CHAPTER XIII—HAROLD'S RESOLVE

As they went on their way Harold noticed that Leonard's breathing became more regular, as in honest sleep. He therefore drove slowly so that the other might be sane again before they should arrive at the gate of his father's place; he had something of importance to say before they should part.

Seeing him sleeping so peacefully, Harold passed a strap round him to prevent him falling from his seat. Then he could let his thoughts run more freely. Her safety was his immediate concern; again and again he thought over what he should say to Leonard to ensure his silence.

Whilst he was pondering with set brows, he was startled by Leonard's voice at his side:

'Is that you, Harold? I must have been asleep!' Harold remained silent, amazed at the change. Leonard went on, quite awake and coherent:

'By George! I must have been pretty well cut. I don't remember a thing after coming down the stairs of the club and you and the hall-porter helping me up here. I say, old chap, you have strapped me up all safe and tight. It was good of you to take charge of me. I hope I haven't been a beastly nuisance!' Harold answered grimly:

'It wasn't exactly what I should have called it!' Then, after looking keenly at his companion, he said: 'Are you quite awake and sober now?'

'Quite.' The answer came defiantly; there was something in his questioner's tone which was militant and aggressive. Before speaking further Harold pulled up the horse. They were now crossing bare moorland, where anything within a mile could have easily been seen. They were quite alone, and would be undisturbed. Then he turned to his companion.

'You talked a good deal in your drunken sleep—if sleep it was. You appeared to be awake!' Leonard answered:

'I don't remember anything of it. What did I say?'

'I am going to tell you. You said something so strange and so wrong that you must answer for it. But first I must know its truth.'

'Must! You are pretty dictatorial,' said Leonard angrily. 'Must answer for it! What do you mean?'

'Were you on Caester Hill to-day?'

‘What’s that to you?’ There was no mistaking the defiant, quarrelsome intent.

‘Answer me! were you?’ Harold’s voice was strong and calm.

‘What if I was? It is none of your affair. Did I say anything in what you have politely called my drunken sleep?’

‘You did.’

‘What did I say?’

‘I shall tell you in time. But I must know the truth as I proceed. There is some one else concerned in this, and I must know as I go on. You can easily judge by what I say if I am right.’

‘Then ask away and be damned to you!’ Harold’s calm voice seemed to quell the other’s turbulence as he went on:

‘Were you on Caester Hill this morning?’

‘I was.’

‘Did you meet Miss --- a lady there?’

‘What . . . I did!’

‘Was it by appointment?’ Some sort of idea or half-recollection seemed to come to Leonard; he fumbled half consciously in his breast-pocket. Then he broke out angrily:

‘You have taken my letter!’

‘I know the answer to that question,’ said Harold slowly. ‘You showed me the letter yourself, and insisted on my reading it.’ Leonard’s heart began to quail. He seemed to have an instinctive dread of what was coming. Harold went on calmly and remorselessly:

‘Did a proposal of marriage pass between you?’

‘Yes!’ The answer was defiantly given; Leonard began to feel that his back was against the wall.

‘Who made it?’ The answer was a sudden attempt at a blow, but Harold struck down his hand in time and held it. Leonard, though a fairly strong man, was powerless in that iron grasp.

‘You must answer! It is necessary that I know the truth.’

‘Why must you? What have you to do with it? You are not my keeper! Nor Stephen’s; though I dare say you would like to be!’ The insult cooled Harold’s rising passion, even whilst it wrung his heart.

‘I have to do with it because I choose. You may find the answer if you wish in your last insult! Now, clearly understand me, Leonard Everard. You know me of old; and you know that what I say I shall do. One way or another, your life or mine may hang on your answers to me—if necessary!’ Leonard felt himself pulled up. He knew well the strength and purpose of the man. With a light laugh, which he felt to be, as it was, hollow, he answered:

‘Well, schoolmaster, as you are asking questions, I suppose I may as well answer them. Go on! Next!’ Harold went on in the same calm, cold voice:

‘Who made the proposal of marriage?’

‘She did.’

‘Did . . . Was it made at once and directly, or after some preliminary suggestion?’

‘After a bit. I didn’t quite understand at first what she was driving at.’ There was a long pause. With an effort Harold went on:

‘Did you accept?’ Leonard hesitated. With a really wicked scowl he eyed his big, powerfully-built companion, who still had his hand as in a vice. Then seeing no resource, he answered:

‘I did not! That does not mean that I won’t, though!’ he added defiantly. To his surprise Harold suddenly released his hand. There was a grimness in his tone as he said:

‘That will do! I know now that you have spoken the truth, sober as well as drunk. You need say no more. I know the rest. Most men—even brutes like you, if there are any—would have been ashamed even to think the things you said, said openly to me, you hound. You vile, traitorous, mean-souled hound!’

‘What did I say?’

‘I know what you said; and I shall not forget it.’ He went on, his voice deepening into a stern judicial utterance, as though he were pronouncing a sentence of death:

‘Leonard Everard, you have treated vilely a lady whom I love and honour more than I love my own soul. You have insulted her to her face and behind her back. You have made such disloyal reference to her and to her mad act in so trusting you, and have so

shown your intention of causing, intentionally or unintentionally, woe to her, that I tell you here and now that you hold henceforth your life in your hand. If you ever mention to a living soul what you have told me twice to-night, even though you should be then her husband; if you should cause her harm though she should then be your wife; if you should cause her dishonour in public or in private, I shall kill you. So help me God!'

Not a word more did he say; but, taking up the reins, drove on in silence till they arrived at the gate of Brindehow, where he signed to him to alight.

He drove off in silence.

When he arrived at his own house he sent the servant to bed, and then went to his study, where he locked himself in. Then, and then only, did he permit his thoughts to have full range. For the first time since the blow had fallen he looked straight in the face the change in his own life. He had loved Stephen so long and so honestly that it seemed to him now as if that love had been the very foundation of his life. He could not remember a time when he had not loved her; away back to the time when he, a big boy, took her, a little girl, under his care, and devoted himself to her. He had grown into the belief that so strong and so consistent an affection, though he had never spoken it or even hinted at it or inferred it, had become a part of her life as well as of his own. And this was the end of that dreaming! Not only did she not care for him, but found herself with a heart so empty that she needs must propose marriage to another man! There was surely something, more than at present he knew of or could understand, behind such an act done by her. Why should she ask Everard to marry her? Why should she ask any man? Women didn't do such things! . . . Here he paused. 'Women didn't do such things.' All at once there came back to him fragments of discussions—in which Stephen had had a part, in which matters of convention had been dealt with. Out of these dim and shattered memories came a comfort to his heart, though his brain could not as yet grasp the reason of it. He knew that Stephen had held an unconventional idea as to the equality of the sexes. Was it possible that she was indeed testing one of her theories?

The idea stirred him so that he could not remain quiet. He stood up, and walked the room. Somehow he felt light beginning to dawn, though he could not tell its source, or guess at the final measure of its fulness. The fact of Stephen having done such a thing was hard to bear; but it was harder to think that she should have done such a thing without a motive; or worse: with love of Leonard as a motive! He shuddered as he paused. She could not love such a man. It was monstrous! And yet she had done this thing . . . 'Oh, if she had had any one to advise her, to restrain her! But she had no mother! No mother! Poor Stephen!'

The pity of it, not for himself but for the woman he loved, overcame him. Sitting down heavily before his desk, he put his face on his hands, and his great shoulders shook.

Long, long after the violence of his emotion had passed, he sat there motionless, thinking with all the power and sincerity he knew; thinking for Stephen's good.

When a strong man thinks unselfishly some good may come out of it. He may blunder; but the conclusion of his reasoning must be in the main right. So it was with Harold. He knew that he was ignorant of women, and of woman's nature, as distinguished from man's. The only woman he had ever known well was Stephen; and she in her youth and in her ignorance of the world and herself was hardly sufficient to supply to him data for his present needs. To a clean-minded man of his age a woman is something divine. It is only when in later life disappointment and experience have hammered bitter truth into his brain, that he begins to realise that woman is not angelic but human. When he knows more, and finds that she is like himself, human and limited but with qualities of purity and sincerity and endurance which put his own to shame, he realises how much better a helpmate she is for man than could be the vague, unreal creations of his dreams. And then he can thank God for His goodness that when He might have given us Angels He did give us women!

Of one thing, despite the seeming of facts, he was sure: Stephen did not love Leonard. Every fibre of his being revolted at the thought. She of so high a nature; he of so low. She so noble; he so mean. Bah! the belief was impossible.

Impossible! Herein was the manifestation of his ignorance; anything is possible where love is concerned! It was characteristic of the man that in his mind he had abandoned, for the present at all events, his own pain. He still loved Stephen with all the strength of his nature, but for him the selfish side ceased to exist. He was trying to serve Stephen; and every other thought had to give way. He had been satisfied that in a manner she loved him in some way and in some degree; and he had hoped that in the fulness of time the childish love would ripen, so that in the end would come a mutual affection which was of the very essence of Heaven. He believed still that she loved him in some way; but the future that was based on hope had now been wiped out with a sudden and unsparing hand. She had actually proposed marriage to another man. If the idea of a marriage with him had ever crossed her mind she could have had no doubt of her feeling toward another. . . . And yet? And yet he could not believe that she loved Leonard; not even if all trains of reasoning should end by leading to that point. One thing he had at present to accept, that whatever might be the measure of affection Stephen might have for him, it was not love as he understood

it. He resolutely turned his back on the thought of his own side of the matter, and tried to find some justification of Stephen's act.

'Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to ye' has perhaps a general as well as a special significance. It is by patient tireless seeking that many a precious thing has been found. It was after many a long cycle of thought that the seeking and the knocking had effectual result. Harold came to believe, vaguely at first but more definitely as the evidence nucleated, that Stephen's act was due to some mad girlish wish to test her own theory; to prove to herself the correctness of her own reasoning, the fixity of her own purpose. He did not go on analysing further; for as he walked the room with a portion of the weight taken from his heart he noticed that the sky was beginning to quicken. The day would soon be upon him, and there was work to be done. Instinctively he knew that there was trouble in store for Stephen, and he felt that in such an hour he should be near her. All her life she had been accustomed to him. In her sorrows to confide in him, to tell him her troubles so that they might dwindle and pass away; to enhance her pleasures by making him a sharer in them.

Harold was inspirited by the coming of the new day. There was work to be done, and the work must be based on thought. His thoughts must take a practical turn; what was he to do that would help Stephen? Here there dawned on him for the first time the understanding of a certain humiliation which she had suffered; she had been refused! She who had stepped so far out of the path of maidenly reserve in which she had always walked as to propose marriage to a man, had been refused! He did not, could not, know to the full the measure of such humiliation to a woman; but he could guess at any rate a part. And that guessing made him grind his teeth in impotent rage.

But out of that rage came an inspiration. If Stephen had been humiliated by the refusal of one man, might not this be minimised if she in turn might refuse another? Harold knew so well the sincerity of his own love and the depth of his own devotion that he was satisfied that he could not err in giving the girl the opportunity of refusing him. It would be some sort of balm to her wounded spirit to know that Leonard's views were not shared by all men. That there were others who would deem it a joy to serve as her slaves. When she had refused him she would perhaps feel easier in her mind. Of course if she did not refuse him . . . Ah! well, then would the gates of Heaven open . . . But that would never be. The past could not be blotted out! All he could do would be to serve her. He would go early. Such a man as Leonard Everard might make some new complication, and the present was quite bad enough.

It was a poor enough thing for him, he thought at length. She might trample on him; but it was for her sake. And to him what did it matter? The worst had come. All was over now!

CHAPTER XIV—THE BEECH GROVE

On the morning following the proposal Stephen strolled out into a beech grove, some little distance from the house, which from childhood had been a favourite haunt of hers. It was not in the immediate road to anywhere, and so there was no occasion for any of the household or the garden to go through it or near it. She did not put on a hat, but took only a sunshade, which she used in passing over the lawn. The grove was on the side of the house away from her own room and the breakfast-room. When she had reached its shade she felt that at last she was alone.

The grove was a privileged place. Long ago a great number of young beeches had been planted so thickly that as they grew they shot up straight and branchless in their struggle for the light. Not till they had reached a considerable altitude had they been thinned; and then the thinning had been so effected that, as the high branches began to shoot out in the freer space, they met in time and interlaced so closely that they made in many places a perfect screen of leafy shade. Here and there were rifts or openings through which the light passed; under such places the grass was fine and green, or the wild hyacinths in due season tinged the earth with blue. Through the grove some wide alleys had been left: great broad walks where the soft grass grew short and fine, and to whose edges came a drooping of branches and an upspringing of undergrowth of laurel and rhododendron. At the far ends of these walks were little pavilions of marble built in the classic style which ruled for garden use two hundred years ago. At the near ends some of them were close to the broad stretch of water from whose edges ran back the great sloping banks of emerald sward dotted here and there with great forest trees. The grove was protected by a ha-ha, so that it was never invaded from without, and the servants of the house, both the domestics and the gardeners and grooms, had been always forbidden to enter it. Thus by long usage it had become a place of quiet and solitude for the members of the family.

To this soothing spot had come Stephen in her pain. The long spell of self-restraint during that morning had almost driven her to frenzy, and she sought solitude as an anodyne to her tortured soul. The long anguish of a third sleepless night, following on a day of humiliation and terror, had destroyed for a time the natural resilience of a healthy nature. She had been for so long in the prison of her own purpose with Fear as warder; the fetters of conventional life had so galled her that here in the accustomed solitude of this place, in which from childhood she had been used to move and think

freely, she felt as does a captive who has escaped from an irksome durance. As Stephen had all along been free of movement and speech, no such opportunities of freedom called to her. The pent-up passion in her, however, found its own relief. Her voice was silent, and she moved with slow steps, halting often between the green tree-trunks in the cool shade; but her thoughts ran free, and passion found a vent. No stranger seeing the tall, queenly girl moving slowly through the trees could have imagined the fierce passion which blazed within her, unless he had been close enough to see her eyes. The habit of physical restraint to which all her life she had been accustomed, and which was intensified by the experience of the past thirty-six hours, still ruled her, even here. Gradually the habit of security began to prevail, and the shackles to melt away. Here had she come in all her childish troubles. Here had she fought with herself, and conquered herself. Here the spirits of the place were with her and not against her. Here memory in its second degree, habit, gave her the full sense of spiritual freedom.

As she walked to and fro the raging of her spirit changed its objective: from restraint to its final causes; and chief amongst them the pride which had been so grievously hurt. How she loathed the day that had passed, and how more than all she hated herself for her part in it; her mad, foolish, idiotic, self-importance which gave her the idea of such an act and urged her to the bitter end of its carrying out; her mulish obstinacy in persisting when every fibre of her being had revolted at the doing, and when deep in her inmost soul was a deterring sense of its futility. How could she have stooped to have done such a thing: to ask a man . . . oh! the shame of it, the shame of it all! How could she have been so blind as to think that such a man was worthy! . . .

In the midst of her whirlwind of passion came a solitary gleam of relief: she knew with certainty that she did not love Leonard; that she had never loved him. The coldness of disdain to him, the fear of his future acts which was based on disbelief of the existence of that finer nature with which she had credited him, all proved to her convincingly that he could never really have been within the charmed circle of her inner life. Did she but know it, there was an even stronger evidence of her indifference to him in the ready manner in which her thoughts flew past him in their circling sweep. For a moment she saw him as the centre of a host of besetting fears; but her own sense of superior power nullified the force of the vision. She was able to cope with him and his doings, were there such need. And so her mind flew back to the personal side of her trouble: her blindness, her folly, her shame.

In truth she was doing good work for herself. Her mind was working truly and to a beneficent end. One by one she was overcoming the false issues of her passion and drifting to an end in which she would see herself face to face and would place so truly

the blame for what had been as to make it a warning and ennobling lesson of her life. She moved more quickly, passing to and fro as does a panther in its cage when the desire of forest freedom is heavy upon it.

That which makes the irony of life will perhaps never be understood in its casual aspect by the finite mind of man. The 'why' and 'wherefore' and the 'how' of it is only to be understood by that All-wise intelligence which can scan the future as well as the present, and see the far far-reaching ramifications of those schemes of final development to which the manifestation of completed character tend.

To any mortal it would seem a pity that to Stephen in her solitude, when her passion was working itself out to an end which might be good, should come an interruption which would throw it back upon itself in such a way as to multiply its malignant force. But again it is a part of the Great Plan that instruments whose use man's finite mind could never predicate should be employed: the seeming good to evil, the seeming evil to good.

As she swept to and fro, her raging spirit compelling to violent movement, Stephen's eyes were arrested by the figure of a man coming through the aisles of the grove. At such a time any interruption of her passion was a cause for heightening anger; but the presence of a person was as a draught to a full-fed furnace. Most of all, in her present condition of mind, the presence of a man—for the thought of a man lay behind all her trouble, was as a tornado striking a burning forest. The blood of her tortured heart seemed to leap to her brain and to suffuse her eyes. She 'saw blood'!

