; her sex had found her out!

She turned and looked around her, as though conscious of being watched. Then, seeing that she was alone, she went her way with settled purpose; with flashing eyes and glowing cheeks—and a beating heart. A heart all woman's since it throbbed the most with apprehension when the enemy, Man, was the objective of her most resolute attack. She knew that she must keep moving; that she must not stop or pause; or her whole resolution must collapse. And so she hurried on, fearful lest a chance meeting with any one might imperil her purpose.

On she went through the faint moss-green paths; through meadows rich with flowering grasses and the many reds of the summer wild-flowers. And so up through the path cut in the natural dipping of the rock that rose over Caester Hill and formed a strong base for the clump of great trees that made a landmark for many a mile around. During the first part of her journey between the house and the hilltop, she tried to hold her purpose at arm's length; it would be sufficient to face its terrors when the time had come. In the meantime the matter was of such overwhelming importance that nothing else could take its place; all she could do was to suspend the active part of the thinking faculties and leave the mind only receptive.

But when she had passed through the thin belt of stunted oak and beech which hedged in the last of the lush meadows, and caught sight of the clump of trees on the hilltop, she unconsciously braced herself as a young regiment loses its tremors when the sight of the enemy breaks upon it. No longer her eyes fell earthward; they were raised, and raised proudly. Stephen Norman was fixed in her intention. Like the woman of old, her feet were on the ploughshares and she would not hesitate.

As she drew near the appointed place her pace grew slower and slower; the woman in her was unconsciously manifesting itself. She would not be first in her tryst with a man. Unconsciousness, however, is not a working quality which can be relied upon for staying power; the approach to the trysting-place brought once more home to her the strange nature of her enterprise. She had made up her mind to it; there was no use in deceiving herself. What she had undertaken to do was much more unconventional than being first at a meeting. It was foolish and weak to delay. The last thought braced her up; and it was with a hurried gait, which alone would have betrayed her to an intelligent observer, that she entered the grove.

CHAPTER XI—THE MEETING

Had Stephen been better acquainted with men and women, she would have been more satisfied with herself for being the first at the tryst. The conventional idea, in the minds of most women and of all men, is that a woman should never be the first. But real women, those in whom the heart beats strong, and whose blood can leap, know better. These are the commanders of men. In them sex calls to sex, all unconsciously at first; and men answer to their call, as they to men's.

Two opposite feelings strove for dominance as Stephen found herself on the hilltop, alone. One a feeling natural enough to any one, and especially to a girl, of relief that a dreaded hour had been postponed; the other of chagrin that she was the first.

After a few moments, however, one of the two militant thoughts became dominant: the feeling of chagrin. With a pang she thought if she had been a man and summoned for such a purpose, how she would have hurried to the trysting-place; how the flying of her feet would have vied with the quick rapturous beating of her heart! With a little sigh and a blush, she remembered that Leonard did not know the purpose of the meeting; that he was a friend almost brought up with her since boy and girl times; that he had often been summoned in similar terms and for the most trivial of social purposes.

For nearly half an hour Stephen sat on the rustic seat under the shadow of the great oak, looking, half unconscious of its beauty and yet influenced by it, over the wide landscape stretched at her feet.

In spite of her disregard of conventions, she was no fool; the instinct of wisdom was strong within her, so strong that in many ways it ruled her conscious efforts. Had any one told her that her preparations for this interview were made deliberately with some of the astuteness that dominated the Devil when he took Jesus to the top of a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth at His feet, she would have, and with truth, denied it with indignation. Nevertheless it was a fact that she had, in all unconsciousness, chosen for the meeting a spot which would evidence to a man, consciously or unconsciously, the desirability for his own sake of acquiescence in her views and wishes. For all this spreading landscape was her possession, which her husband would share. As far as the eye could reach was within the estate which she had inherited from her father and her uncle.

The half-hour passed in waiting had in one way its advantages to the girl: though she was still as high strung as ever, she acquired a larger measure of control over herself. The nervous tension, however, was so complete physically that all her faculties were acutely awake; very early she became conscious of a distant footstep.

To Stephen's straining ears the footsteps seemed wondrous slow, and more wondrous regular; she felt instinctively that she would have liked to have listened to a more hurried succession of less evenly-marked sounds. But notwithstanding these thoughts, and the qualms which came in their turn, the sound of the coming feet brought great joy. For, after all, they were coming; and coming just in time to prevent the sense of disappointment at their delay gaining firm foothold. It was only when the coming was assured that she felt how strong had been the undercurrent of her apprehension lest they should not come at all.

Very sweet and tender and beautiful Stephen looked at this moment. The strong lines of her face were softened by the dark fire in her eyes and the feeling which glowed in the deep blushes which mantled her cheeks. The proudness of her bearing was no less marked than ever, but in the willowy sway of her body there was a yielding of mere sorry pride. In all the many moods which the gods allow to good women there is none so dear or so alluring, consciously as well as instinctively, to true men as this self-surrender. As Leonard drew near, Stephen sank softly into a seat, doing so with a guilty feeling of acting a part. When he actually came into the grove he found her seemingly lost in a reverie as she gazed out over the wide expanse in front of her. He was hot after his walk, and with something very like petulance threw himself into a cane armchair, exclaiming as he did so with the easy insolence of old familiarity:

'What a girl you are, Stephen! dragging a fellow all the way up here. Couldn't you have fixed it down below somewhere if you wanted to see me?'

Strangely enough, as it seemed to her, Stephen did not dislike his tone of mastery. There was something in it which satisfied her. The unconscious recognition of his manhood, as opposed to her womanhood, soothed her in a peaceful way. It was easy to yield to a dominant man. She was never more womanly than when she answered him softly:

'It was rather unfair; but I thought you would not mind coming so far. It is so cool and delightful here; and we can talk without being disturbed.' Leonard was lying back in his chair fanning himself with his wide-brimmed straw hat, with outstretched legs wide apart and resting on the back of his heels. He replied with grudging condescension:

'Yes, it's cool enough after the hot tramp over the fields and through the wood. It's not so good as the house, though, in one way: a man can't get a drink here. I say, Stephen, it wouldn't be half bad if there were a shanty put up here like those at the Grands Mulets or on the Matterhorn. There could be a tap laid on where a fellow could quench his thirst on a day like this!'

Before Stephen's eyes floated a momentary vision of a romantic ch[^]let with wide verandah and big windows looking over the landscape; a great wide stone hearth; quaint furniture made from the gnarled branches of trees; skins on the floor; and the walls adorned with antlers, great horns, and various trophies of the chase. And amongst them Leonard, in a picturesque suit, lolling back just as at present and smiling with a loving look in his eyes as she handed him a great blue-and-white Munich beer mug topped with cool foam. There was a soft mystery in her voice as she answered:

'Perhaps, Leonard, there will some day be such a place here!' He seemed to grumble as he replied:

'I wish it was here now. Some day seems a long way off!'

This seemed a good opening for Stephen; for the fear of the situation was again beginning to assail her, and she felt that if she did not enter on her task at once, its difficulty might overwhelm her. She felt angry with herself that there was a change in her voice as she said:

'Some day may mean—can mean everything. Things needn't be a longer way off than we choose ourselves, sometimes!'

'I say, that's a good one! Do you mean to say that because I am some day to own Brindehow I can do as I like with it at once, whilst the governor's all there, and a better life than I am any day? Unless you want me to shoot the old man by accident when we go out on the First.' He laughed a short, unmeaning masculine laugh which jarred somewhat on her. She did not, however, mean to be diverted from her main purpose, so she went on quickly:

'You know quite well, Leonard, that I don't mean anything of the kind. But there was something I wanted to say to you, and I wished that we should be alone. Can you not guess what it is?'

'No, I'll be hanged if I can!' was his response, lazily given.

Despite her resolution she turned her head; she could not meet his eyes. It cut her with a sharp pain to notice when she turned again that he was not looking at her. He continued fanning himself with his hat as he gazed out at the view. She felt that the critical moment of her life had come, that it was now or never as to her fulfilling her settled intention. So with a rush she went on her way:

'Leonard, you and I have been friends a long time. You know my views on some points, and that I think a woman should be as free to act as a man!' She paused;

words and ideas did not seem to flow with the readiness she expected. Leonard's arrogant assurance completed the dragging her back to earth which her own self-consciousness began:

'Drive on, old girl! I know you're a crank from Crankville on some subjects. Let us have it for all you're worth. I'm on the grass and listening.'

Stephen paused. 'A crank from Crankville!'—this after her nights of sleepless anxiety; after the making of the resolution which had cost her so much, and which was now actually in process of realisation. Was it all worth so much? why not abandon it now? . . . Abandon it! Abandon a resolution! All the obstinacy of her nature—she classed it herself as firmness—rose in revolt. She shook her head angrily, pulled herself together, and went on:

'That may be! though it's not what I call myself, or what I am usually called, so far as I know. At any rate my convictions are honest, and I am sure you will respect them as such, even if you do not share them.' She did not see the ready response in his face which she expected, and so hurried on:

'It has always seemed to me that a—when a woman has to speak to a man she should do so as frankly as she would like him to speak to her, and as freely. Leonard, I—I,' as she halted, a sudden idea, winged with possibilities of rescuing procrastination came to her. She went on more easily:

'I know you are in trouble about money matters. Why not let me help you?' He sat up and looked at her and said genially:

'Well, Stephen, you are a good old sort! No mistake about it. Do you mean to say you would help me to pay my debts, when the governor has refused to do so any more?'