It mattered not that the man whom she saw she knew and trusted. Indeed, this but added fuel to the flame. In the presence of a stranger some of her habitual self-restraint would doubtless have come back to her. But now the necessity for such was foregone; Harold was her alter ego, and in his presence was safety. He was, in this aspect, but a higher and more intelligent rendering of the trees around her. In another aspect he was an opportune victim, something to strike at. When the anger of a poison snake opens its gland, and the fang is charged with venom, it must strike at something. It does not pause or consider what it may be; it strikes, though it may be at stone or iron. So Stephen waited till her victim was within distance to strike. Her black eyes, fierce with passion and blood-rimmed as a cobra's, glittered as he passed among the tree-trunks towards her, eager with his errand of devotion.

Harold was a man of strong purpose. Had he not been, he would never have come on his present errand. Never, perhaps, had any suitor set forth on his quest with a heavier heart. All his life, since his very boyhood, had been centred round the girl whom to-day he had come to serve. All his thought had been for her: and to-day all he

could expect was a gentle denial of all his hopes, so that his future life would be at best a blank.

But he would be serving Stephen! His pain might be to her good; ought to be, to a certain extent, to her mental ease. Her wounded pride would find some solace . . . As he came closer the feeling that he had to play a part, veritably to act one, came stronger and stronger upon him, and filled him with bitter doubt as to his power. Still he went on boldly. It had been a part of his plan to seem to come eagerly, as a lover should come; and so he came. When he got close to Stephen, all the witchery of her presence came upon him as of old. After all, he loved her with his whole soul; and the chance had come to tell her so. Even under the distressing conditions of his suit, the effort had its charm.

Stephen schooled herself to her usual attitude with him; and that, too, since the effort was based on truth came with a certain ease to her. At the present time, in her present frame of mind, nothing in the wide world could give her pleasure; the ease which came, if it did not change her purpose, increased her power. Their usual salutation, begun when she was a little baby, was 'Good morning, Stephen!' 'Good morning, Harold!' It had become so much a custom that now it came mechanically on her part. The tender reference to childhood's days, though it touched her companion to the quick, did not appeal to her since she had no special thought of it. Had such a thought come to her it might have softened her even to tears, for Harold had been always deep in her heart. As might have been expected from her character and condition of mind, she was the first to begin:

'I suppose you want to see me about something special, Harold, you have come so early.'

'Yes, Stephen. Very special!'

'Were you at the house?' she asked in a voice whose quietness might have conveyed a warning. She was so suspicious now that she suspected even Harold of—of what she did not know. He answered in all simplicity:

'No. I came straight here.'

'How did you know I should be here?' Her voice was now not only quiet but sweet. Without thinking, Harold blundered on. His intention was so single-minded, and his ignorance of woman so complete, that he did not recognise even elementary truths:

‘I knew you always came here long ago when you were a child when you were in—’ Here it suddenly flashed upon him that if he seemed to expect that she was in trouble as he had purposed saying, he would give away his knowledge of what had happened and so destroy the work to which he had set himself. So he finished the sentence in a lame and impotent manner, which, however, saved complete annihilation as it was verbally accurate: ‘in short frocks.’ Stephen needed to know little more. Her quick intelligence grasped the fact that there was some purpose afoot which she did not know or understand. She surmised, of course, that it was some way in connection with her mad act, and she grew cooler in her brain as well as colder in her heart as she prepared to learn more. Stephen had changed from girl to woman in the last twenty-four hours; and all the woman in her was now awake. After a moment’s pause she said with a winning smile:

‘Why, Harold, I’ve been in long frocks for years. Why should I come here on this special day on that account?’ Even as she was speaking she felt that it would be well to abandon this ground of inquiry. It had clearly told her all it could. She would learn more by some other means. So she went on in a playful way, as a cat—not a kitten—does when it has got a mouse:

‘That reason won’t work, Harold. It’s quite rusty in the joints. But never mind it! Tell me why you have come so early?’ This seemed to Harold to be a heaven-sent opening; he rushed in at once:

‘Because, Stephen, I wanted to ask you to be my wife! Oh! Stephen, don’t you know that I love you? Ever since you were a little girl! When you were a little girl and I a big boy I loved you. I have loved you ever since with all my heart, and soul, and strength. Without you the world is a blank to me! For you and your happiness I would do anything—anything!’

This was no acting. When once the barrier of beginning had been broken, his soul seemed to pour itself out. The man was vibrant through all his nature; and the woman’s very soul realised its truth. For an instant a flame of gladness swept through her; and for the time it lasted put all other thought aside.

But suspicion is a hard metal which does not easily yield to fire. It can come to white heat easily enough, but its melting-point is high indeed. When the flame had leaped it had spent its force; the reaction came quick. Stephen’s heart seemed to turn to ice, all the heat and life rushing to her brain. Her thoughts flashed with convincing quickness; there was no time for doubting amid their rush. Her life was for good or ill at the crossing of the ways. She had trusted Harold thoroughly. The habit of her whole life from her babyhood up had been to so look to him as comrade and protector and

sympathetic friend. She was so absolutely sure of his earnest devotion that this new experience of a riper feeling would have been a joy to her, if it should be that his act was all spontaneous and done in ignorance of her shame. 'Shame' was the generic word which now summarised to herself her thought of her conduct in proposing to Leonard. But of this she must be certain. She could not, dare not, go farther till this was settled. With the same craving for certainty with which she convinced herself that Leonard understood her overtures, and with the same dogged courage with which she pressed the matter on him, she now went on to satisfy her mind.

'What did you do yesterday?'

'I was at Norcester all day. I went early. By the way, here is the ribbon you wanted; I think it's exactly the same as the pattern.' As he spoke he took a tissue-piper parcel from his pocket and handed it to her.

'Thanks!' she said. 'Did you meet any friends there?'

'Not many.' He answered guardedly; he had a secret to keep.

'Where did you dine?'

'At the club!' He began to be uneasy at this questioning; but he did not see any way to avoid answering without creating some suspicion.

'Did you see any one you knew at the club?' Her voice as she spoke was a little harder, a little more strained. Harold noticed the change, rather by instinct than reason. He felt that there was danger in it, and paused. The pause seemed to suddenly create a new fury in the breast of Stephen. She felt that Harold was playing with her. Harold! If she could not trust him, where then was she to look for trust in the world? If he was not frank with her, what then meant his early coming; his seeking her in the grove; his proposal of marriage, which seemed so sudden and so inopportune? He must have seen Leonard, and by some means have become acquainted with her secret of shame . . . His motive?

Here her mind halted. She knew as well as if it had been trumpeted from the skies that Harold knew all. But she must be certain . . . Certain!

She was standing erect, her hands held down by her sides and clenched together till the knuckles were white; all her body strung high—like an over-pitched violin. Now she raised her right hand and flung it downward with a passionate jerk.

‘Answer me!’ she cried imperiously. ‘Answer me! Why are you playing with me? Did you see Leonard Everard last night? Answer me, I say. Harold An Wolf, you do not lie! Answer me!’

As she spoke Harold grew cold. From the question he now knew that Stephen had guessed his secret. The fat was in the fire with a vengeance. He did not know what to do, and still remained silent. She did not give him time to think, but spoke again, this time more coldly. The white terror had replaced the red:

‘Are you not going to answer me a simple question, Harold? To be silent now is to wrong me! I have a right to know!’

In his trouble, for he felt that say what he would he could only give her new pain, he said humbly:

‘Don’t ask me, Stephen! Won’t you understand that I want to do what is best for you? Won’t you trust me?’ Her answer came harshly. A more experienced man than Harold, one who knew women better, would have seen how overwrought she was, and would have made pity the pivot of his future bearing and acts and words while the interview lasted; pity, and pity only. But to Harold the high ideal was ever the same. The Stephen whom he loved was no subject for pity, but for devotion only. He knew the nobility of her nature and must trust it to the end. When her silence and her blazing eyes denied his request, he answered her query in a low voice:

‘I did!’ Even whilst he spoke he was thankful for one thing, he had not been pledged in any way to confidence. Leonard had forced the knowledge on him; and though he would have preferred a million times over to be silent, he was still free to speak. Stephen’s next question came more coldly still:

‘Did he tell you of his meeting with me?’

‘He did.’

‘Did he tell you all?’ It was torture to him to answer; but he was at the stake and must bear it.

‘I think so! If it was true.’

‘What did he tell you? Stay! I shall ask you the facts myself; the broad facts. We need not go into details . . . ’

‘Oh, Stephen!’ She silenced his pleading with an imperious hand.

‘If I can go into this matter, surely you can. If I can bear the shame of telling, you can at least bear that of listening. Remember that knowing—knowing what you know, or at least what you have heard—you could come here and propose marriage to me!’ This she said with a cold, cutting sarcasm which sounded like the rasping of a roughly-sharpened knife through raw flesh. Harold groaned in spirit; he felt a weakness which began at his heart to steal through him. It took all his manhood to bear himself erect. He dreaded what was coming, as of old the once-tortured victim dreaded the coming torment of the rack.

CHAPTER XV—THE END OF THE MEETING

Stephen went on in her calm, cold voice:

‘Did he tell you that I had asked him to marry me?’ Despite herself, as she spoke the words a red tide dyed her face. It was not a flush; it was not a blush; it was a sort of flood which swept through her, leaving her in a few seconds whiter than before. Harold saw and understood. He could not speak; he lowered his head silently. Her eyes glittered more coldly. The madness that every human being may have once was upon her. Such a madness is destructive, and here was something more vulnerable than herself.

‘Did he tell you how I pressed him?’ There was no red tide this time, nor ever again whilst the interview lasted. To bow in affirmation was insufficient; with an effort he answered:

‘I understood so.’ She answered with an icy sarcasm:

‘You understood so! Oh, I don’t doubt he embellished the record with some of his own pleasantries. But you understood it; and that is sufficient.’ After a pause she went on:

‘Did he tell you that he had refused me?’

‘Yes!’ Harold knew now that he was under the torture, and that there was no refusing. She went on, with a light laugh, which wrung his heart even more than her pain had done . . . Stephen to laugh like that!

‘And I have no doubt that he embellished that too, with some of his fine masculine witticisms. I understood myself that he was offended at my asking him. I understood it quite well; he told me so!’ Then with feminine intuition she went on:

‘I dare say that before he was done he said something kindly of the poor little thing that loved him; that loved him so much, and that she had to break down all the bounds of modesty and decorum that had made the women of her house honoured

for a thousand years! And you listened to him whilst he spoke! Oh-h-h!' she quivered with her white-hot anger, as the fierce heat in the heart of a furnace quivers. But her voice was cold again as she went on:

'But who could help loving him? Girls always did. It was such a beastly nuisance! You "understood" all that, I dare say; though perhaps he did not put it in such plain words!' Then the scorn, which up to now had been imprisoned, turned on him; and he felt as though some hose of deathly chill was being played upon him.

'And yet you, knowing that only yesterday, he had refused me—refused my pressing request that he should marry me, come to me hot-foot in the early morning and ask me to be your wife. I thought such things did not take place; that men were more honourable, or more considerate, or more merciful! Or at least I used to think so; till yesterday. No! till to-day. Yesterday's doings were my own doings, and I had to bear the penalty of them myself. I had come here to fight out by myself the battle of my shame . . . '

Here Harold interrupted her. He could not bear to hear Stephen use such a word in connection with herself.

'No! You must not say "shame." There is no shame to you, Stephen. There can be none, and no one must say it in my presence!' In her secret heart of hearts she admired him for his words; she felt them at the moment sink into her memory, and knew that she would never forget the mastery of his face and bearing. But the blindness of rage was upon her, and it is of the essence of this white-hot anger that it preys not on what is basest in us, but on what is best. That Harold felt deeply was her opportunity to wound him more deeply than before.

'Even here in the solitude which I had chosen as the battleground of my shame you had need to come unasked, unthought of, when even a lesser mind than yours, for you are no fool, would have thought to leave me alone. My shame was my own, I tell you; and I was learning to take my punishment. My punishment! Poor creatures that we are, we think our punishment will be what we would like best: to suffer in silence, and not to have spread abroad our shame!' How she harped on that word, though she knew that every time she uttered it, it cut to the heart of the man who loved her. 'And yet you come right on top of my torture to torture me still more and illimitably. You come, you who alone had the power to intrude yourself on my grief and sorrow; power given you by my father's kindness. You come to me without warning, considerately telling me that you knew I would be here because I had always come here when I had been in trouble. No—I do you an injustice. "In trouble" was not what you said, but that I had come when I had been in short frocks. Short frocks! And you came to tell

me that you loved me. You thought, I suppose, that as I had refused one man, I would jump at the next that came along. I wanted a man. God! God! what have I done that such an affront should come upon me? And come, too, from a hand that should have protected me if only in gratitude for my father's kindness!' She was eyeing him keenly, with eyes that in her unflinching anger took in everything with the accuracy of sun-painting. She wanted to wound; and she succeeded.

But Harold had nerves and muscles of steel; and when the call came to them they answered. Though the pain of death was upon him he did not flinch. He stood before her like a rock, in all his great manhood; but a rock on whose summit the waves had cast the wealth of their foam, for his face was as white as snow. She saw and understood; but in the madness upon her she went on trying new places and new ways to wound:

'You thought, I suppose, that this poor, neglected, despised, rejected woman, who wanted so much to marry that she couldn't wait for a man to ask her, would hand herself over to the first chance comer who threw his handkerchief to her; would hand over herself—and her fortune!'

'Oh, Stephen! How can you say such things, think such things?' The protest broke from him with a groan. His pain seemed to inflame her still further; to gratify her hate, and to stimulate her mad passion:

'Why did I ever see you at all? Why did my father treat you as a son; that when you had grown and got strong on his kindness you could thus insult his daughter in the darkest hour of her pain and her shame!' She almost choked with passion. There was now nothing in the whole world that she could trust. In the pause he spoke:

'Stephen, I never meant you harm. Oh, don't speak such wild words. They will come back to you with sorrow afterwards! I only meant to do you good. I wanted . . . ' Her anger broke out afresh:

'There; you speak it yourself! You only wanted to do me good. I was so bad that any kind of a husband . . . Oh, get out of my sight! I wish to God I had never seen you! I hope to God I may never see you again! Go! Go! Go!'

This was the end! To Harold's honest mind such words would have been impossible had not thoughts of truth lain behind them. That Stephen—his Stephen, whose image in his mind shut out every other woman in the world, past, present, and future—should say such things to any one, that she should think such things, was to him a deadly blow. But that she should say them to him! . . . Utterance, even the utterance which speaks in the inmost soul, failed him. He had in some way that he knew not

hurt—wounded—killed Stephen; for the finer part was gone from the Stephen that he had known and worshipped so long. She wished him gone; she wished she had never seen him; she hoped to God never to see him again. Life for him was over and done! There could be no more happiness in the world; no more wish to work, to live! . . .

He bowed gravely; and without a word turned and walked away.

Stephen saw him go, his tall form moving amongst the tree trunks till finally it was lost in their massing. She was so filled with the tumult of her passion that she looked, unmoved. Even the sense of his going did not change her mood. She raged to and fro amongst the trees, her movements getting quicker and quicker as her excitement began to change from mental to physical; till the fury began to exhaust itself. All at once she stopped, as though arrested by a physical barrier; and with a moan sank down in a helpless heap on the cool moss.

* * * * *

Harold went from the grove as one seems to move in a dream. Little things and big were mixed up in his mind. He took note, as he went towards the town by the byroads, of everything around him in his usual way, for he had always been one of those who notice unconsciously, or rather unintentionally. Long afterwards he could shut his eyes and recall every step of the way from the spot where he had turned from Stephen to the railway station outside Norcester. And on many and many such a time when he opened them again the eyelids were wet. He wanted to get away quickly, silently, unobserved. With the instinct of habitual thought his mind turned London-ward. He met but few persons, and those only cottiers. He saluted them in his usual cheery way, but did not stop to speak with any. He was about to take a single ticket to London when it struck him that this might look odd, so he asked for a return. Then, his mind being once more directed towards concealment of purpose, he sent a telegram to his housekeeper telling her that he was called away to London on business. It was only when he was far on his journey that he gave thought to ways and means, and took stock of his possessions. Before he took out his purse and pocket-book he made up his mind that he would be content with what it was, no matter how little. He had left Normanstand and all belonging to it for ever, and was off to hide himself in whatever part of the world would afford him the best opportunity. Life was over! There was nothing to look forward to; nothing to look back at! The present was a living pain whose lightest element was despair. As, however, he got further and further away, his practical mind began to work; he thought over matters so as to arrange in his mind

how best he could dispose of his affairs, so to cause as little comment as might be, and to save the possibility of worry or distress of any kind to Stephen.