'It would be a great pleasure to me, Leonard, to do anything for your good or your pleasure.'

There was a long pause; they both sat looking down at the ground. The woman's heart beat loud; she feared that the man must hear it. She was consumed with anxiety, and with a desolating wish to be relieved from the strain of saying more. Surely, surely Leonard could not be so blind as not to see the state of things! . . . He would surely seize the occasion; throw aside his diffidence and relieve her! . . . His words made a momentary music in her ears as he spoke:

'And is this what you asked me to come here for?'

The words filled her with a great shame. She felt herself a dilemma. It had been no part of her purpose to allude his debts. Viewed in the light of what was to follow, it would seem to him that she was trying to foreclose his affection. That could not be allowed to pass; the error must be rectified. And yet! . . . And yet this very error must be cleared up before she could make her full wish apparent. She seemed to find herself compelled by inexorable circumstances into an unlooked-for bluntness. In any case she must face the situation. Her pluck did not fail her; it was with a very noble and graceful simplicity that she turned to her companion and said:

‘Leonard, I did not quite mean that. It would be a pleasure to me to be of that or any other service to you, if I might be so happy! But I never meant to allude to your debts. Oh! Leonard, can’t you understand! If you were my husband—or—or going to be, all such little troubles would fall away from you. But I would not for the world have you think . . . ’

Her very voice failed her. She could not speak what was in her mind; she turned away, hiding in her hands her face which fairly seemed to burn. This, she thought, was the time for a true lover’s opportunity! Oh, if she had been a man, and a woman had so appealed, how he would have sprung to her side and taken her in his arms, and in a wild rapture of declared affection have swept away all the pain of her shame!

But she remained alone. There was no springing to her side; no rapture of declared affection; no obliteration of her shame. She had to bear it all alone. There, in the open; under the eyes that she would fain have seen any other phase of her distress. Her heart beat loud and fast; she waited to gain her self-control.

Leonard Everard had his faults, plenty of them, and he was in truth composed of an amalgam of far baser metals than Stephen thought; but he had been born of gentle blood and reared amongst gentlefolk. He did not quite understand the cause or the amount of his companion’s concern; but he could not but recognise her distress. He realised that it had followed hard upon her most generous intention towards himself. He could not, therefore, do less than try to comfort her, and he began his task in a conventional way, but with a blundering awkwardness which was all manlike. He took her hand and held it in his; this much at any rate he had learned in sitting on stairs or in conservatories after extra dances. He said as tenderly as he could, but with an impatient gesture unseen by her:

‘Forgive me, Stephen! I suppose I have said or done something which I shouldn’t. But I don’t know what it is; upon my honour I don’t. Anyhow, I am truly sorry for it. Cheer up, old girl! I’m not your husband, you know; so you needn’t be distressed.’

Stephen took her courage *à deux mains*. If Leonard would not speak she must. It was manifestly impossible that the matter could be left in its present state.

‘Leonard,’ she said softly and solemnly, ‘might not that some day be?’

Leonard, in addition to being an egotist and the very incarnation of selfishness, was a prig of the first water. He had been reared altogether in convention. Home life and Eton and Christchurch had taught him many things, wise as well as foolish; but had tended to fix his conviction that affairs of the heart should proceed on adamant lines of conventional decorum. It never even occurred to him that a lady could so far step from the confines of convention as to take the initiative in a matter of affection. In his blind ignorance he blundered brutally. He struck better than he knew, as, meaning only to pass safely by an awkward conversational corner, he replied:

‘No jolly fear of that! You’re too much of a boss for me!’ The words and the levity with which they were spoken struck the girl as with a whip. She turned for an instant as pale as ashes; then the red blood rushed from her heart, and face and neck were dyed crimson. It was not a blush, it was a suffusion. In his ignorance Leonard thought it was the former, and went on with what he considered his teasing.

‘Oh yes! You know you always want to engineer a chap your own way and make him do just as you wish. The man who has the happiness of marrying you, Stephen, will have a hard row to hoe!’ His ‘chaff’ with its utter want of refinement seemed to her, in her high-strung earnest condition, nothing short of brutal, and for a few seconds produced a feeling of repulsion. But it is in the nature of things that opposition of any kind arouses the fighting instinct of a naturally dominant nature. She lost sight of her femininity in the pursuit of her purpose; and as this was to win the man to her way of thinking, she took the logical course of answering his argument. If Leonard Everard had purposely set himself to stimulate her efforts in this direction he could hardly have chosen a better way. It came somewhat as a surprise to Stephen, when she heard her own words:

‘I would make a good wife, Leonard! A husband whom I loved and honoured would, I think, not be unhappy!’ The sound of her own voice speaking these words, though the tone was low and tender and more self-suppressing by far than was her wont, seemed to peal like thunder in her own ears. Her last bolt seemed to have sped. The blood rushed to her head, and she had to hold on to the arms of the rustic chair or she would have fallen forward.

The time seemed long before Leonard spoke again; every second seemed an age. She seemed to have grown tired of waiting for the sound of his voice; it was with a kind of surprise that she heard him say:

‘You limit yourself wisely, Stephen!’

‘How do you mean?’ she asked, making a great effort to speak.

‘You would promise to love and honour; but there isn’t anything about obeying.’

As he spoke Leonard stretched himself again luxuriously, and laughed with the intellectual arrogance of a man who is satisfied with a joke, however inferior, of his own manufacture. Stephen looked at him with a long look which began in anger—that anger which comes from an unwonted sense of impotence, and ends in tolerance, the intermediate step being admiration. It is the primeval curse that a woman’s choice is to her husband; and it is an important part of the teaching of a British gentlewoman, knit in the very fibres of her being by the remorseless etiquette of a thousand years, that she be true to him. The man who has in his person the necessary powers or graces to evoke admiration in his wife, even for a passing moment, has a stronghold unconquerable as a rule by all the deadliest arts of mankind.

Leonard Everard was certainly good to look upon as he lolled at his ease on that summer morning. Tall, straight, supple; a typical British gentleman of the educated class, with all parts of the body properly developed and held in some kind of suitable poise.

As Stephen looked, the anxiety and chagrin which tormented her seemed to pass. She realised that here was a nature different from her own, and which should be dealt with in a way unsuitable to herself; and the conviction seemed to make the action which it necessitated more easy as well as more natural to her. Perhaps for the first time in her life Stephen understood that it may be necessary to apply to individuals a standard of criticism unsuitable to self-judgment. Her recognition might have been summed up in the thought which ran through her mind:

‘One must be a little lenient with a man one loves!’

Stephen, when once she had allowed the spirit of toleration to work within her, felt immediately its calming influence. It was with brighter thoughts and better humour that she went on with her task. A task only, it seemed now; a means to an end which she desired.

‘Leonard, tell me seriously, why do you think I gave you the trouble of coming out here?’

‘Upon my soul, Stephen, I don’t know.’

‘You don’t seem to care either, lolling like that when I am serious!’ The words were acid, but the tone was soft and friendly, familiar and genuine, putting quite a meaning of its own on them. Leonard looked at her indolently:

‘I like to loll.’

‘But can’t you even guess, or try to guess, what I ask you?’

‘I can’t guess. The day’s too hot, and that shanty with the drinks is not built yet.’

‘Or may never be!’ Again he looked at her sleepily.

‘Never be! Why not?’

‘Because, Leonard, it may depend on you.’

‘All right then. Drive on! Hurry up the architect and the jerry-builder!’

A quick blush leaped to Stephen’s cheeks. The words were full of meaning, though the tone lacked something; but the news was too good. She could not accept it at once; she decided to herself to wait a short time. Ere many seconds had passed she rejoiced that she had done so as he went on:

‘I hope you’ll give me a say before that husband of yours comes along. He might be a blue-ribbonite; and it wouldn’t do to start such a shanty for rot-gut!’

Again a cold wave swept over her. The absolute difference of feeling between the man and herself; his levity against her earnestness, his callous blindness to her purpose, even the commonness of his words chilled her. For a few seconds she wavered again in her intention; but once again his comeliness and her own obstinacy joined hands and took her back to her path. With chagrin she felt that her words almost stuck in her throat, as summoning up all her resolution she went on:

‘It would be for you I would have it built, Leonard!’ The man sat up quickly.

‘For me?’ he asked in a sort of wonderment.

‘Yes, Leonard, for you and me!’ She turned away; her blushes so overcame her that she could not look at him. When she faced round again he was standing up, his back towards her.

She stood up also. He was silent for a while; so long that the silence became intolerable, and she spoke:

‘Leonard, I am waiting!’ He turned round and said slowly, the absence of all emotion from his face chilling her till her face blanched:

‘I don’t think I would worry about it!’

Stephen Norman was plucky, and when she was face to face with any difficulty she was all herself. Leonard did not look pleasant; his face was hard and there was just a suspicion of anger. Strangely enough, this last made the next step easier to the girl; she said slowly:

‘All right! I think I understand!’

He turned from her and stood looking out on the distant prospect. Then she felt that the blow which she had all along secretly feared had fallen on her. But her pride as well as her obstinacy now rebelled. She would not accept a silent answer. There must be no doubt left to torture her afterwards. She would take care that there was no mistake. Schooling herself to her task, and pressing one hand for a moment to her side as though to repress the beating of her heart, she came behind him and touched him tenderly on the arm.

‘Leonard,’ she said softly, ‘are you sure there is no mistake? Do you not see that I am asking you,’ she intended to say ‘to be my husband,’ but she could not utter the words, they seemed to stick in her mouth, so she finished the sentence: ‘that I be your wife?’