Even then, in his agony of mind, his heart was with her; it was not the least among his troubles that he would have to be away from her when perhaps she would need him most. And yet whenever he would come to this point in his endless chain of thought, he would have to stop for a while, overcome with such pain that his power of thinking was paralysed. He would never, could never, be of service to her again. He had gone out of her life, as she had gone out of his life; though she never had, nor never could out of his thoughts. It was all over! All the years of sweetness, of hope, and trust, and satisfied and justified faith in each other, had been wiped out by that last terrible, cruel meeting. Oh! how could she have said such things to him! How could she have thought them! And there she was now in all the agony of her unrestrained passion. Well he knew, from his long experience of her nature, how she must have suffered to be in such a state of mind, to have so forgotten all the restraint of her teaching and her life! Poor, poor Stephen! Fatherless now as well as motherless; and friendless as well as fatherless! No one to calm her in the height of her wild abnormal passion! No one to comfort her when the fit had passed! No one to sympathise with her for all that she had suffered! No one to help her to build new and better hopes out of the wreck of her mad ideas! He would cheerfully have given his life for her. Only last night he was prepared to kill, which was worse than to die, for her sake. And now to be far away, unable to help, unable even to know how she fared. And behind her eternally the shadow of that worthless man who had spurned her love and flouted her to a chance comer in his drunken delirium. It was too bitter to bear. How could God lightly lay such a burden on his shoulders who had all his life tried to walk in sobriety and chastity and in all worthy and manly ways! It was unfair! It was unfair! If he could do anything for her? Anything! Anything! . . . And so the unending whirl of thoughts went on!

The smoke of London was dim on the horizon when he began to get back to practical matters. When the train drew up at Euston he stepped from it as one to whom death would be a joyous relief!

He went to a quiet hotel, and from there transacted by letter such business matters as were necessary to save pain and trouble to others. As for himself, he made up his mind that he would go to Alaska, which he took to be one of the best places in the as yet uncivilised world for a man to lose his identity. As a security at the start he changed his name; and as John Robinson, which was not a name to attract public attention, he shipped as a passenger on the *Scoriac* from London to New York.

The *Scoriac* was one of the great cargo boats which take a certain number of passengers. The few necessaries which he took with him were chosen with an eye to utility in that frozen land which he sought. For the rest, he knew nothing, nor did he care how or whither he went. His vague purpose was to cross the American Continent to San Francisco, and there to take passage for the high latitudes north of the Yukon River.

* * * * *

When Stephen began to regain consciousness her first sensation was one of numbness. She was cold in the back, and her feet did not seem to exist; but her head was hot and pulsating as though her brain were a living thing. Then her half-open eyes began to take in her surroundings. For another long spell she began to wonder why all around her was green. Then came the inevitable process of reason. Trees! It is a wood! How did I come here? why am I lying on the ground?

All at once wakened memory opened on her its flood-gates, and overwhelmed her with pain. With her hands pressed to her throbbing temples and her burning face close to the ground, she began to recall what she could of the immediate past. It all seemed like a terrible dream. By degrees her intelligence came back to its normal strength, and all at once, as does one suddenly wakened from sleep to the knowledge of danger, she sat up.

Somehow the sense of time elapsed made Stephen look at her watch. It was half-past twelve. As she had come into the grove immediately after breakfast, and as Harold had almost immediately joined her, and as the interview between them had been but short, she must have lain on the ground for more than three hours. She rose at once, trembling in every limb. A new fear began to assail her; that she had been missed at home, and that some one might have come to look for her. Up to now she had not been able to feel the full measure of pain regarding what had passed, but which would, she knew, come to her in the end. It was too vague as yet; she could not realise that it had really been. But the fear of discovery was immediate, and must be guarded against without delay. As well as she could, she tidied herself and began to walk slowly back to the house, hoping to gain her own room unnoticed. That her general intelligence was awake was shown by the fact that before she left the grove she remembered that she had forgotten her sunshade. She went back and searched till she had found it.

Gaining her room without meeting any one, she at once change her dress, fearing that some soil or wrinkle might betray her. Resolutely she put back from her mind all consideration of the past; there would be time for that later on. Her nerves were

already much quieter than they had been. That long faint, or lapse into insensibility, had for the time taken the place of sleep. There would be a price to be paid for it later; but for the present it had served its purpose. Now and again she was disturbed by one thought; she could not quite remember what had occurred after Harold had left, and just before she became unconscious. She dared not dwell upon it, however. It would doubtless all come back to her when she had leisure to think the whole matter over as a connected narrative.

When the gong sounded for lunch she went down, with a calm exterior, to face the dreaded ordeal of another meal.

Luncheon passed off without a hitch. She and her aunt talked as usual over all the small affairs of the house and the neighbourhood, and the calm restraint was in itself soothing. Even then she could not help feeling how much convention is to a woman's life. Had it not been for these recurring trials of set hours and duties she could never have passed the last day and night without discovery of her condition of mind. That one terrible, hysterical outburst was perhaps the safety valve. Had it been spread over the time occupied in conventional duties its force even then might have betrayed her; but without the necessity of nerving herself to conventional needs, she would have infallibly betrayed herself by her negative condition.

After lunch she went to her own boudoir where, when she had shut the inner door, no one was allowed to disturb her without some special need in the house or on the arrival of visitors. This 'sporting oak' was the sign of 'not at home' which she had learned in her glimpse of college life. Here in the solitude of safety, she began to go over the past, resolutely and systematically.

She had already been so often over the memory of the previous humiliating and unhappy day that she need not revert to it at present. Since then had she not quarrelled with Harold, whom she had all her life so trusted that her quarrel with him seemed to shake the very foundations of her existence? As yet she had not remembered perfectly all that had gone on under the shadow of the beech grove. She dared not face it all at once, even as yet. Time must elapse before she should dare to cry; to think of her loss of Harold was to risk breaking down altogether. Already she felt weak. The strain of the last forty-eight hours was too much for her physical strength. She began to feel, as she lay back in her cushioned chair, that a swoon is no worthy substitute for sleep. Indeed it had seemed to make the need for sleep even more imperative.

It was all too humiliating! She wanted to think over what had been; to recall it as far as possible so as to fix it in her mind, whilst it was still fresh. Later on, some action might

have to be based on her recollection. And yet . . . How could she think when she was so tired . . . tired . . .

Nature came to the poor girl's relief at last, and she fell into a heavy sleep . . .

It was like coming out of the grave to be dragged back to waking life out of such a sleep, and so soon after it had begun. But the voice seemed to reach to her inner consciousness in some compelling way. For a second she could not understand; but as she rose from the cushions the maid's message repeated, brought her wide awake and alert in an instant:

'Mr. Everard, young Mr. Everard, to see you, miss!'

CHAPTER XVI—A PRIVATE CONVERSATION

The name braced Stephen at once. Here was danger, an enemy to be encountered; all the fighting blood of generations leaped to the occasion. The short spell of sleep had helped to restore her. There remained still quite enough of mental and nervous excitement to make her think quickly; the words were hardly out of the maid's mouth before her resolution was taken. It would never do to let Leonard Everard see she was diffident about meeting him; she would go down at once. But she would take the precaution of having her aunt present; at any rate, till she should have seen how the land lay. Her being just waked from sleep would be an excuse for asking her aunt to see the visitor till she came down. So she said to the maid:

'I have been asleep. I must have got tired walking in the wood in the heat. Ask Auntie to kindly see Mr. Everard in the blue drawing-room till I come down. I must tidy my hair; but I will be down in a few minutes.'

'Shall I send Marjorie to you, miss?'

'No! Don't mind; I can do what I want myself. Hurry down to Miss Rowly!'

How she regarded Leonard Everard now was shown in her instinctive classing him amongst her enemies.

When she entered the room she seemed all aglow. She wanted not only to overcome but to punish; and all the woman in her had risen to the effort. Never in her life had Stephen Norman looked more radiantly beautiful, more adorable, more desirable. Even Leonard Everard felt his pulses quicken as he saw that glowing mass of beauty standing out against the cold background of old French tapestry. All the physical side of him leaped in answer to the call of her beauty; and even his cold heart and his self-engrossed brain followed with slower gait. He had been sitting opposite

Miss Rowly in one of the windows, twirling his hat in nervous suspense. He jumped up, and, as she came towards him, went forward rapidly to greet her. No one could mistake the admiration in his eyes. Ever since he had made up his mind to marry her she had assumed a new aspect in his thoughts. But now her presence swept away all false imaginings; from the moment that her loveliness dawned upon him something like love began to grow within his breast. Stephen saw the look and it strengthened her. He had so grievously wounded her pride the previous day that her victory on this was a compensation which set her more at her old poise.

Her greeting was all sweetness: she was charmed to see him. How was his father, and what was the news? Miss Rowly looked on with smiling visage. She too had seen the look of admiration in his eyes, and it pleased her. Old ladies, especially when they are maiden ladies, always like to see admiration in the eyes of young men when they are turned in the direction of any girl dear to them.

They talked for some time, keeping all the while, by Stephen's clever generalship, to the small-talk of the neighbourhood and the minor events of social importance. As the time wore on she could see that Leonard was growing impatient, and evidently wanted to see her alone. She ignored, however, all his little private signalling, and presently ordered tea to be brought. This took some little time; when it had been brought and served and drunk, Leonard was in a smothered fume of impatience. She was glad to see that as yet her aunt had noticed nothing, and she still hoped that she would be able to so prolong matters, that she would escape without a private interview. She did not know the cause of Leonard's impatience: that he must see her before the day passed. She too was an egoist, in her own way; in the flush of belief of his subjugation she did not think of attributing to him any other motive than his desire for herself. As she had made up her mind on the final issue she did not want to be troubled by a new 'scene.'

But, after all, Leonard was a man; and man's ways are more direct than woman's. Seeing that he could not achieve his object in any other way, he said out suddenly, thinking, and rightly, that she would not wish to force an issue in the presence of her aunt:

'By the way, Miss Norman,' he had always called her 'Miss Norman' in her aunt's presence: 'I want to have two minutes with you before I go. On a matter of business,' he added, noticing Miss Rowly's surprised look. The old lady was old-fashioned even for her age; in her time no young man would have asked to see a young lady alone on business. Except on one kind of business; and with regard to that kind of business

gentlemen had to obtain first the confidence and permission of guardians. Leonard saw the difficulty and said quickly:

'It is on the matter you wrote to me about!'

Stephen was prepared for a nasty shock, but hardly for so nasty a one as this. There was an indelicacy about it which went far beyond the bounds of thoughtless conventionality. That such an appeal should be made to her, and in such a way, savoured of danger. Her woman's intuition gave her the guard, and at once she spoke, smilingly and gently as one recalling a matter in which the concern is not her own:

'Of course! It was selfish of me not to have thought of it, and to have kept you so long waiting. The fact is, Auntie, that Leonard—I like to call him Leonard, since we were children together, and he is so young; though perhaps it would be more decorous nowadays to say "Mr. Everard"—has consulted me about his debts. You know, Auntie dear, that young men will be young men in such matters; or perhaps you do not, since the only person who ever worried you has been myself. But I stayed at Oxford and I know something of young men's ways; and as I am necessarily more or less of a man of business, he values my help. Don't you, Leonard?' The challenge was so direct, and the position he was in so daringly put, that he had to acquiesce. Miss Rowly, who had looked on with a frown of displeasure, said coldly:

'I know you are your own mistress, my dear. But surely it would be better if Mr. Everard would consult with his solicitor or his father's agent, or some of his gentlemen friends, rather than with a young lady whose relations with him, after all, are only those of a neighbour on visiting terms. For my own part, I should have thought that Mr. Everard's best course would have been to consult his own father! But the things that gentlemen, as well as ladies do, have been sadly changed since my time!' Then, rising in formal dignity, she bowed gravely to the visitor before leaving the room.

But the position of being left alone in the room with Leonard did not at all suit Stephen's plans. Rising quickly she said to her aunt:

'Don't stir, Auntie. I dare say you are right in what you say; but I promised Mr. Everard to go into the matter. And as I have brought the awkwardness on myself, I suppose I must bear it. If Mr. Everard wants to see me alone, and I suppose he is diffident in speaking on such a matter before you—he didn't play with you, you know!—we can go out on the lawn. We shan't be long!' Before Leonard could recover his wits she had headed him out on the lawn.

Her strategy was again thoroughly good. The spot she chose, though beyond earshot, was quite in the open and commanded by all the windows in that side of the house. A person speaking there might say what he liked, but his actions must be discreet.

On the lawn Stephen tripped ahead; Leonard followed inwardly raging. By her clever use of the opening she had put him in a difficulty from which there was no immediate means of extrication. He could not quarrel overtly with Stephen; if he did so, how could he enter on the pressing matter of his debts? He dared not openly proclaim his object in wishing to marry her, for had he done so her aunt might have interfered, with what success he could not be sure. In any case it would cause delay, and delay was what he could not afford. He felt that in mentioning his debts at just such a movement he had given Stephen the chance she had so aptly taken. He had to be on his good behaviour, however; and with an apprehension that was new to him he followed her.

An old Roman marble seat was placed at an angle from the house so that the one of the two occupants within its curve must almost face the house, whilst the other gave to it at least a quarter-face. Stephen seated herself on the near side, leaving to Leonard the exposed position. As soon as he was seated, she began:

'Now, Leonard, tell me all about the debts?' She spoke in tones of gay friendliness, but behind the mask of her cheerfulness was the real face of fear. Down deep in her mind was a conviction that her letter was a pivotal point of future sorrow. It was in the meantime quite apparent to her that Leonard kept it as his last resource; so her instinct was to keep it to the front and thus minimise its power.

Leonard, though inwardly weakened by qualms of growing doubt, had the animal instinct that, as he was in opposition, his safety was in attacking where his opponent most feared. He felt that there was some subtle change in his companion; this was never the same Stephen Norman whom only yesterday he had met upon the hill! He plunged at once into his purpose.

'But it wasn't about my debts you asked me to meet you, Stephen.'

'You surprise me, Leonard! I thought I simply asked you to come to meet me. I know the first subject I mentioned when we began to talk, after your grumbling about coming in the heat, was your money matters.' Leonard winced, but went on:

'It was very good of you, Stephen; but really that is not what I came to speak of to-day. At first, at all events!' he added with a sublime naïvetté, as the subject of his debts and his imperative want of money rose before him. Stephen's eyes flashed; she saw more clearly than ever through his purpose. Such as admission at the very outset

of the proffer of marriage, which she felt was coming, was little short of monstrous. Her companion did not see the look of mastery on her face; he was looking down at the moment. A true lover would have been looking up.

'I wanted to tell you, Stephen, that I have been thinking over what you said to me in your letter, and what you said in words; and I want to accept!' As he was speaking he was looking her straight in the face.

Stephen answered slowly with a puzzled smile which wrinkled up her forehead:

'Accept what I said in my letter! why, Leonard, what do you mean? That letter must have had a lot more in it than I thought. I seem to remember that it was simply a line asking you to meet me. Just let me look at it; I should like to be sure of what actually is!' As she spoke she held out her hand. Leonard was nonplussed; he did not know what to say. Stephen made up her mind to have the letter back. Leonard was chafing under the position forced upon him, and tried to divert his companion from her purpose. He knew well why she had chosen that exposed position for their interview. Now, as her outstretched hand embarrassed him, he made reprisal; he tried to take it in his in a tender manner.

She instantly drew back her hand and put it behind her in a decided manner. She was determined that whatever might happen she would not let any watcher at the windows, by chance or otherwise, see any sign of tenderness on her part. Leonard, thinking that his purpose had been effected, went on, breathing more freely:

'Your letter wasn't much. Except of course that it gave me the opportunity of listening to what you said; to all your sweet words. To your more than sweet proposal!'

'Yes! It must have been sweet to have any one, who was in a position to do so, offer to help you when you knew that you were overwhelmed with debts!' The words were brutal. Stephen felt so; but she had no alternative. Leonard had some of the hard side of human nature; but he had also some of the weak side. He went on blindly:

'I have been thinking ever since of what you said, and I want to tell you that I would like to do as you wish!' As he spoke, his words seemed even to him to be out of place. He felt it would be necessary to throw more fervour into the proceedings. The sudden outburst which followed actually amused Stephen, even in her state of fear:

'Oh, Stephen, don't you know that I love you! You are so beautiful! I love you! I love you! Won't you be my wife?'

This was getting too much to close quarters. Stephen said in a calm, business-like way:

‘My dear Leonard, one thing at a time! I came out here, you know, to speak of your debts; and until that is done, I really won’t go into any other matter. Of course if you’d rather not . . . ’ Leonard really could not afford this; matters were too pressing with him. So he tried to affect a cheery manner; but in his heart was a black resolve that she should yet pay for this.

‘All right! Stephen. Whatever you wish I will do; you are the queen of my heart, you know!’

‘How much is the total amount?’ said Stephen.

This was a change to the prosaic which made sentiment impossible. He gave over, for the time.

‘Go on!’ said Stephen, following up her advantage. ‘Don’t you even know how much you owe?’

‘The fact is, I don’t. Not exactly. I shall make up the amount as well as I can and let you know. But that’s not what I came about to-day.’ Stephen was going to make an angry gesture of dissent. She was not going to have that matter opened up. She waited, however, for Leonard was going on after his momentary pause. She breathed more freely after his first sentence. He was unable evidently to carry on a double train of thought.

‘It was about that infernal money-lenders’ letter that the Governor got!’ Stephen got still less anxious. This open acknowledgment of his true purpose seemed to clear the air.

‘What is the amount?’ Leonard looked quickly at her; the relief of her mind made her tone seem joyful.

‘A monkey! Five hundred pounds, you know. But then there’s three hundred for interest that has to be paid also. It’s an awful lot of money, isn’t it?’ The last phrase was added on seeing Stephen’s surprised look.

‘Yes!’ she answered quietly. ‘A great deal of money—to waste!’ They were both silent for a while. Then she said:

‘What does your father say to it?’

‘He was in an awful wax. One of these beastly duns had written to him about another account and he was in a regular fury. When I told him I would pay it within a week, he said very little, which was suspicious; and then, just when I was going out, he sprung this on me. Mean of him! wasn’t it? I need expect no help from him.’ As he was

speaking he took a mass of letters from his pocket and began to look among them for the money-lenders' letter.

'Why, what a correspondence you have there. Do you keep all your letters in your pockets?' said Stephen quietly.

'All I don't tear up or burn. It wouldn't do to let the Governor into my secrets. He might know too much!'

'And are all those letters from duns?'

'Mostly, but I only keep those letters I have to attend to and those I care for.'

'Show me the bundle!' she said. Then seeing him hesitate, added:

'You know if I am to help you to get clear you must take me into your confidence. I dare say I shall have to see a lot more letters than these before you are quite clear!' Her tone was too quiet. Knowing already the silent antagonism between them he began to suspect her; knowing also that her own letter was not amongst them, he used his wits and handed them over without a word. She, too, suspected him. After his tacit refusal to give her the letter, she almost took it for granted that it was not amongst them. She gave no evidence of her feeling, however, but opened and read the letters in due sequence; all save two, which, being in a female hand, she gave back without a word. There was a calmness and an utter absence of concern, much less of jealousy, about this which disconcerted him. Throughout her reading Stephen's face showed surprise now and again; but when she came to the last, which was that of the usurers, it showed alarm. Being a woman, a legal threat had certain fears of its own.

'There must be no delay about this!' she said.

'What am I to do?' he answered, a weight off his mind that the fiscal matter had been practically entered on.

'I shall see that you get the money!' she said quietly. 'It will be really a gift, but I prefer it to be as a loan for many reasons.' Leonard made no comment. He found so many reasons in his own mind that he thought it wise to forbear from asking any of hers. Then she took the practical matter in hand:

'You must wire to these people at once to say that you will pay the amount on the day after to-morrow. If you will come here to-morrow at four o'clock the money will be ready for you. You can go up to town by the evening train and pay off the debt first thing in the morning. When you bring the receipt I shall speak to you about the other

debts; but you must make out a full list of them. We can't have any half-measure. I will not go into the matter till I have all the details before me!' Then she stood up to go.

As they walked across the lawn, she said:

'By the way, don't forget to bring that letter with you. I want to see what I really did say in it!' Her tone was quiet enough, and the wording was a request; but Leonard knew as well as if it had been spoken outright as a threat that if he did not have the letter with him when he came things were likely to be unpleasant.

The farther he got from Normanstand on his way home the more discontented Leonard grew. Whilst he had been in Stephen's presence she had so dominated him, not only by her personality but by her use of her knowledge of his own circumstances, that he had not dared to make protest or opposition; but now he began to feel how much less he was to receive than he had expected. He had come prepared to allow Stephen to fall into his arms, fortune and all. But now, although he had practical assurance that the weight of his debts would be taken from him, he was going away with his tail between his legs. He had not even been accepted as a suitor, he who had himself been wooed only a day before. His proposal of marriage had not been accepted, had not even been considered by the woman who had so lately broken ironclad convention to propose marriage to him. He had been treated merely as a scapegrace debtor who had come to ask favours from an old friend. He had even been treated like a bad boy; had been told that he had wasted money; had been ordered, in no doubtful way, to bring the full schedule of his debts. And all the time he dared not say anything lest the thing shouldn't come off at all. Stephen had such an infernally masterly way with her! It didn't matter whether she was proposing to him, or he was proposing to her, he was made to feel small all the same. He would have to put up with it till he had got rid of the debts!

And then as to the letter. Why was she so persistent about seeing it? Did she want to get it into her hands and then keep it, as Harold An Wolf had done? Was it possible that she suspected he would use it to coerce her; she would call it 'blackmail,' he supposed. This being the very thing he had intended to do, and had done, he grew very indignant at the very thought of being accused of it. It was, he felt, a very awkward thing that he had lost possession of the letter. He might need it if Stephen got nasty. Then Harold might give it to her, as he had threatened to do. He thought he would call round that evening by Harold's house, and see if he couldn't get back the letter. It belonged to him; Harold had no right to keep it. He would see him before he and Stephen got putting their heads together. So, on his way home, he turned his steps at once to Harold's house.

He did not find him in. The maid who opened the door could give him no information; all she could say was that Mrs. Dingle the housekeeper had got a telegram from Master saying that he had been called suddenly away on business.

This was a new source of concern to Leonard. He suspected a motive of some sort; though what that motive could be he could not hazard the wildest guess. On his way home he called at the post-office and sent a telegram to Cavendish and Cecil, the name of the usurers' firm, in accordance with Stephen's direction. He signed it: 'Jasper Everard.'

CHAPTER XVII—A BUSINESS TRANSACTION

When Stephen had sent off her letter to the bank she went out for a stroll; she knew it would be no use trying to get rest before dinner. That ordeal, too, had to be gone through. She found herself unconsciously going in the direction of the grove; but when she became aware of it a great revulsion overcame her, and she shuddered.

Slowly she took her way across the hard stretch of finely-kept grass which lay on the side of the house away from the wood. The green sward lay like a sea, dotted with huge trees, singly, or in clumps as islands. In its far-stretching stateliness there was something soothing. She came back to the sound of the dressing-gong with a better strength to resist the trial before her. Well she knew her aunt would have something to say on the subject of her interference in Leonard Everard's affairs.

Her fears were justified, for when they had come into the drawing-room after dinner Miss Rowly began:

'Stephen dear, is it not unwise of you to interfere in Mr. Everard's affairs?'

'Why unwise, Auntie?'

'Well, my dear, the world is censorious. And when a young lady, of your position and your wealth, takes a part in a young man's affairs tongues are apt to wag. And also, dear, debts, young men's debts, are hardly the subjects for a girl's investigation. Remember, that we ladies live very different lives from men; from some men, I should say, for your dear father was the best of men, and I should think that in all his life there was nothing which he would have wished concealed. But, my dear, young men are less restrained in their ways than we are, than we have to be for our own safety and protection.' The poor lady was greatly perturbed at having to speak in such a way. Stephen saw her distress; coming over to her, she sat down and took her hand. Stephen had a very tender side to her nature, and she loved very truly the dear old lady who had taken her mother's place and had shown her all a mother's

love. Now, in her loneliness and woe and fear, she clung to her in spirit. She would have liked to have clung to her physically; to have laid her head on her bosom, and have cried her heart out. The time for tears had not come. Hourly she felt more and more the weight that a shameful secret is to carry. She knew, however, that she could set her aunt's mind at rest on the present subject; so she said:

'I think you are right, Auntie dear. It would have been better if I had asked you first; but I saw that Leonard was in distress, and wormed the cause of it from him. When I heard that it was only debt I offered to help him. He is an old friend, you know, Auntie. We were children together; and as I have much more money than I can ever want or spend, I thought I might help him. I am afraid I have let myself in for a bigger thing than I intended; but as I have promised I must go on with it. I dare say, Auntie, that you are afraid that I may end by getting in love with him, and marrying him. Don't you, dear?' This was said with a hug and a kiss which gave the old lady delight. Her instinct told her what was coming. She nodded her head in acquiescence. Stephen went on gravely:

'Put any such fear out of your mind. I shall never marry him. I can never love him.' She was going to say 'could never love him,' when she remembered.

'Are you sure, my dear? The heart is not always under one's own control.'

'Quite sure, Auntie. I know Leonard Everard; and though I have always liked him, I do not respect him. Why, the very fact of his coming to me for money would make me reconsider any view I had formed, had nothing else ever done so. You may take it, Auntie dear, that in the way you mean Leonard is nothing to me; can never be anything to me!' Here a sudden inspiration took her. In its light a serious difficulty passed, and the doing of a thing which had a fear of its own became easy. With a conviction in her tone, which in itself aided her immediate purpose, she said:

'I shall prove it to you. That is, if you will not mind doing something which will save me an embarrassment.'

'You know I will do anything, my dearest, which an old woman can do for a young one!' Stephen squeezed the mittened hand which she held as she went on:

'As I said, I have promised to lend him some money. The first instalment is to be given him to-morrow; he is to call for it in the afternoon. Will you give it to him for me?'

'Gladly, my dear,' said the old lady, much relieved. Stephen continued:

'One other thing, Auntie, I want you to do for me: not to think of the amount, or to say a word to me about it. It is a large sum, and I dare say it will frighten you a little. But I

have made up my mind to it. I am learning a great deal out of this, Auntie dear; and I am quite willing to pay for my knowledge. After all, money is the easiest and cheapest way of paying for knowledge! Don't you agree with me?'

Miss Rowly gulped down her disappointment. She felt that she ought not to say too much, now that Stephen had set aside her graver fears. She consoled herself with the thought that even a large amount of money would cause no inconvenience to so wealthy a woman as Stephen. Beyond this, as she would have the handing over of the money to Leonard, she would know the amount. If advisable, she could remonstrate. She could if necessary consult, in confidence, with Harold. Her relief from her greater fear, and her gladness at this new proof of her niece's confidence, were manifested in the extra affection with which she bade her good-night.

Stephen did not dare to breathe freely till she was quite alone; and as she lay quiet in her bed in the dark she thought before sleep came.

Her first feeling was one of thankfulness that immediate danger was swerving from her. Things were so shaping themselves that she need not have any fear concerning Leonard. For his own sake he would have to keep silent. If he intended to blackmail her she would have the protection of her aunt's knowledge of the loan, and of her participation in it. The only weapon that remained to him was her letter; and that she would get from him before furnishing the money for the payment of his other debts.

These things out of the way, her thoughts turned to the matter of the greater dread; that of which all along she had feared to think for a moment: Harold!

Harold! and her treatment of him!

The first reception of the idea was positive anguish. From the moment he had left her till now there had been no time when a consideration of the matter was possible. Time pressed, or circumstances had interfered, or her own personal condition had forbidden. Now, when she was alone, the whole awful truth burst on her like an avalanche. Stephen felt the issue of her thinking before the thinking itself was accomplished; and it was with a smothered groan that she, in the darkness, held up her arms with fingers linked in desperate concentration of appeal.

Oh, if she could only take back one hour of her life, well she knew what that hour would be! Even that shameful time with Leonard on the hill-top seemed innocuous beside the degrading remembrance of her conduct to the noble friend of her whole life.

Sadly she turned over in her bed, and with shut eyes put her burning face on the pillow, to hide, as it were, from herself her abject depth of shame.

Leonard lounged through the next morning with what patience he could. At four o'clock he was at the door of Normanstand in his dogcart. This time he had a groom with him and a suitcase packed for a night's use, as he was to go on to London after his interview with Stephen. He had lost sight altogether of the matter of Stephen's letter, or else he would have been more nervous.

He was taken into the blue drawing-room, where shortly Miss Rowly joined him. He had not expected this. His mental uneasiness manifested itself in his manner, and his fidgeting was not unobserved by the astute old lady. He was disconcerted; 'overwhelmed' would better have described his feelings when she said:

'Miss Norman is sorry she can't see you to-day as she is making a visit; but she has given me a message for you, or rather a commission to discharge. Perhaps you had better sit down at the table; there are writing materials there, and I shall want a receipt of some sort.'

'Stephen did not say anything about a receipt!' The other smiled sweetly as she said in a calm way:

'But unfortunately Miss Norman is not here; and so I have to do the best I can. I really must have some proof that I have fulfilled my trust. You see, Mr. Everard, though it is what lawyers call a "friendly" transaction, it is more or less a business act; and I must protect myself.'

Leonard saw that he must comply, for time pressed. He sat down at the table. Taking up a pen and drawing a sheet of paper towards him, he said with what command of his voice he could:

'What am I to write?' The old lady took from her basket a folded sheet of notepaper, and, putting on her reading-glasses, said as she smoothed it out:

'I think it would be well to say something like this—"I, Leonard Everard, of Brindehow, in the Parish of Normanstand, in the County of Norcester, hereby acknowledge the receipt from Miss Laetitia Rowly of nine hundred pounds sterling lent to me in accordance with my request, the same being to clear me of a pressing debt due by me.'

When he had finished writing the receipt Miss Rowly looked it over, and handing it back to him, said:

‘Now sign; and date!’ He did so with suppressed anger.

She folded the document carefully and put it in her pocket. Then taking from the little pouch which she wore at her belt a roll of notes, she counted out on the table nine notes of one hundred pounds each. As she put down the last she said:

‘Miss Norman asked me to say that a hundred pounds is added to the sum you specified to her, as doubtless the usurers would, since you are actually behind the time promised for repayment, require something extra as a solatium or to avoid legal proceedings already undertaken. In fact that they would “put more salt on your tail.” The expression, I regret to say, is not mine.’

Leonard folded up the notes, put them into his pocket-book, and walked away. He did not feel like adding verbal thanks to the document already signed. As he got near the door the thought struck him; turning back he said:

‘May I ask if Stephen said anything about getting the document?’

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said icily, ‘did you speak of any one?’

‘Miss Norman, I meant!’ Miss Rowly’s answer to this came so smartly that it left an added sting. Her arrow was fledged with two feathers so that it must shoot true: her distrust of him and his own impotence.

‘Oh no! Miss Norman knows nothing of this. She simply asked me to give you the money. This is my own doing entirely. You see, I must exercise my judgment on my dear niece’s behalf. Of course it may not be necessary to show her the receipt; but if it should ever be advisable it is always there.’

He looked at her with anger, not unmixed with admiration, as, bowing rather lower than necessary, he went out of the door, saying sotto voce, between his teeth:

‘When my turn comes out you go! Neck and crop! Quick! Normanstand isn’t big enough to hold us both!’

CHAPTER XVIII—MORE BUSINESS

When Leonard tendered the eight hundred pounds in payment of his debt of five hundred, Mr. Cavendish at first refused to take it. But when Leonard calmly but firmly refused to pay a single penny beyond the obligations already incurred, including interest on the full sum for one day, he acquiesced. He knew the type of man fully; and knew also that in all probability it would not be long before he would come to the Firm again on a borrowing errand. When such time should come, he would put an extra clause into his Memorandum of Agreement which would allow the Firm full

power to make whatever extra charge they might choose in case of the slightest default in making payment.

Leonard's visits to town had not of late been many, and such as he had had were not accompanied with a plethora of cash. He now felt that he had earned a holiday; and it was not till the third morning that he returned to Brindehow. His father made no comment on his absence; his only allusion to the subject was:

'Back all right! Any news in town?' There was, however, an unwonted suavity in his manner which made Leonard a little anxious. He busied himself for the balance of the morning in getting together all his unpaid accounts and making a schedule of them. The total at first amazed almost as much as it frightened him. He feared what Stephen would say. She had already commented unfavourably on the one amount she had seen. When she was face to face with this she might refuse to pay altogether. It would therefore be wise to propitiate her. What could he do in this direction? His thoughts naturally turned to the missing letter. If he could get possession of it, it would either serve as a sop or a threat. In the one case she would be so glad to have it back that she would not stick at a few pounds; in the other it would 'bring her to her senses' as he put in his own mind his intention of blackmail.

He was getting so tightened up in situation that as yet he could only do as he was told, and keep his temper as well as he could.