The moment the words were spoken—the bare, hard, naked, shameless words—the revulsion came. As a lightning flash shows up the blackness of the night the appalling truth of what she had done was forced upon her. The blood rushed to her head till cheeks and shoulders and neck seemed to burn. Covering her face with her hands she sank back on the seat crying silently bitter tears that seemed to scald her eyes and her cheeks as they ran.

Leonard was angry. When it began to dawn upon him what was the purpose of Stephen’s speech, he had been shocked. Young men are so easily shocked by breaches of convention made by women they respect! And his pride was hurt. Why should he have been placed in such a ridiculous position! He did not love Stephen in that way; and she should have known it. He liked her and all that sort of thing; but what right had she to assume that he loved her? All the weakness of his moral nature came out in his petulance. It was boyish that his eyes filled with tears. He knew it, and that made him more angry than ever. Stephen might well have been at a loss to understand his anger, as, with manifest intention to wound, he answered her:

‘What a girl you are, Stephen. You are always doing something or other to put a chap in the wrong and make him ridiculous. I thought you were joking—not a good joke either! Upon my soul, I don’t know what I’ve done that you should fix on me! I wish to goodness—’

If Stephen had suffered the red terror before, she suffered the white terror now. It was not injured pride, it was not humiliation, it was not fear; it was something vague and terrible that lay far deeper than any of these. Under ordinary circumstances she would have liked to have spoken out her mind and given back as good as she got; and even as the thoughts whirled through her brain they came in a torrent of vague vituperative eloquence. But now her tongue was tied. Instinctively she knew that she had put it out of her power to revenge, or even to defend herself. She was tied to the stake, and must suffer without effort and in silence.

Most humiliating of all was the thought that she must propitiate the man who had so wounded her. All love for him had in the instant passed from her; or rather she realised fully the blank, bare truth that she had never really loved him at all. Had she really loved him, even a blow at his hands would have been acceptable; but now . . .

She shook the feelings and thoughts from her as a bird does the water from its wings; and, with the courage and strength and adaptability of her nature, addressed herself to the hard task which faced her in the immediate present. With eloquent, womanly gesture she arrested the torrent of Leonard’s indignation; and, as he paused in surprised obedience, she said:

‘That will do, Leonard! It is not necessary to say any more; and I am sure you will see, later on, that at least there was no cause for your indignation! I have done an unconventional thing, I know; and I dare say I shall have to pay for it in humiliating bitterness of thought later on! But please remember we are all alone! This is a secret between us; no one else need ever know or suspect it!’

She rose as she concluded. The quiet dignity of her speech and bearing brought back Leonard in some way to his sense of duty as a gentleman. He began, in a sheepish way, to make an apology:

‘I’m sure I beg your pardon, Stephen.’ But again she held the warning hand:

‘There is no need for pardon; the fault, if there were any, was mine alone. It was I, remember, who asked you to come here and who introduced and conducted this melancholy business. I have asked you several things, Leonard, and one more I will add—’tis only one: that you will forget!’

As she moved away, her dismissal of the subject was that of an empress to a serf. Leonard would have liked to answer her; to have given vent to his indignation that, even when he had refused her offer, she should have the power to treat him if he was the one refused, and to make him feel small and ridiculous in his own eyes. But somehow he felt constrained to silence; her simple dignity outclassed him.

There was another factor too, in his forming his conclusion of silence. He had never seen Stephen look so well, or so attractive. He had never respected her so much as when her playfulness had turned to majestic gravity. All the boy and girl strife of the years that had gone seemed to have passed away. The girl whom he had played with, and bullied, and treated as frankly as though she had been a boy, had in an instant become a woman—and such a woman as demanded respect and admiration even from such a man.

CHAPTER XII—ON THE ROAD HOME

When Leonard Everard parted from Stephen he did so with a feeling of dissatisfaction: firstly, with Stephen; secondly, with things in general; thirdly, with himself. The first was definite, concrete, and immediate; he could give himself chapter and verse for all the girl's misdoing. Everything she had said or done had touched some nerve painfully, or had offended his feelings; and to a man of his temperament his feelings are very sacred things, to himself.

'Why had she put him in such a ridiculous position? That was the worst of women. They were always wanting him to do something he didn't want to do, or crying . . . there was that girl at Oxford.'

Here he turned his head slowly, and looked round in a furtive way, which was getting almost a habit with him. 'A fellow should go away so that he wouldn't have to swear lies. Women were always wanting money; or worse: to be married! Confound women; they all seemed to want him to marry them! There was the Oxford girl, and then the Spaniard, and now Stephen!' This put his thoughts in a new channel. He wanted money himself. Why, Stephen had spoken of it herself; had offered to pay his debts. Gad! it was a good idea that every one round the countryside seemed to know his affairs. What a flat he had been not to accept her offer then and there before matters had gone further. Stephen had lots of money, more than any girl could want. But she didn't give him time to get the thing fixed . . . If he had only known beforehand what she wanted he could have come prepared . . . that was the way with women! Always thinking of themselves! And now? Of course she wouldn't stump up after his refusing her. What would his father say if he came to hear of it? And he must speak to him soon, for these chaps were threatening to County Court him if he didn't

pay. Those harpies in Vere Street were quite nasty . . . ’ He wondered if he could work Stephen for a loan.

He walked on through the woodland path, his pace slower than before. ‘How pretty she had looked!’ Here he touched his little moustache. ‘Gad! Stephen was a fine girl anyhow! If it wasn’t for all that red hair . . . I like ’em dark better! . . . And her being such an infernal boss!’ . . . Then he said unconsciously aloud:

‘If I was her husband I’d keep her to rights!’

Poor Stephen!

‘So that’s what the governor meant by telling me that fortune was to be had, and had easily, if a man wasn’t a blind fool. The governor is a starchy old party. He wouldn’t speak out straight and say, “Here’s Stephen Norman, the richest girl you are ever likely to meet; why don’t you make up to her and marry her?” But that would be encouraging his son to be a fortune-hunter! Rot! . . . And now, just because she didn’t tell me what she wanted to speak about, or the governor didn’t give me a hint so that I might be prepared, I have gone and thrown away the chance. After all it mightn’t be so bad. Stephen is a fine girl! . . . But she mustn’t ever look at me as she did when I spoke about her not obeying. I mean to be master in my own house anyhow!’

‘A man mustn’t be tied down too tight, even if he is married. And if there’s plenty of loose cash about it isn’t hard to cover up your tracks . . . I think I’d better think this thing over calmly and be ready when Stephen comes at me again. That’s the way with women. When a woman like Stephen fixes her cold grey on a man she does not mean to go asleep over it. I daresay my best plan will be to sit tight, and let her work herself up a bit. There’s nothing like a little wholesome neglect for bringing a girl to her bearings!’ . . .

For a while he walked on in satisfied self-complacency.

‘Confound her! why couldn’t she have let me know that she was fond of me in some decent way, without all that formal theatrical proposing? It’s a deuced annoying thing in the long run the way the women get fond of me. Though it’s nice enough in some ways while it lasts!’ he added, as if in unwilling recognition of fact. As the path debouched on the highroad he said to himself half aloud:

‘Well, she’s a mighty fine girl, anyhow! And if she is red I’ve had about enough of the black! . . . That Spanish girl is beginning to kick too! I wish I had never come across . . . ,

‘Shut up, you fool!’ he said to himself as he walked on.

When he got home he found a letter from his father. He took it to his room before breaking the seal. It was at least concise and to the point:

'The enclosed has been sent to me. You will have to deal with it yourself. You know my opinion and also my intention. The items which I have marked have been incurred since I spoke to you last about your debts. I shall not pay another farthing for you. So take your own course!

'Jasper Everard.'

The enclosed was a jeweller's bill, the length and the total of which lengthened his face and drew from him a low whistle. He held it in his hand for a long time, standing quite still and silent. Then drawing a deep breath he said aloud:

'That settles it! The halter is on me! It's no use squealing. If it's to be a red head on my pillow! . . . All right! I must only make the best of it. Anyhow I'll have a good time to-day, even if it must be the last!'

That day Harold was in Norchester on business. It was late when he went to the club to dine. Whilst waiting for dinner he met Leonard Everard, flushed and somewhat at uncertain in his speech. It was something of a shock to Harold to see him in such a state.

Leonard was, however, an old friend, and man is as a rule faithful to friends in this form of distress. So in his kindly feeling Harold offered to drive him home, for he knew that he could thus keep him out of further harm. Leonard thanked him in uncertain speech, and said he would be ready. In the meantime he would go and play billiards with the marker whilst Harold was having his dinner.

At ten o'clock Harold's dogcart was ready and he went to look for Leonard, who had not since come near him. He found him half asleep in the smoking-room, much drunker than he had been earlier in the evening.

The drive was fairly long, so Harold made up his mind for a prolonged term of uneasiness and anxiety. The cool night-air, whose effect was increased by the rapid motion, soon increased Leonard's somnolence and for a while he slept soundly, his companion watching carefully lest he should sway over and fall out of the trap. He even held him up as they swung round sharp corners.

After a time he woke up, and woke in a nasty temper. He began to find fault in an incoherent way with everything. Harold said little, just enough to prevent any cause for further grievance. Then Leonard changed and became affectionate. This mood was a greater bore than the other, but Harold managed to bear it with stolid

indifference. Leonard was this by time making promises to do things for him, that as he was what he called a 'goo' fell'; he might count on his help and support in the future. As Harold knew him to be a wastrel, over head and ears in debt and with only the succession to a small estate, he did not take much heed to his maunderings. At last the drunken man said something which startled him so much that he instinctively drew himself together with such suddenness as to frighten the horse and almost make him rear up straight.