Altogether it was in a chastened mood that he made his appearance at Normanstand later in the afternoon. He was evidently expected, for he was shown into the study without a word. Here Miss Rowly and Stephen joined him. Both were very kind in manner. After the usual greetings and commonplaces Stephen said in a brisk, businesslike way:

'Have you the papers with you?' He took the bundle of accounts from his pocket and handed them to her. After his previous experience he would have suggested, had he dared, that he should see Stephen alone; but he feared the old lady. He therefore merely said:

'I am afraid you will find the amount very large. But I have put down everything!'

So he had; and more than everything. At the last an idea struck him that as he was getting so much he might as well have a little more. He therefore added several good-sized amounts which he called 'debts of honour.' This would, he thought, appeal to the feminine mind. Stephen did not look at the papers at once. She stood up, holding them, and said to Miss Rowly:

‘Now, if you will talk to Mr. Everard I will go over these documents quietly by myself. When I have been through them and understand them all I shall come back; and we will see what can be done.’ She moved gracefully out of the room, closing the door behind her. As is usual with women, she had more than one motive for her action in going away. In the first place, she wished to be alone whilst she went over the schedule of the debts. She feared she might get angry; and in the present state of her mind towards Leonard the expression of any feeling, even contempt, would not be wise. Her best protection from him would be a manifest kindly negation of any special interest. In the second place, she believed that he would have her letter with the other papers, and she did not wish her aunt to see it, lest she should recognise the writing. In her boudoir, with a beating heart, she untied the string and looked through the papers.

Her letter was not among them.

For a few seconds she stood stock still, thinking. Then, with a sigh, she sat down and began to read the list of debts, turning to the originals now and again for details. As she went on, her wonder and disgust grew; and even a sense of fear came into her thoughts. A man who could be so wildly reckless and so selfishly unscrupulous was to be feared. She knew his father was a comparatively poor man, who could not possibly meet such a burden. If he were thus to his father, what might he be to her if he got a chance.

The thought of what he might have been to her, had he taken the chance she had given him, never occurred to her. This possibility had already reached the historical stage in her mind.

She made a few pencil notes on the list; and went back to the study. Her mind was made up.

She was quite businesslike and calm, did not manifest the slightest disapproval, but seemed to simply accept everything as facts. She asked Leonard a few questions on subjects regarding which she had made notes, such as discounts. Then she held the paper out to him and without any preliminary remark said:

‘Will you please put the names to these?’

‘How do you mean?’ he asked, flushing.

‘The names of the persons to whom these sums marked “debt of honour” are due.’ His reply came quickly, and was a little aggressive; he thought this might be a good time to make a bluff:

‘I do not see that that is necessary. I can settle them when I have the money.’ Slowly and without either pause or flurry Stephen replied, looking him straight in the eyes as she handed him the papers:

‘Of course it is not necessary! Few things in the world really are! I only wanted to help you out of your troubles; but if you do not wish me to . . . !’ Leonard interrupted in alarm:

‘No! no! I only spoke of these items. You see, being “debts of honour” I ought not to give the names.’ Looking with a keen glance at her set face he saw she was obdurate; and, recognising his defeat, said as calmly as he could, for he felt raging:

‘All right! Give me the paper!’ Bending over the table he wrote. When she took the paper, a look half surprised, half indignant, passed over her face. Her watchful aunt saw it, and bending over looked also at the paper. Then she too smiled bitterly.

Leonard had printed in the names! The feminine keenness of both women had made his intention manifest. He did not wish for the possibility of his handwriting being recognised. His punishment came quickly. With a dazzling smile Stephen said to him:

‘But, Leonard, you have forgotten to put the addresses!’

‘Is that necessary?’

‘Of course it is! Why, you silly, how is the money to be paid if there are no addresses?’

Leonard felt like a rat in a trap; but he had no alternative. So irritated was he, and so anxious to hide his irritation that, forgetting his own caution, he wrote, not in printing characters but in his own handwriting, addresses evolved from his own imagination. Stephen’s eyes twinkled as he handed her the paper: he had given himself away all round.

Leonard having done all that as yet had been required of him, felt that he might now ask a further favour, so he said:

‘There is one of those bills which I have promised to pay by Monday.’

‘Promised?’ said Stephen with wide-opened eyes. She had no idea of sparing him, she remembered the printed names. ‘Why, Leonard, I thought you said you were unable to pay any of those debts?’

Again he had put himself in a false position. He could not say that it was to his father he had made the promise; for he had already told Stephen that he had been afraid to

tell him of his debts. In his desperation, for Miss Rowly's remorseless glasses were full on him, he said:

'I thought I was justified in making the promise after what you said about the pleasure it would be to help me. You remember, that day on the hilltop?'

If he had wished to disconcert her he was mistaken; she had already thought over and over again of every form of embarrassment her unhappy action might bring on her at his hands. She now said sweetly and calmly, so sweetly and so calmly that he, with knowledge of her secret, was alarmed:

'But that was not a promise to pay. If you will remember it was only an offer, which is a very different thing. You did not accept it then!' She was herself somewhat desperate, or she would not have sailed so close to the wind.

'Ah, but I accepted later!' he said quickly, feeling in his satisfaction in an epigrammatic answer a certain measure of victory. He felt his mistake when she went on calmly:

'Offers like that are not repeated. They are but phantoms, after all. They come at their own choice, when they do come; and they stay but the measure of a breath or two. You cannot summon them!' Leonard fell into the current of the metaphor and answered:

'I don't know that even that is impossible. There are spells which call, and recall, even phantoms!'

'Indeed!' Stephen was anxious to find his purpose.

Leonard felt that he was getting on, that he was again acquiring the upper hand; so he pushed on the metaphor, more and more satisfied with himself:

'And it is wonderful how simple some spells, and these the most powerful, can be. A remembered phrase, the recollection of a pleasant meeting, the smell of a forgotten flower, or the sight of a forgotten letter; any or all of these can, through memory, bring back the past. And it is often in the past that the secret of the future lies!'

Miss Rowly felt that something was going on before her which she could not understand. Anything of this man's saying which she could not fathom must be at least dangerous; so she determined to spoil his purpose, whatever it might be.

'Dear me! That is charmingly poetic! Past and future; memory and the smell of flowers; meetings and letters! It is quite philosophy. Do explain it all, Mr. Everard!' Leonard was not prepared to go on under the circumstances. His own mention of 'letter,' although he had deliberately used it with the intention of frightening

Stephen, had frightened himself. It reminded him that he had not brought, had not got, the letter; and that as yet he was not certain of getting the money. Stephen also had noted the word, and determined not to pass the matter by. She said gaily:

'If a letter is a spell, I think you have a spell of mine, which is a spell of my own weaving. You were to show me the letter in which I asked you to come to see me. It was in that, I think you said, that I mentioned your debts; but I don't remember doing so. Show it to me!'

'I have not got it with me!' This was said with mulish sullenness.

'Why not?'

'I forgot.'

'That is a pity! It is always a pity to forget things in a business transaction; as this is. I think, Auntie, we must wait till we have all the documents, before we can complete this transaction!'

Leonard was seriously alarmed. If the matter of the loan were not gone on with at once the jeweller's bill could not be paid by Monday, and the result would be another scene with his father. He turned to Stephen and said as charmingly as he could, and he was all in earnest now:

'I'm awfully sorry! But these debts have been so worrying me that they put lots of things out of my head. That bill to be paid on Monday, when I haven't a feather to fly with, is enough to drive a fellow off his chump. The moment I lay my hands on the letter I shall keep it with me so that I can't forget it again. Won't you forgive me for this time?'

'Forgive!' she answered, with a laugh. 'Why it's not worth forgiveness! It is not worth a second thought! All right! Leonard, make your mind easy; the bill will be paid on Monday!' Miss Rowly said quietly:

'I have to be in London on Monday afternoon; I can pay it for you.' This was a shock to Leonard; he said impulsively:

'Oh, I say! Can't I . . . ' His words faded away as the old lady again raised her lorgnon and gazed at him calmly. She went on:

'You know, my dear, it won't be even out of my way, as I have to call at Mr. Malpas's office, and I can go there from the hotel in Regent Street.' This was all news to Stephen. She did not know that her aunt had intended going to London; and indeed she did not know of any business with Mr. Malpas, whose firm had been London

solicitor to the Rowlys for several generations. She had no doubt, however, as to the old lady's intention. It was plain to her that she wanted to help. So she thanked her sweetly. Leonard could say nothing. He seemed to be left completely out of it. When Stephen rose, as a hint to him that it was time for him to go, he said humbly, as he left:

'Would it be possible that I should have the receipt before Monday evening? I want to show it to my father.'

'Certainly!' said the old lady, answering him. 'I shall be back by the two o'clock train; and if you happen to be at the railway station at Norcester when I arrive I can give it to you!'

He went away relieved, but vindictive; determined in his own mind that when he had received the money for the rest of the debts he would see Stephen, when the old lady was not present, and have it out with her.

CHAPTER XIX—A LETTER

On Monday evening after dinner Mr. Everard and his son sat for a while in silence. They had not met since morning; and in the presence of the servants conversation had been scrupulously polite. Now, though they were both waiting to talk, neither liked to begin. The older man was outwardly placid, when Leonard, a little flushed and a little nervous of voice, began:

'Have you had any more bills?' He had expected none, and thus hoped to begin by scoring against his father. It was something of a set-down when the latter, taking some papers from his breast-pocket, handed them to him, saying:

'Only these!' Leonard took them in silence and looked at them. All were requests for payment of debts due by his son.

In each case the full bill was enclosed. He was silent a while; but his father spoke:

'It would almost seem as if all these people had made up their minds that you were of no further use to them.' Then without pausing he said, but in a sharper voice:

'Have you paid the jewellers? This is Monday!' Without speaking Leonard took leisurely from his pocket folded paper. This he opened, and, after deliberately smoothing out the folds, handed it to his father. Doubtless something in his manner had already convinced the latter that the debt was paid. He took the paper in as leisurely a way as it had been given, adjusted his spectacles, and read it. Seeing that his son had scored this time, he covered his chagrin with an appearance of paternal satisfaction.

‘Good!’ For many reasons he was glad the debt was paid He was himself too poor a man to allow the constant drain his son’s debts, and too careful of his position to be willing have such exposure as would come with a County Court action against his son. All the same, his exasperation continued. Neither was his quiver yet empty. He shot his next arrow:

‘I am glad you paid off those usurers!’ Leonard did not like the definite way he spoke. Still in silence, he took from his pocket a second paper, which he handed over unfolded. Mr. Everard read it, and returned it politely, with again one word:

‘Good!’ For a few minutes there was silence. The father spoke again:

‘Those other debts, have you paid them?’ With a calm deliberation so full of tacit rudeness that it made his father flush Leonard answered:

‘Not yet, sir! But I shall think of them presently. I don’t care to be bustled by them; and I don’t mean to!’ It was apparent that though he spoke verbally of his creditors, his meaning was with regard to others also.

‘When will they be paid?’ As his son hesitated, he went on:

‘I am alluding to those who have written to me. I take it that as my estate is not entailed, and as you have no income except from me, the credit which has been extended to you has been rather on my account than your own. Therefore, as the matter touches my own name, I am entitled to know something of what is going on.’ His manner as well as his words was so threatening that Leonard was a little afraid. He might imperil his inheritance. He answered quickly:

‘Of course, sir, you shall know everything. After all, you know, my affairs are your affairs!’

‘I know nothing of the sort. I may of course be annoyed by your affairs, even dishonoured, in a way, by them. But I accept no responsibility whatever. As you have made your bed, so must you lie on it!’

‘It’s all right, sir, I assure you. All my debts, both those you know of and some you don’t, I shall settle very shortly.’

‘How soon?’ The question was sternly put.

‘In a few days. I dare say a week at furthest will see everything straightened out.’

The elder man stood, saying gravely as he went to the door:

‘You will do well to tell me when the last of them is paid. There is something which I shall then want to tell you!’ Without waiting for reply he went to his study.

Leonard went to his room and made a systematic, though unavailing, search for Stephen’s letter; thinking that by some chance he might have recovered it from Harold and had overlooked it.

The next few days he passed in considerable suspense. He did not dare go near Normanstand until he was summoned, as he knew he would be when he was required.

* * * * *

When Miss Rowly returned from her visit to London she told Stephen that she had paid the bill at the jeweller’s, and had taken the precaution of getting a receipt, together with a duplicate for Mr. Everard. The original was by her own request made out as received from Miss Laetitia Rowly in settlement of the account of Leonard Everard, Esq.; the duplicate merely was ‘recd. in settlement of the account of—,’ etc. Stephen’s brows bent hit thought as she said:

‘Why did you have it done that way, Auntie dear?’ The other answered quietly:

‘I had a reason, my dear; good reason! Perhaps I shall tell you all about it some day; in the meantime I want you not to ask me anything about it. I have a reason for that too. Stephen, won’t you trust me in this, blindfold?’ There was something so sweet and loving in the way she made the request that Stephen was filled with emotion. She put her arms round her aunt’s neck and hugged her tight. Then laying her head on her bosom she said with a sigh:

‘Oh, my dear, you can’t know how I trust you; or how much your trust is to me. You never can know!’

The next day the two women held a long consultation over the schedule of Leonard’s debts. Neither said a word of disfavour, or even commented on the magnitude. The only remark touching on the subject was made by Miss Rowly:

‘We must ask for proper discounts. Oh, the villainy of those tradesmen! I do believe they charge double in the hope of getting half. As to jewellers . . . !’ Then she announced her intention of going up to town again on Thursday, at which visit she would arrange for the payment of the various debts. Stephen tried to remonstrate, but she was obdurate. She held Stephen’s hand in hers and stroked it lovingly as she kept on repeating:

‘Leave it all to me, dear! Leave it all to me! Everything shall be paid as you wish; but leave it to me!’

Stephen acquiesced. This gentle yielding was new in her; it touched the elder lady to the quick, even whilst it pained her. Well she knew that some trouble must have gone to the smoothing of that imperious nature.

Stephen’s inner life in these last few days was so bitterly sad that she kept it apart from all the routine of social existence. Into it never came now, except as the exciting cause of all the evil, a thought of Leonard. The saddening memory was of Harold. And of him the sadness was increased and multiplied by a haunting fear. Since he had walked out of the grove she had not seen him nor heard from him. This was in itself strange; for in all her life, when she was at home and he too, never a day passed without her seeing him. She had heard her aunt say that word had come of his having made a sudden journey to London, from which he had not yet returned. She was afraid to make inquiries. Partly lest she might hear bad news—this was her secret fear; partly lest she might bring some attention to herself in connection with his going. Of some things in connection with her conduct to him she was afraid to think at all. Thought, she felt, would come in time, and with it new pains and new shames, of which as yet she dared not think.

One morning came an envelope directed in Harold’s hand. The sight made her almost faint. She rejoiced that she had been first down, and had opened the postbag with her own key. She took the letter to her room and shut herself in before opening it. Within were a few lines of writing and her own letter to Leonard in its envelope. Her head beat so hard that she could scarcely see; but gradually the writing seemed to grow out of the mist:

‘The enclosed should be in your hands. It is possible that it may comfort you to know that it is safe. Whatever may come, God love and guard you.’

For a moment joy, hot and strong, blazed through her. The last words were ringing through her brain. Then came the cold shock, and the gloom of fear. Harold would never have written thus unless he was going away! It was a farewell!

For a long time she stood, motionless, holding the letter in her hand. Then she said, half aloud:

‘Comfort! Comfort! There is no more comfort in the world for me! Never, never again! Oh, Harold! Harold!’

She sank on her knees beside her bed, and buried her face in her cold hands, sobbing in all that saddest and bitterest phase of sorrow which can be to a woman's heart: the sorrow that is dry-eyed and without hope.

Presently the habit of caution which had governed her last days woke her to action. She bathed her eyes, smoothed her hair, locked the letter and its enclosure in the little jewel-safe let into the wall, and came down to breakfast.

The sense of loss was so strong on her that she forgot herself. Habit carried her on without will or voluntary effort, and, so faithfully worked to her good that even the loving eyes of her aunt—and the eyes of love are keen—had no suspicion that any new event had come into her life.

Not till she was alone in her room that night did Stephen dare to let her thoughts run freely. In the darkness her mind began to work truly, so truly that she began at the first step of logical process: to study facts. And to study them she must question till she found motive.

Why had Harold sent her the letter? His own words said that it should be in her hands. Then, again, he said it might comfort her to know the letter was safe. How could it comfort her? How did he get possession of the letter?

There she began to understand; her quick intuition and her old knowledge of Harold's character and her new knowledge of Leonard's, helped her to reconstruct causes. In his interview with her he had admitted that Leonard had told him much, all. He would no doubt have refused to believe him, and Leonard would have shown him, as proof, her letter asking him to meet her. He would have seen then, as she did now, how much the possession of that letter might mean to any one.