'Woa! Woa! Steady, boy. Gently!' he said, quieting him. Then turning to his companion said in a voice hollow with emotion and vibrant with suppressed passion:

'What was it you said?'

Leonard, half awake, and not half of that half master of himself, answered:

'I said I will make you agent of Normanstand when I marry Stephen.'

Harold grew cold. To hear of any one marrying Stephen was to him like plunging him in a glacier stream; but to hear her name so lightly spoken, and by such a man, was a bewildering shock which within a second set his blood on fire.

'What do you mean?' he thundered. 'You marry Ste . . . Miss Norman! You're not worthy to untie her shoe! You indeed! She wouldn't look on the same side of the street with a drunken brute like you! How dare you speak of her in such a way!'

'Brute!' said Leonard angrily, his vanity reaching inward to heart and brain through all the numbing obstacle of his drunken flesh. 'Who's brute? Brute yourself! Tell you goin' to marry Stephen, 'cos Stephen wants it. Stephen loves me. Loves me with all her red head! Wha're you doin'! Wha!!'

His words merged in a lessening gurgle, for Harold had now got him by the throat.

'Take care what you say about that lady! damn you!' he said, putting his face close the other's with eyes that blazed. 'Don't you dare to mention her name in such a way, or you will regret it longer than you can think. Loves you, you swine!'

The struggle and the fierce grip on his throat sobered Leonard somewhat. Momentarily sobbed him to that point when he could be coherent and vindictive, though not to the point where he could think ahead. Caution, wisdom, discretion, taste, were not for him at such a moment. Guarding his throat with both hands in an instinctive and spasmodic manner he answered the challenge:

'Who are you calling swine? I tell you she loves me. She ought to know. Didn't she tell me so this very day!' Harold drew back his arm to strike him in the face, his anger too

great for words. But the other, seeing the motion and in the sobering recognition of danger, spoke hastily:

‘Keep your hair on! You know so jolly much more than I do. I tell you that she told me this and a lot more this morning when she asked me to marry her.’

Harold’s heart grew cold as ice. There is something in the sound of a voice speaking truthfully which a true man can recognise. Through all Leonard’s half-drunken utterings came such a ring of truth; and Harold recognised it. He felt that his voice was weak and hollow as he spoke, thinking it necessary to give at first a sort of official denial to such a monstrous statement:

‘Liar!’

‘I’m no liar!’ answered Leonard. He would like to have struck him in answer to such a word had he felt equal to it. ‘She asked me to marry her to-day on the hill above the house, where I went to meet her by appointment. Here! I’ll prove it to you. Read this!’ Whilst he was speaking he had opened the greatcoat and was fumbling in the breast-pocket of his coat. He produced a letter which he handed to Harold, who took it with trembling hand. By this time the reins had fallen slack and the horse was walking quietly. There was moonlight, but not enough to read by. Harold bent over and lifted the driving-lamp next to him and turned it so that he could read the envelope. He could hardly keep either lamp or paper still, his hand trembled so when he saw that the direction was in Stephen’s handwriting. He was handing it back when Leonard said again:

‘Open it! Read it! You must do so; I tell you, you must! You called me a liar, and now must read the proof that I am not. If you don’t I shall have to ask Stephen to make you!’ Before Harold’s mind flashed a rapid thought of what the girl might suffer in being asked to take part in such a quarrel. He could not himself even act to the best advantage unless he knew the truth . . . he took the letter from the envelope and held it before the lamp, the paper fluttering as though in a breeze from the trembling of his hand. Leonard looked on, the dull glare of his eyes brightening with malignant pleasure as he beheld the other’s concern. He owed him a grudge, and by God he would pay it. Had he not been struck—throttled—called a liar! . . .

As he read the words Harold’s face cleared. ‘Why, you infernal young scoundrel!’ he said angrily, ‘that letter is nothing but a simple note from a young girl to an old friend—playmate asking him to come to see her about some trivial thing. And you construe it into a proposal of marriage. You hound!’ He held the letter whilst he spoke, heedless of the outstretched hand of the other waiting to take it back. There was a dangerous

glitter in Leonard's eyes. He knew his man and he knew the truth of what he had himself said, and he felt, with all the strength of his base soul, how best he could torture him. In the very strength of Harold's anger, in the poignancy of his concern, in the relief to his soul expressed in his eyes and his voice, his antagonist realised the jealousy of one who honours—and loves. Second by second Leonard grew more sober, and more and better able to carry his own idea into act.

'Give me my letter!' he began.

'Wait!' said Harold as he put the lamp back into its socket. 'That will do presently. Take back what you said just now!'