Good God! to 'any one.' Could it have been so to Harold himself . . . that he thought to use it as an engine, to force her to meet his wishes—as Leonard had already tried to do! The mistrust, founded on her fear, was not dead yet . . . No! no! no! Her whole being resented such a monstrous proposition! Besides, there was proof. Thank God! there was proof. A blackmailer would have stayed close to her, and would have kept the letter; Harold did neither. Her recognition of the truth was shown in her act, when, stretching out her arms in the darkness, she whispered pleadingly:

'Forgive me, Harold!'

And Harold, far away where the setting sun was lying red on the rim of the western sea, could not hear her. But perhaps God did.

As, then, Harold's motive was not of the basest, it must have been of the noblest. What would be a man's noblest motive under such circumstances? Surely self-sacrifice!

And yet there could be no doubt as to Harold's earnestness when he had told her that he loved her . . .

Here Stephen covered her face in one moment of rapture. But the gloom that followed was darker than the night. She did not pursue the thought. That would come later when she should understand.

And yet, so little do we poor mortals know the verities of things, so blind are we to things thrust before our eyes, that she understood more in that moment of ecstasy than in all the reasoning that preceded and followed it. But the reasoning went on:

If he really loved, and told her so, wherein was the self-sacrifice? She had reproached him with coming to her with his suit hotfoot upon his knowledge of her shameful proffer of herself to another man; of her refusal by him. Could he have been so blind as not to have seen, as she did, the shameful aspect of his impulsive act? Surely, if he had thought, he must have seen! . . . And he must have thought; there had been time for it. It was at dinner that he had seen Leonard; it was after breakfast when he had seen her . . . And if he had seen then . . .

In an instant it all burst upon her; the whole splendid truth. He had held back the expression of his long love for her, waiting for the time when her maturity might enable her to understand truly and judge wisely; waiting till her grief for the loss of her father had become a story of the past; waiting for God knows what a man's mind sees of obstacles when he loves. But he had spoken it out when it was to her benefit. What, then, had been his idea of her benefit? Was it that he wished to meet the desire that she had manifested to have some man to—to love? . . . The way she covered her face with her hands whilst she groaned aloud made her answer to her own query a perfect negative.

Was it, then, to save her from the evil of marrying Leonard in case he should repent of his harshness, and later on yield himself to her wooing? The fierce movement of her whole body, which almost threw the clothes from her bed, as the shameful recollection rolled over her, marked the measure of her self-disdain.

One other alternative there was; but it seemed so remote, so far-fetched, so noble, so unlike what a woman would do, that she could only regard it in a shamefaced way. She put the matter to herself questioningly, and with a meekness which had its roots deeper than she knew. And here out of the depths of her humility came a noble

thought. A noble thought, which was a noble truth. Through the darkness of the night, through the inky gloom of her own soul came with that thought a ray of truth which, whilst it showed her her own shrivelled unworthiness, made the man whom she had dishonoured with insults worse than death stand out in noble relief. In that instant she guessed at, and realised, Harold's unselfish nobility of purpose, the supreme effort of his constant love. Knowing the humiliation she must have suffered at Leonard's hands, he had so placed himself that even her rejection of him might be some solace to her wounded spirit, her pride.

Here at last was truth! She knew it in the very marrow of her bones.

This time she did not move. She thought and thought of that noble gentleman who had used for her sake even that pent-up passion which, for her sake also, he had suppressed so long.

In that light, which restored in her eyes and justified so fully the man whom she had always trusted, her own shame and wrongdoing, and the perils which surrounded her, were for the time forgotten.

And its glory seemed to rest upon her whilst she slept.

CHAPTER XX—CONFIDENCES

Miss Rowly had received a bulky letter by the morning's post. She had not opened it, but had allowed it to rest beside her plate all breakfast-time. Then she had taken it away with her to her own sitting-room. Stephen did not appear to take any notice of it. She knew quite well that it was from some one in London whom her aunt had asked to pay Leonard's bills. She also knew that the old lady had some purpose in her reticence, so she waited. She was learning to be patient in these days. Miss Rowly did say anything about it that day, or the next, or the next. The third-morning, she received another letter which she had read in an enlightening manner. She began its perusal with set brow frowning, then she nodded her head and smiled. She put the letter back in its envelope and placed it in the little bag always carried. But she said nothing. Stephen wondered, but waited.

That night, when Stephen's maid had left her, there came a gentle tap at her door, and an instant after the door opened. The tap had been a warning, not a request; it had in a measure prepared Stephen, who was not surprised to see her Aunt in dressing-gown, though it was many a long day since she had visited her niece's room at night. She closed the door behind her, saying:

‘There is something I want to talk to you about, dearest, and I thought it would be better to do so when there could not be any possible interruption. And besides,’ here there was a little break in her voice, ‘I could hardly summon up my courage in the daylight.’ She stopped, and the stopping told its own story. In an instant Stephen’s arm’s were round her, all the protective instinct in her awake, at the distress of the woman she loved. The old lady took comfort from the warmth of the embrace, and held her tight whilst she went on:

‘It is about these bills, my dear. Come and sit down and put a candle near me. I want you to read something.’

‘Go on, Auntie dear,’ she said gravely. The old lady, after a pause, spoke with a certain timidity:

‘They are all paid; at least all that can be. Perhaps I had better read you the letter I have had from my solicitors:

‘“‘Dear Madam,—In accordance with your instructions we have paid all the accounts mentioned in Schedule A (enclosed). We have placed for your convenience three columns: (1) the original amount of each account, (2) the amount of discount we were able to arrange, and (3) the amount paid. We regret that we have been unable to carry out your wishes with regard to the items enumerated in Schedule B (enclosed). We have, we assure you, done all in our power to find the gentlemen whose names and addresses are therein given. These were marked ‘Debt of honour’ in the list you handed to us. Not having been able to obtain any reply to our letters, we sent one of our clerks first to the addresses in London, and afterwards to Oxford. That clerk, who is well used to such inquiries, could not find trace of any of the gentlemen, or indeed of their existence. We have, therefore, come to the conclusion that, either there must be some error with regard to (a) names, (b) addresses, or (c) both; or that no such persons exist. As it would be very unlikely that such errors could occur in all the cases, we can only conclude that there have not been any such persons. If we may hazard an opinion: it is possible that, these debts being what young men call ‘debts of honour,’ the debtor, or possibly the creditors, may not have wished the names mentioned. In such case fictitious names and addresses may have been substituted for the real ones. If you should like any further inquiry instituted we would suggest that you ascertain the exact names and addresses from the debtor. Or should you prefer it we would see the gentleman on your behalf, on learning from you his name and address. We can keep, in the person of either one of the Firm or a Confidential Clerk as you might prefer, any appointment in such behalf you may care to make.

“‘We have already sent to you the receipted account from each of the creditors as you directed, viz. ‘Received from Miss Laetitia Rowly in full settlement to date of the account due by Mr. Leonard Everard the sum of,’ etc. etc. And also, as you further directed, a duplicate receipt of the sum-total due in each case made out as ‘Received in full settlement to date of account due by,’ etc. etc. The duplicate receipt was pinned at the back of each account so as to be easily detachable.

“‘With regard to finance we have carried out your orders, etc.”’ She hurried on the reading. “These sums, together with the amounts of nine hundred pounds sterling, and seven hundred pounds sterling lodged to the account of Miss Stephen Norman in the Norcester branch of the Bank as repayment of moneys advanced to you as by your written instructions, have exhausted the sum, etc.”’ She folded up the letter with the schedules, laying the bundle of accounts on the table. Stephen paused; she felt it necessary to collect herself before speaking.

‘Auntie dear, will you let me see that letter? Oh, my dear, dear Auntie, don’t think I mistrust you that I ask it. I do because I love you, and because I want to love you more if it is possible to do so.’ Miss Rowly handed her the letter. She rose from the arm of the chair and stood beside the table as though to get better light from the candle than she could get from where she had sat.

She read slowly and carefully to the end; then folded up the letter and handed it to her aunt. She came back to her seat on the edge of the chair, and putting her arms round her companion’s neck looked her straight in the eyes. The elder woman grew embarrassed under the scrutiny; she coloured up and smiled in a deprecatory way as she said:

‘Don’t look at me like that, darling; and don’t shake your head so. It is all right! I told you I had my reasons, and you said you would trust me. I have only done what I thought best!’

‘But, Auntie, you have paid away more than half your little fortune. I know all the figures. Father and uncle told me everything. Why did you do it? Why did you do it?’ The old woman held out her arms as she said:

‘Come here, dear one, and sit on my knee as you used to when you were a child, and I will whisper you.’ Stephen sprang from her seat and almost threw herself into the loving arms. For a few seconds the two, clasped tight to each other’s heart, rocked gently to and fro. The elder kissed the younger and was kissed impulsively in return. Then she stroked the beautiful bright hair with her wrinkled hand, and said admiringly:

‘What lovely hair you have, my dear one!’ Stephen held her closer and waited.

‘Well, my dear, I did it because I love you!’

‘I know that, Auntie; you have never done anything else my life!’

‘That is true, dear one. But it is right that I should do this. Now you must listen to me, and not speak till I have done. Keep your thoughts on my words, so that you may follow my thoughts. You can do your own thinking about them afterwards. And your own talking too; I shall listen as long as you like!’

‘Go on, I’ll be good!’

‘My dear, it is not right that you should appear to have paid the debts of a young man who is no relation to you and who will, I know well, never be any closer to you than he is now.’ She hurried on, as though fearing an interruption, but Stephen felt that her clasp tightened. ‘We never can tell what will happen as life goes on. And, as the world is full of scandal, one cannot be too careful not to give the scandalmongers anything to exercise their wicked spite upon. I don’t trust that young man! he is a bad one all round, or I am very much mistaken. And, my dear, come close to me! I cannot but see that you and he have some secret which he is using to distress you!’ She paused, and her clasp grew closer still as Stephen’s head sank on her breast. ‘I know you have done something or said something foolish of which he has a knowledge. And I know my dear one, that whatever it was, and no matter how foolish it may have been, it was not a wrong thing. God knows, we are all apt to do wrong things as well as foolish ones; the best of us. But such is not for you! Your race, your father and mother, your upbringing, yourself and the truth and purity which are yours would save you from anything which was in itself wrong. That I know, my dear, as well as I know myself! Ah! better, far better! for the gods did not think it well to dower me as they have dowered you. The God of all the gods has given you the ten talents to guard; and He knows, as I do, that you will be faithful to your trust.’

There was a solemn ring in her voce as the words were spoken which went through the young girl’s heart. Love and confidence demanded in return that she should have at least the relief of certain acquiescence; there is a possible note of pain in the tensity of every string! Stephen lifted her head proudly and honestly, though her cheeks were scarlet, saying with a consciousness of integrity which spoke directly soul to soul:

‘You are right, dear! I have done something very foolish; very, very foolish! But it was nothing which any one could call wrong. Do not ask me what it was. I need only tell you this: that it was an outrage on convention. It was so foolish, and based on such foolish misconception; it sprang from such over-weening, arrogant self-opinion that it

deserves the bitter punishment which will come; which is coming; which is with me now! It was the cause of something whose blackness I can't yet realise; but of which I will tell you when I can speak of it. But it was not wrong in itself, or in the eyes of God or man!' The old woman said not a word. No word was needed, for had she not already expressed her belief? But Stephen felt her relief in the glad pressure of her finger-tips. In a voice less strained and tense Miss Rowly went on:

'What need have I for money, dear? Here I have all that any woman, especially at my age, can need. There is no room even for charity; you are so good to all your people that my help is hardly required. And, my dear one, I know—I know,' she emphasised the word as she stroked the beautiful hair, 'that when I am gone my own poor, the few that I have looked after all my life, will, not suffer when my darling thinks of me!' Stephen fairly climbed upon her as she said, looking in the brave old eyes:

'So help me God, my darling, they shall never want!'

Silence for a time; and then Miss Rowly's voice again:

'Though it would not do for the world to know that a young maiden lady had paid the debts of a vicious young man, it makes no matter if they be paid by an old woman, be the same maid, wife, or widow! And really, my dear, I do not see how any money I might have could be better spent than in keeping harm away from you.'

'There need not be any harm at all, Auntie.'

'Perhaps not, dear! I hope not with all my heart. But I fear that young man. Just fancy him threatening you, and in your own house; in my very presence! Oh! yes, my dear. He meant to threaten, anyhow! Though I could not exactly understand what he was driving at, I could see that he was driving at something. And after all that you were doing for him, and had done for him! I mean, of course, after all that I had done for him, and was doing for him. It is mean enough, surely, for a man to beg, and from a woman; but to threaten afterwards. Ach! But I think, my dear, it is checkmate to him this time. All along the line the only proof that is of there being any friendliness towards him from this house points to me. And moreover, my dear, I have a little plan in my head that will tend to show him up even better, in case he may ever try to annoy us. Look at me when next he is here. I mean to do a little play-acting which will astonish him, I can tell you, if it doesn't frighten him out of the house altogether. But we won't talk of that yet. You will understand when you see it!' Her eyes twinkled and her mouth shut with a loud snap as she spoke.

After a few minutes of repose, which was like a glimpse of heaven to Stephen's aching heart, she spoke again:

‘There was something else that troubled you more than even this. You said you would tell me when you were able to speak of it . . . Why not speak now? Oh! my dear, our hearts are close together to-night; and in all your life, you will never have any one who will listen with greater sympathy than I will, or deal more tenderly with your fault, whatever it may have been. Tell me, dear! Dear!’ she whispered after a pause, during which she realised the depth of the girl’s emotion by her convulsive struggling to keep herself in check.

All at once the tortured girl seemed to yield herself, and slipped inertly from her grasp till kneeling down she laid her head in the motherly lap and sobbed. Miss Rowly kept stroking her hair in silence. Presently the girl looked up, and with a pang the aunt saw that her eyes were dry. In her pain she said:

‘You sob like that, my child, and yet you are not crying; what is it, oh! my dear one? What is it that hurts you so that you cannot cry?’

And then the bitter sobbing broke out again, but still alas! without tears. Crouching low, and still enclosing her aunt’s waist with her outstretched arms and hiding her head in her breast; she said:

‘Oh! Auntie, I have sent Harold away!’

‘What, my dear? What?’ said the old lady astonished. ‘Why, I thought there was no one in the world that you trusted so much as Harold!’

‘It is true. There was—there is no one except you whom I trust so much. But I mistook something he said. I was in a blind fury at the time, and I said things that I thought my father’s daughter never could have said. And she never thought them, even then! Oh, Auntie, I drove him away with all the horrible things I could say that would wound him. And all because he acted in a way that I see now was the most noble and knightly in which any man could act. He that my dear father had loved, and honoured, and trusted as another son. He that was a real son to him, and not a mock sop like me. I sent him away with such fierce and bitter pain that his poor face was ashen grey, and there was woe in his eyes that shall make woe in mine whenever I shall see them in my mind, waking or sleeping. He, the truest friend . . . the most faithful, the most tender, the most strong, the most unselfish! Oh! Auntie, Auntie, he just turned and bowed and went away. And he couldn’t do anything else with the way I spoke to him; and now I shall never see him again!’

The young girl’s eyes ware still dry, but the old woman’s were wet. For a few minutes she kept softly stroking the bowed heat till the sobbing grew less and less, and then died away; and the girl lay still, collapsed in the abandonment of dry-eyed grief.

Then she rose, and taking off her dressing-gown, said tenderly:

'Let me stay with you to-night, dear one? Go to sleep in my arms, as you did long ago when there was any grief that you could not bear.'

So Stephen lay in those loving arms till her own young breast ceased heaving, and she breathed softly. Till dawn she slept on the bosom of her who loved her so well.

CHAPTER XXI—THE DUTY OF COURTESY

Leonard was getting tired of waiting when he received his summons to Normanstand. But despite his impatience he was ill pleased with the summons, which came in the shape of a polite note from Miss Rowly asking him to come that afternoon at tea-time. He had expected to hear from Stephen.

'Damn that old woman! You'd think she was working the whole show!' However, he turned up at a little before five o'clock, spruce and dapper and well dressed and groomed as usual. He was shown, as before, into the blue drawing-room. Miss Rowly, who sat there, rose as he entered, and coming across the room, greeted him, as he thought, effusively. He actually winced when she called him 'my dear boy' before the butler.

She ordered tea to be served at once, and when it had been brought she said to the butler:

'Tell Mannerly to bring me a large thick envelope which is on the table in my room. It is marked L.E. on the outside.' Presently an elderly maid handed her the envelope and withdrew. When tea was over she opened the envelope, and taking from it a number of folios, looked over them carefully; holding them in her lap, she said quietly:

'You will find writing materials on the table. I am all ready now to hand you over the receipts.' His eyes glistened. This was good news at all events; the debts were paid. In a rapid flash of thought he came to the conclusion that if the debts were actually paid he need not be civil to the old lady. He felt that he could have been rude to her if he had actual possession of the receipts. As it was, however, he could not yet afford to have any unpleasantness. There was still to come that lowering interview with his father; and he could not look towards it satisfactorily until he had the assurance of the actual documents that he was safe. Miss Rowly was, in her own way, reading his mind in his face. Her lorgnon seemed to follow his every expression like a searchlight. He remembered his former interview with her, and how he had been bested in it; so he made up his mind to acquiesce in time. He went over to the table and sat down. Taking a pen he turned to Miss Rowly and said:

‘What shall I write?’ She answered calmly:

‘Date it, and then say, “Received from Miss Laetitia Rowly the receipts for the following amounts from the various firms hereunder enumerated.”’ She then proceeded to read them, he writing and repeating as he wrote. Then she added:

“‘The same being the total amount of my debts which she has kindly paid for me.”’ He paused here; she asked.

‘Why don’t you go on?’

‘I thought it was Stephen—Miss Norman,’ he corrected, catching sight of her lorgnon, ‘who was paying them.’

‘Good Lord, man,’ she answered, ‘what does it matter who has paid them, so long as they are paid?’

‘But I didn’t ask you to pay them,’ he went on obstinately. There was a pause, and then the old lady, with a distinctly sarcastic smile, said:

‘It seems to me, young man, that you are rather particular as to how things are done for you. If you had begun to be just a little bit as particular in making the debts as you are in the way of having them paid, there would be a little less trouble and expense all round. However, the debts have been paid, and we can’t unpay them. But of course you can repay me the money if you like. It amounts in all to four thousand three hundred and seventeen pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence, and I have paid every penny of it out of my own pocket. If you can’t pay it yourself, perhaps your father would like to do so.’

The last shot told; he went on writing: “‘Kindly paid for me,”’ she continued in the same even voice:

“‘In remembrance of my mother, of whom she was an acquaintance.” Now sign it!’ He did so and handed it to her. She read it over carefully, folded it, and put it in her pocket. She then stood. He rose also; and as he moved to the door—he had not offered to shake hands with her—he said:

‘I should like to see, Miss Norman.’

‘I am afraid you will have to wait.’

‘Why?’

‘She is over at Heply Regis. She went there for Lady Heply’s ball, and will remain for a few days. Good afternoon!’ The tone in which the last two words were spoken seemed in his ears like the crow of the victor after a cock-fight.

As he was going out of the room a thought struck her. She felt he deserved some punishment for his personal rudeness to her. After all, she had paid half her fortune for him, though not on his account; and not only had he given no thanks, but had not even offered the usual courtesy of saying good-bye. She had intended to have been silent on the subject, and to have allowed him to discover it later. Now she said, as if it was an after-thought:

‘By the way, I did not pay those items you put down as “debts of honour”; you remember you gave the actual names and addresses.’

‘Why not?’ the question came from him involuntarily. The persecuting lorgnon rose again:

‘Because they were all bogus! Addresses, names, debts, honour! Good afternoon!’

He went out flaming; free from debt, money debts; all but one. And some other debts—not financial—whose magnitude was exemplified in the grinding of his teeth.

After breakfast next morning he said to his father:

‘By the way, you said you wished to speak to me, sir.’ There was something in the tone of his voice which called up antagonism.

‘Then you have paid your debts?’

‘All!’

‘Good! Now there is something which it is necessary I should call your attention to. Do you remember the day on which I handed you that pleasing epistle from Messrs. Cavendish and Cecil?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘Didn’t you send a telegram to them?’

‘I did.’

‘You wrote it yourself?’

‘Certainly.’

‘I had a courteous letter from the money-lenders, thanking me for my exertions in securing the settlement of their claim, and saying that in accordance with the request in my telegram they had held over proceedings until the day named. I did not quite remember having sent any telegram to them, or any letter either. So, being at a loss, I went to our excellent postmaster and requested that he would verify the sending of a telegram to London from me. He courteously looked up the file; which was ready for transference to the G.P.O., and showed me the form. It was in your handwriting.’ He paused so long that Leonard presently said:

‘Well!’

‘It was signed Jasper Everard. Jasper Everard! my name; and yet it was sent by my son, who was christened, if I remember rightly, Leonard!’ Then he went on, only in a cold acrid manner which made his son feel as though a February wind was blowing on his back:

‘I think there need not have been much trouble in learning to avoid confusing our names. They are really dissimilar. Have you any explanation to offer of the—the error, let us call it?’ A bright thought struck Leonard.

‘Why, sir,’ he said, ‘I put it in your name as they had written to you. I thought it only courteous.’ The elder man winced; he had not expected the excuse. We went on speaking in the same calm way, but his tone was more acrid than before:

‘Good! of course! It was only courteous of you! Quite so! But I think it will be well in the future to let me look after my own courtesy; as regards my signature at any rate. You see, my dear boy, a signature is queer sort of thing, and judges and juries are apt to take a poor view of courtesy as over against the conventions regarding a man, writing his own name. What I want to tell you is this, that on seeing that signature I made a new will. You see, my estate is not entailed, and therefore I think it only right to see that in such a final matter justice is done all round. I therefore made a certain provision of which I am sure you will approve. Indeed, since I am assured of the payment of your debts, I feel justified in my action. I may say, inter alia, that I congratulate you on either the extent of your resources or the excellence of your friendships, or both. I confess that the amounts brought to my notice were rather large; more especially in proportion to the value of the estate which you are some day to inherit. For you are of course to inherit some day, my dear boy. You are my only son, and it would be hardly—hardly courteous of me not to leave it to you. But I have put a clause in my will to the effect that the trustee’s are to pay all debts of your accruing which can be proved against you, before handing over to you either the

estate itself or the remainder after its sale and the settlement of all claims. That's all. Now run away, my boy; I have some important work to do.'

* * * * *

The day after her return from Heply Regis, Stephen was walking in the wood when she thought she heard a slight rustling of leaves some way behind her. She looked round, expecting to see some one; but the leafy path was quite clear. Her suspicion was confirmed; some one was secretly following her. A short process of exclusions pointed to the personality of the some one. Tramps and poachers were unknown in Normanstand, and there was no one else whom she could think of who had any motive in following her in such a way; it must be Leonard Everard. She turned and walked rapidly in the opposite direction. As this would bring her to the house Leonard had to declare his presence at once or else lose the opportunity of a private interview which he sought. When she saw him she said at once and without any salutation:

'What are you doing there; why are you following me?'

'I wanted to see you alone. I could not get near you on account of that infernal old woman.' Stephen's face grew hard.

'On account of whom?' she asked with dangerous politeness.

'Miss Rowly; your aunt.'

'Don't you think, Mr. Everard,' she said icily, 'that it is at least an unpardonable rudeness to speak that way, and to me, of the woman I love best in all the world?'

'Sorry!' he said in the offhand way of younger days, 'I apologise. Fact is, I was angry that she wouldn't let me see you.'

'Not let you see me!' she said as if amazed. 'What do mean?'

'Why, I haven't been able to see you alone ever since I went to meet you on Caester Hill.'

'But why should you see me alone?' she asked as if still in amazement. 'Surely you can say anything you have to say before my aunt.' With an unwisdom for which an instant later he blamed himself he blurted out:

'Why, old girl, you yourself did not think her presence necessary when you asked me to meet you on the hill.'

‘When was that?’ She saw that he was angry and wanted to test him; to try how far he would venture. He was getting dangerous; she must know the measure of what she had to fear.

He fell into the trap at once. His debts being paid, fear was removed, and all the hectoring side of the man was aroused. His antagonist was a woman; and he had already had in his life so many unpleasant scenes with women that this was no new experience. This woman had, by her own indiscretion, put a whip into his hand; and, if necessary to secure his own way, by God! he meant to use it! These last days had made her a more desirable possession in his eyes. The vastness of her estate had taken hold on him, and his father’s remorseless intention with regard to his will would either keep him with very limited funds, or leave him eventually a pauper if he forestalled his inheritance. The desire of her wealth had grown daily, and it was now the main force in bringing him here to-day. And to this was now added the personal desire which her presence evoked. Stephen, at all times beautiful, had never looked more lovely. In the days since she had met him on the hilltop, a time that to her seemed so long ago, she had grown to be a woman, and there is some subtle inconceivable charm in completed womanhood. The reaction from her terrible fear and depression had come, and her strong brilliant youth was manifesting itself. Her step was springy and her eyes were bright; and the glow of fine health, accentuated by the militant humour of the present moment, seemed to light up her beautiful skin. In herself she was desirable, very desirable; Leonard felt his pulses quicken and his blood leap as he looked at her. Even his prejudice against her red hair had changed to something like hungry admiration. Leonard felt for the first moment since he had known her that she was a woman; and that, with relation to her, he was a man.

And at the moment all the man in him asserted itself. It was with half love, as he saw it, and half self-assertion that he answered her question:

‘The day you asked me to marry you! Oh! what a fool I was not to leap at such a chance! I should have taken you in my arms then and kissed you till I showed you how much I loved you. But that will all come yet; the kissing is still to come! Oh! Stephen, don’t you see that I love you? Won’t you tell me that you love me still? Darling!’ He almost sprang at her, his arms extended to clasp her.

‘Stop!’ Her voice rang like a trumpet. She did not mean to submit to physical violence, and in the present state of her feeling, an embrace from him would be a desecration. He was now odious to her; she positively loathed him.

Before her uplifted hand and those flashing eyes, he stopped as one stricken into stone. In that instant she knew she was safe; and with a woman’s quickness of

apprehension and resolve, made up her mind what course to pursue. In a calm voice she said quietly:

'Mr. Everard, you have followed me in secret, and without my permission. I cannot talk here with you, alone. I absolutely refuse to do so; now or at any other time. If you have anything especial to say to me you will find me at home at noon to-morrow. Remember, I do not ask you to come. I simply yield to the pressure of your importunity. And remember also that I do not authorise you in any way to resume this conversation. In fact, I forbid it. If you come to my house you must control yourself to my wish!'

Then with a stately bow, whose imperious distance inflamed him more than ever, and without once looking back she took her way home, all agitated inwardly and with fast beating heart.

CHAPTER XXII—FIXING THE BOUNDS

Leonard came towards Normanstand next forenoon in considerable mental disturbance. In the first place he was seriously in love with Stephen, and love is in itself a disturbing influence.

Leonard's love was all of the flesh; and as such had power at present to disturb him, as it would later have power to torture him. Again, he was disturbed by the fear of losing Stephen, or rather of not being able to gain her. At first, ever since she had left him on the path from the hilltop till his interview the next day, he had looked on her possession as an 'option,' to the acceptance of which circumstances seemed to be compelling him. But ever since, that asset seemed to have been dwindling; and now he was almost beginning to despair. He was altogether cold at heart, and yet highly strung with apprehension, as he was shown into the blue drawing-room.

Stephen came in alone, closing the door behind her. She shook hands with him, and sat down by a writing-table near the window, pointing to him to sit on an ottoman a little distance away. The moment he sat down he realised that he was at a disadvantage; he was not close to her, and he could not get closer without manifesting his intention of so doing. He wanted to be closer, both for the purpose of his suit and for his own pleasure; the proximity of Stephen began to multiply his love for her. He thought that to-day she looked better than ever, of a warm radiant beauty which touched his senses with unattainable desire. She could not but notice the passion in his eyes, and instinctively her eyes wandered to a silver gong placed on the table well within reach. The more he glowed, the more icily calm she sat, till the silence between them began to grow oppressive. She waited, determined that he

should be the first to speak. Recognising the helplessness of silence, he began huskily:

'I came here to-day in the hope that you would listen to me.' Her answer, given with a conventional smile, was not helpful:

'I am listening.'

'I cannot tell you how sorry I am that I did not accept your offer. If I had know when I was coming that day that you loved me . . . ' She interrupted him, calm of voice, and with uplifted hand:

'I never said so, did I? Surely I could not have said such a thing! I certainly don't remember it?' Leonard was puzzled.

'You certainly made me think so. You asked me to marry you, didn't you?' Her answer came calmly, though in a low voice:

'I did.'

'Then if you didn't love me, why did you ask me to marry you?' It was his nature to be more or less satisfied when he had put any one opposed to him proportionally in the wrong; and now his exultation at having put a poser manifested itself in his tone. This, however, braced up Stephen to cope with a difficult and painful situation. It was with a calm, seemingly genial frankness, that she answered, smilingly:

'Do you know, that is what has been puzzling me from that moment to this!' Her words appeared to almost stupefy Leonard. This view of the matter had not occurred to him, and now the puzzle of it made him angry.

'Do you mean to say,' he asked hotly, 'that you asked a man to marry you when you didn't even love him?'

'That is exactly what I do mean! Why I did it is, I assure you, as much a puzzle to me as it is to you. I have come to the conclusion that it must have been from my vanity. I suppose I wanted to dominate somebody; and you were the weakest within range!'

'Thank you!' He was genuinely angry by this time, and, but for a wholesome fear of the consequences, would have used strong language.

'I don't see that I was the weakest about.' Somehow this set her on her guard. She wanted to know more, so she asked:

'Who else?'

‘Harold An Wolf! You had him on a string already!’ The name came like a sword through her heart, but the bitter comment braced her to further caution. Her voice seemed to her to sound as though far away:

‘Indeed! And may I ask you how you came to know that?’ Her voice seemed so cold and sneering to him that he lost his temper still further.

‘Simply because he told me so himself.’ It pleased him to do in ill turn to Harold. He did not forget that savage clutch at his throat; and he never would. Stephen’s senses were all alert. She saw an opportunity of learning something, and went on with the same cold voice:

‘And I suppose it was that pleasing confidence which was the cause of your refusal of my offer of marriage; of which circumstance you have so thoughtfully and so courteously reminded me.’ This, somehow, seemed of good import to Leonard. If he could show her that his intention to marry her was antecedent to Harold’s confidence, she might still go back to her old affection for him. He could not believe that it did not still exist; his experience of other women showed him that their love outlived their anger, whether the same had been hot or cold.

‘It had nothing in the world to do with it. He never said a word about it till he threatened to kill me—the great brute!’ This was learning something indeed! She went on in the same voice:

‘And may I ask you what was the cause of such sanguinary intention?’

‘Because he knew that I was going to marry you!’ As he spoke he felt that he had betrayed himself; he went on hastily, hoping that it might escape notice:

‘Because he knew that I loved you. Oh! Stephen, don’t you know it now! Can’t you see that I love you; and that I want you for my wife!’

‘But did he threaten to kill you out of mere jealousy? Do you still go in fear of your life? Will it be necessary to arrest him?’ Leonard was chagrined at her ignoring of his love-suit, and in his self-engrossment answered sulkily:

‘I’m not afraid of him! And, besides, I believe he has bolted. I called at his house yesterday, and his servant said they hadn’t heard a word from him.’ Stephen’s heart sank lower and lower. This was what she had dreaded. She said in as steady a voice as she could muster:

‘Bolted! Has he gone altogether?’

‘Oh, he’ll come back all right, in time. He’s not going to give up the jolly good living he has here!’

‘But why has he bolted? When he threatened to kill you did he give any reason?’ There was too much talk about Harold. It made him angry; so he answered in an offhand way:

‘Oh, I don’t know. And, moreover, I don’t care!’

‘And now,’ said Stephen, having ascertained what she wanted to know, ‘what is it that you want to speak to me about?’

Her words fell on Leonard like a cold douche. Here had he been talking about his love for her, and yet she ignored the whole thing, and asked him what he wanted to talk about.

‘What a queer girl you are. You don’t seem to attend to what a fellow is saying. Here have I been telling you that I love you, and asking you to marry me; and yet you don’t seem to have even heard me!’ She answered at once, quite sweetly, and with a smile of superiority which maddened him:

‘But that subject is barred!’

‘How do you mean? Barred!’

‘Yes. I told you yesterday!’

‘But, Stephen,’ he cried out quickly, all the alarm in him and all the earnestness of which he was capable uniting to his strengthening, ‘can’t you understand that I love you, with all my heart? You are so beautiful; so beautiful!’ He felt now in reality what he was saying.

The torrent of his words left no opening for her objection; it swept all merely verbal obstacles before it. She listened, content in a measure. So long as he sat at the distance which she had arranged before his coming she did not fear any personal violence. Moreover, it was a satisfaction to her now to hear him, who had refused her, pleading in vain. The more sincere his eloquence, the larger her satisfaction; she had no pity for him now.

‘I know I was a fool, Stephen! I had my chance that day on the hilltop; and if I had felt then as I feel now, as I have felt every moment since, I would not have been so cold. I would have taken you in my arms and held you close and kissed you, again, and again, and again. Oh, darling! I love you! I love you! I love you!’ He held out his arms imploringly. ‘Won’t you love me? Won’t—’

He stopped, paralysed with angry amazement. She was laughing.