'What? Take back what?'

'That base lie; that Miss Norman asked you to marry her.'

Leonard felt that in a physical struggle for the possession of the letter he would be outmatched; but his passion grew colder and more malignant, and in a voice that cut like the hiss of a snake he spoke slowly and deliberately. He was all sober now; the drunkenness of brain and blood was lost, for the time, in the strength of his cold passion.

'It is true. By God it is true; every word of it! That letter, which you want to steal, is only a proof that I went to meet her on Caester Hill by her own appointment. When I got there, she was waiting for me. She began to talk about a ch[^]let there, and at first I didn't know what she meant—'

There was such conviction, such a triumphant truth in his voice, that Harold was convinced.

'Stop!' he thundered; 'stop, don't tell me anything. I don't want to hear. I don't want to know.' He covered his face with his hands and groaned. It was not as though the speaker were a stranger, in which case he would have been by now well on in his death by strangulation; he had known Leonard all his life, and he was a friend of Stephen's. And he was speaking truth.

The baleful glitter of Leonard's eyes grew brighter still. He was as a serpent when he goes to strike. In this wise he struck.

'I shall not stop. I shall go on and tell you all I choose. You have called me liar—twice. You have also called me other names. Now you shall hear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And if you won't listen to me some one else will.' Harold groaned again; Leonard's eyes brightened still more, and the evil smile on

his face grew broader as he began more and more to feel his power. He went on to speak with a cold deliberate malignancy, but instinctively so sticking to absolute truth that he could trust himself to hurt most. The other listened, cold at heart and physically; his veins and arteries seemed stagnant.

‘I won’t tell you anything of her pretty embarrassments; how her voice fell as she pleaded; how she blushed and stammered. Why, even I, who am used to women and their pretty ways and their passions and their flushings and their stormy upbraidings, didn’t quite know for a while what she was driving at. So at last she spoke out pretty plainly, and told me what a fond wife she’d make me if I would only take her!’ Harold said nothing; he only rocked a little as one in pain, and his hands fell. The other went on:

‘That is what happened this morning on Caester Hill under the trees where I met Stephen Norman by her own appointment; honestly what happened. If you don’t believe me now you can ask Stephen. My Stephen!’ he added in a final burst of venom as in a gleam of moonlight through a rift in the shadowy wood he saw the ghastly pallor of Harold’s face. Then he added abruptly as he held out his hand:

‘Now give me my letter!’

In the last few seconds Harold had been thinking. And as he had been thinking for the good, the safety, of Stephen, his thoughts flew swift and true. This man’s very tone, the openness of his malignity, the underlying scorn when he spoke of her whom others worshipped, showed him the danger—the terrible immediate danger in which she stood from such a man. With the instinct of a mind working as truly for the woman he loved as the needle does to the Pole he spoke quietly, throwing a sneer into the tone so as to exasperate his companion—it was brain against brain now, and for Stephen’s sake:

‘And of course you accepted. You naturally would!’ The other fell into the trap. He could not help giving an extra dig to his opponent by proving him once more in the wrong.

‘Oh no, I didn’t! Stephen is a fine girl; but she wants taking down a bit. She’s too high and mighty just at present, and wants to boss a chap too much. I mean to be master in my own house; and she’s got to begin as she will have to go on. I’ll let her wait a bit; and then I’ll yield by degrees to her lovemaking. She’s a fine girl, for all her red head; and she won’t be so bad after all!’

Harold listened, chilled into still and silent amazement. To hear Stephen spoken of in such a way appalled him. She of all women! . . . Leonard never knew how near sudden

death he was, as he lay back in his seat, his eyes getting dull again and his chin sinking. The drunkenness which had been arrested by his passion was reasserting itself. Harold saw his state in time and arrested his own movement to take him by the throat and dash him to the ground. Even as he looked at him in scornful hate, the cart gave a lurch and Leonard fell forward. Instinctively Harold swept an arm round him and held him up. As he did so the unconsciousness of arrested sleep came; Leonard's chin sank on his breast and he breathed stertorously.

As he drove on, Harold's thoughts circled in a tumult. Vague ideas of extreme measures which he ought to take flashed up and paled away. Intention revolved upon itself till its weak side was exposed, and, it was abandoned. He could not doubt the essential truth of Leonard's statement regarding the proposal of marriage. He did not understand this nor did he try to. His own love for the girl and the bitter awaking to its futility made him so hopeless that in his own desolation all the mystery of her doing and the cause of it was merged and lost.

His only aim and purpose now was her safety. One thing at least he could do: by fair means or foul stop Leonard's mouth, so that others need not know her shame! He groaned aloud as the thought came to him. Beyond this first step he could do nothing, think of nothing as yet. And he could not take this first step till Leonard had so far sobered that he could understand.

And so waiting for that time to come, he drove on through the silent night.