He grew purple in the face; his hands were still outstretched. The few seconds seemed like hours.

'Forgive me!' she said in a polite tone, suddenly growing grave. 'But really you looked so funny, sitting there so quietly, and speaking in such a way, that I couldn't help it. You really must forgive me! But remember, I told you the subject was barred; and as, knowing that, you went on, you really have no one but yourself to blame!' Leonard was furious, but managed to say as he dropped his arms:

'But I love you!'

'That may be, now,' she went on icily. 'But it is too late. I do not love you; and I have never loved you! Of course, had you accepted my offer of marriage you should never have known that. No matter how great had been my shame and humiliation when I had come to a sense of what I had done, I should have honourably kept my part of the tacit compact entered into when I made that terrible mistake. I cannot tell you how rejoiced and thankful I am that you took my mistake in such a way. Of course, I do not give you any credit for it; you thought only of yourself, and did that which you liked best!'

'That is a nice sort of thing to tell a man!' he interrupted with cynical frankness.

'Oh, I do not want to hurt you unnecessarily; but I wish there to be no possible misconception in the matter. Now that I have discovered my error I am not likely to fall into it again; and that you may not have any error at all, I tell you now again, that I have not loved you, do not love you, and never will and never can love you.' Here an idea struck Leonard and he blurted out:

'But do you not think that something is due to me?'

'How do you mean?' Her brows were puckered with real wonder this time.

'For false hopes raised in my mind. If I did not love you before, the very act of proposing to me has made me love you; and now I love you so well that I cannot live without you!' In his genuine agitation he was starting up, when the sight of her hand laid upon the gong arrested him. She laughed as she said:

'I thought that the privilege of changing one's mind was a female prerogative! Besides, I have done already something to make reparation to you for the wrong of . . . of—I may put it fairly, as the suggestion is your own—of not having treated you as a woman!'

'Damn!'

‘As you observe so gracefully, it is annoying to have one’s own silly words come back at one, boomerang fashion. I made up my mind to do something for you; to pay off your debts.’ This so exasperated him that he said out brutally:

‘No thanks to you for that! As I had to put up with the patronage and the lecturings, and the eyeglass of that infernal old woman, I don’t intend . . . ’

Stephen stood up, her hand upon the gong:

‘Mr. Everard, if you do not remember that you are in my drawing-room, and speaking of my dear and respected aunt, I shall not detain you longer!’

He sat down at once, saying surlily:

‘I beg your pardon. I forgot. You make me so wild that—that . . . ’ He chewed the ends of his moustache angrily. She resumed her seat, taking her hand from the gong. Without further pause she continued:

‘Quite right! It has been Miss Rowly who paid your debts. At first I had promised myself the pleasure; but from something in your speech and manner she thought it better that such an act should not be done by a woman in my position to a man in yours. It might, if made public, have created quite a wrong impression in the minds of many of our friends.’

There was something like a snort from Leonard. She ignored it:

‘So she paid the money herself out of her own fortune. And, indeed, I must say that you do not seem to have treated her with much gratitude.’

‘What did I say or do that put you off doing the thing yourself?’

‘I shall answer it frankly: It was because you manifested, several times, in a manner there was no mistaking, both by words and deeds, an intention of levying blackmail on me by using your knowledge of my ridiculous, unmaidenly act. No one can despise, or deplore, or condemn that act more than I do; so that rather than yield a single point to you, I am, if necessary, ready to face the odium which the public knowledge of it might produce. What I had intended to do for you in the way of compensation for false hopes raised to you by that act has now been done. That it was done by my aunt on my behalf, and not by me, matters to you no more than it did to your creditors, who, when they received the money, made no complaint of injury to their feelings on that account.

‘Now, when you think the whole matter over in quietness, you will, knowing that I am ready at any time to face if necessary the unpleasant publicity, be able to estimate

what damage you would do to yourself by any exposé. It seems to me that you would come out of it pretty badly all round. That, however, is not my affair; it entirely rests with yourself. I think I know how women would regard it. I dare say you best know how men would look at it; and at you!'

Leonard knew already how the only man who knew of it had taken it, and the knowledge did not reassure him!

'You jade! You infernal, devilish, cruel, smooth-tongued jade!' He stood as bespoke. She stood too, and stood watching him with her hand on the gong. After a pause of a couple of seconds she said gravely:

'One other thing I should wish to say, and I mean it. Understand me clearly, that I mean it! You must not come again into my grounds without my special permission. I shall not allow my liberty to be taken away, or restricted, by you. If there be need at any time to come to the house, come in ceremonious fashion, by the avenues which are used by others. You can always speak to me in public, or socially, in the most friendly manner; as I shall hope to be able to speak to you. But you must never transgress the ordinary rules of decorum. If you do, I shall have to take, for my own protection, another course. I know you now! I am willing to blot out the past; but it must be the whole past that is wiped out!'

She stood facing him; and as he looked at her clear-cut aquiline face, her steady eyes, her resolute mouth, her carriage, masterly in its self-possessed poise, he saw that there was no further hope for him. There was no love and no fear.

'You devil!' he hissed.

She struck the gong; her aunt entered the room.

'Oh, is that you, Auntie? Mr. Everard has finished his business with me!' Then to the servant, who had entered after Miss Rowly:

'Mr. Everard would like his carriage. By the way,' she added, turning to him in a friendly way as an afterthought, 'will you not stay, Mr. Everard, and take lunch with us? My aunt has been rather moping lately; I am sure your presence would cheer her up.'

'Yes, do stay, Mr. Everard!' added Miss Rowly placidly. 'It would make a pleasant hour for us all.'

Leonard, with a great effort, said with conventional politeness:

'Thanks, awfully! But I promised my father to be home for lunch!' and he withdrew to the door which the servant held open.

He went out filled with anger and despair, and, sad for him, with a fierce, overmastering desire—love he called it—for the clever, proud, imperious beauty who had so outmatched and crushed him.

That beautiful red head, which he had at first so despised, was henceforth to blaze in his dreams.

CHAPTER XXIII—THE MAN

On the *Scoriac* Harold An Wolf, now John Robinson, kept aloof from every one. He did not make any acquaintances, did not try to. Some of those at table with him, being ladies and gentlemen, now and again made a polite remark; to which he answered with equal politeness. Being what he was he could not willingly offend any one; and there was nothing in his manner to repel any kindly overture to acquaintance. But this was the full length his acquaintanceship went; so he gradually felt himself practically alone. This was just what he wished; he sat all day silent and alone, or else walked up and down the great deck that ran from stem to stern, still always alone. As there were no second-class or steerage passengers on the *Scoriac*, there were no deck restraints, and so there was ample room for individual solitude. The travellers, however, were a sociable lot, and a general feeling of friendliness was abroad. The first four days of the journey were ideally fine, and life was a joy. The great ship, with bilge keels, was as steady as a rock.

Among the other passengers was an American family consisting of Andrew Stonehouse, the great ironmaster and contractor, with his wife and little daughter.

Stonehouse was a remarkable man in his way, a typical product of the Anglo-Saxon under American conditions. He had started in young manhood with nothing but a good education, due in chief to his own industry and his having taken advantage to the full of such opportunities as life had afforded to him. By unremitting work he had at thirty achieved a great fortune, which had, however; been up to then entirely invested and involved in his businesses. With, however, the colossal plant at his disposal, and by aid of the fine character he had won for honesty and good work, he was able within the next ten years to pile up a fortune vast even in a nation where multi-millionaires are scattered freely. Then he had married, wisely and happily. But no child had come to crown the happiness of the pair who so loved each other till a good many years had come and gone. Then, when the hope of issue had almost passed away, a little daughter came. Naturally the child was idolised by her parents, and thereafter every step taken by either was with an eye to her good. When the rigour of winter and the heat of summer told on the child in a way which the more hardy parents had never felt, she was whirled away to some place with more promising conditions of health

and happiness. When the doctors hinted that an ocean voyage and a winter in Italy would be good, those too were duly undertaken. And now, the child being in perfect health, the family was returning before the weather should get too hot to spend the summer at their châlet amongst the great pines on the slopes of Mount Ranier. Like the others on board, Mr. and Mrs. Stonehouse had proffered travellers' civilities to the sad, lonely young man. As to the others, he had shown thanks for their gracious courtesy; but friendship, as in other cases, did not advance. The Stonehouses were not in any way chagrined; their lives were too happy and too full for them to take needless offence. They respected the young man's manifest desire for privacy; and there, so far as they were concerned, the matter rested.

But this did not suit the child. Pearl was a sweet little thing, a real blue-eyed, golden-haired little fairy, full of loving-kindness. All the mother-instinct in her, and even at six a woman-child can be a mother—theoretically, went out towards the huge, lonely, sad, silent young man. She insisted on friendship with him; insisted shamelessly, with the natural inclination of innocence which rises high above shame. Even the half-hearted protests of the mother, who loved to see the child happy, did not deter her; after the second occasion of Pearl's seeking him, as she persisted, Harold could but remonstrate with the mother in turn; the ease of the gentle lady and the happiness of her child were more or less at stake. When Mrs. Stonehouse would say:

'There, darling! You must be careful not to annoy the gentleman,' Pearl would turn a rosy all-commanding face to her and answer:

'But, mother, I want him to play with me. You must play with me!' Then, as the mother would look at him, he would say quickly, and with genuine heartiness too:

'Oh please, madam, do let her play with me! Come, Pearl, shall you ride a cock-horse or go to market the way the gentleman rides?' Then the child would spring on his knee with a cry of delight, and their games began.

The presence of the child and her loving ways were unutterably sweet to Harold; but his pleasure was always followed by a pain that rent him as he thought of that other little one, now so far away, and of those times that seemed so long since gone.

But the child never relaxed in her efforts to please; and in the long hours of the sea voyage the friendship between her and the man grew, and grew. He was the biggest and strongest and therefore most lovely thing on board the ship, and that sufficed her. As for him, the child manifestly loved and trusted him, and that was all-in-all to his weary, desolate heart.

The fifth day out the weather began to change; the waves grew more and more mountainous as the day wore on and the ship advanced west. Not even the great bulk and weight of the ship, which ordinarily drove through the seas without pitch or roll, were proof against waves so gigantic. Then the wind grew fiercer and fiercer, coming in roaring squalls from the south-west. Most of those on board were alarmed, for the great waves were dreadful to see, and the sound of the wind was a trumpet-call to fear.

The sick stayed in their cabins; the rest found an interest if not a pleasure on deck. Among the latter were the Stonehouses, who were old travellers. Even Pearl had already had more sea-voyages than fall to most people in their lives. As for Harold, the storm seemed to come quite naturally to him and he paced the deck like a ship-master.

It was fortunate for the passengers that most of them had at this period of the voyage got their sea legs; otherwise walking on the slippery deck, that seemed to heave as the rolling of the vessel threw its slopes up or down, would have been impossible. Pearl was, like most children, pretty sure-footed; holding fast to Harold's hand she managed to move about ceaselessly. She absolutely refused to go with any one else. When her mother said that she had better sit still she answered:

'But, mother, I am quite safe with The Man!' 'The Man' was the name she had given Harold, and by which she always now spoke of him. They had had a good many turns together, and Harold had, with the captain's permission, taken her up on the bridge and showed her how to look out over the 'dodger' without the wind hurting her eyes. Then came the welcome beef-tea hour, and all who had come on deck were cheered and warmed with the hot soup. Pearl went below, and Harold, in the shelter of the charthouse, together with a good many others, looked out over the wild sea.

Harold, despite the wild turmoil of winds and seas around him, which usually lifted his spirits, was sad, feeling lonely and wretched; he was suffering from the recoil of his little friend's charming presence. Pearl came on deck again looking for him. He did not see her, and the child, seeing an opening for a new game, avoided both her father and mother, who also stood in the shelter of the charthouse, and ran round behind it on the weather side, calling a loud 'Boo!' to attract Harold's attention as she ran.

A few seconds later the *Scoriac* put her nose into a coming wave at just the angle which makes for the full exercise of the opposing forces. The great wave seemed to strike the ship on the port quarter like a giant hammer; and for an instant she stood still, trembling. Then the top of the wave seemed to leap up and deluge her. The wind took the flying water and threw it high in volumes of broken spray, which swept not

only the deck but the rigging as high as the top of the funnels. The child saw the mass of water coming, and shrieking flew round the port side of the charthouse. But just as she turned down the open space between it and the funnel the vessel rolled to starboard. At the same moment came a puff of wind of greater violence than ever. The child, calling out, half in simulated half in real fear, flew down the slope. As she did so the gale took her, and in an instant whirled her, almost touching her mother, over the rail into the sea.

Mrs. Stonehouse shrieked and sprang forward as though to follow her child. She was held back by the strong arm of her husband. They both slipped on the sloping deck and fell together into the scuppers. There was a chorus of screams from all the women present. Harold, with an instinctive understanding of the dangers yet to be encountered, seized a red tam-o'-shanter from the head of a young girl who stood near.

Her exclamation of surprise was drowned in the fearful cry 'Man overboard!' and all rushed down to the rail and saw Harold, as he emerged from the water, pull the red cap over his head and then swim desperately towards the child, whose golden hair was spread on the rising wave.

The instant after Pearl's being swept overboard might be seen the splendid discipline of a well-ordered ship. Every man to his post, and every man with a knowledge of his duty. The First Officer called to the Quartermaster at the wheel in a voice which cut through the gale like a trumpet:

'Hard a port! Hard!'

The stern of the great ship swung away to port in time to clear the floating child from the whirling screw, which would have cut her to pieces in an instant. Then the Officer after tearing the engine-room signal to 'Starboard engine full speed astern,' ran for the lifebuoy hanging at the starboard end of the bridge. This he hurled far into the sea. As it fell the attached rope dragged with it the signal, which so soon as it reaches water bursts into smoke and flame—signal by day and night. This done, and it had all been done in a couple of seconds, he worked the electric switch of the syren, which screamed out quickly once, twice, thrice. This is the dread sound which means 'man overboard,' and draws to his post every man on the ship, waking or sleeping.

The Captain was now on the bridge and in command, and the First Officer, freed from his duty there, ran to the emergency boat, swung out on its davits on the port side.

All this time, though only numbered by seconds, the *Scoriac* was turning hard to starboard, making a great figure of eight; for it is quicker to turn one of these great sea

monsters round than to stop her in mid career. The aim of her Captain in such cases is to bring her back to the weather side of the floating buoy before launching the boat.

On deck the anguish of the child's parents was pitiable. Close to the rail, with her husband's arms holding her tight to it, the distressed mother leaned out; but always moving so that she was at the nearest point of the ship to her child. As the ship passed on it became more difficult to see the heads. In the greater distance they seemed to be quite close together. All at once, just as a great wave which had hidden them in the farther trough passed on, the mother screamed out:

'She's sinking! she's sinking! Oh, God! Oh, God!' and she fell on her knees, her horrified eyes, set in a face of ashen grey, looking out between the rails.

But at the instant all eyes saw the man's figure rise in the water as he began to dive. There was a hush which seemed deadly; the onlookers feared to draw breath. And then the mother's heart leaped and her cry rang out again as two heads rose together in the waste of sea:

'He has her! He has her! He has her! Oh, thank God! Thank God!' and for a single instant she hid her face in her hands.

Then when the fierce 'hurrah' of all on board had been hushed in expectation, the comments broke forth. Most of the passengers had by this time got glasses of one kind or another.

'See! He's putting the cap on the child's head. He's a cool one that. Fancy him thinking of a red cap at such a time!'

'Ay! we could see that cap, when it might be we couldn't see anything else.'

'Look!' this from an old sailor standing by his boat, 'how he's raisin' in the water. He's keeping his body between her an' the spindrift till the squall has passed. That would choke them both in a wind like this if he didn't know how to guard against it. He's all right; he is! The little maid is safe wi' him.'

'Oh, bless you! Bless you for those words,' said the mother, turning towards him. 'At this moment the Second Officer, who had run down from the bridge, touched Mr. Stonehouse on the shoulder.

'The captain asked me to tell you, sir, that you and Mrs. Stonehouse had better come to him on the bridge. You'll see better from there.'

They both hurried up, and the mother again peered out with fixed eyes. The Captain tried to comfort her; laying his strong hand on her shoulder, he said:

‘There, there! Take comfort, ma’am. She is in the hands of God! All that mortal man can do is being done. And she is safer with that gallant young giant than she could be with any other man on the ship. Look, how he is protecting her! Why he knows that all that can be done is being done. He is waiting for us to get to him, and is saving himself for it. Any other man who didn’t know so much about swimming as he does would try to reach the lifebuoy; and would choke the two of them with the spindrift in the trying. Mind how he took the red cap to help us see them. He’s a fine lad that; a gallant lad!’