CHAPTER XXIV—FROM THE DEEPS

Presently the Captain handed Mrs. Stonehouse a pair of binoculars. For an instant she looked through them, then handed them back and continued gazing out to where the two heads appeared—when they did appear on the crest of the waves like pin-heads. The Captain said half to himself and half to the father:

'Mother's eyes! Mother's eyes!' and the father understood.

As the ship swept back to the rescue, her funnels sending out huge volumes of smoke which the gale beat down on the sea to leeward, the excitement grew tenser and tenser. Men dared hardly breathe; women wept and clasped their hands convulsively as they prayed. In the emergency boat the men sat like statues, their oars upright, ready for instant use. The officer stood with the falls in his hand ready to lower away.

When opposite the lifebuoy, and about a furlong from Harold and Pearl, the Captain gave the signal 'Stop,' and then a second later: 'Full speed astern.'

'Ready, men! Steady!' As the coming wave slipping under the ship began to rise up her side, the officer freed the falls and the boat sank softly into the lifting sea.

Instantly the oars struck the water, and as the men bent to them a cheer rang out.

* * * * *

Harold and Pearl heard, and the man turning his head for a moment saw that the ship was close at hand, gradually drifting down to the weather side of them. He raised the child in his arms, saying:

'Now, Pearl, wave your hand to mother and say, hurrah!' The child, fired into fresh hope, waved her tiny hand and cried 'Hurrah! Hurrah!' The sound could not reach the mother's ears; but she saw, and her heart leaped. She too waved her hand, but she uttered no sound. The sweet high voice of the child crept over the water to the ears of the men in the boat, and seemed to fire their arms with renewed strength.

A few more strokes brought them close, Harold with a last effort raised the child in his arms as the boat drove down on them. The boatswain leaning over the bow grabbed the child, and with one sweep of his strong arm took her into the boat. The bow oarsman caught Harold by the wrist. The way of the boat took him for a moment under water; but the next man; pulling his oar across the boat, stooped over and caught him by the collar, and clung fast. A few seconds more and he was hauled abroad. A wild cheer from all on the *Scoriac* came, sweeping down on the wind.

When once the boat's head had been turned towards the ship, and the oars had bent again to their work, they came soon within shelter. When they had got close enough ropes were thrown out, caught and made fast; and then came down one of the bowlines which the seamen held ready along the rail of the lower deck. This was seized by the boatswain, who placed it round him under his armpits. Then, standing with the child in his arms he made ready to be pulled up. Pearl held out her arms to Harold, crying in fear:

'No, no, let The Man take me! I want to go with The Man!' He said quietly so as not to frighten her:

'No, no, dear! Go with him! He can do this better than I can!' So she clung quietly to the seaman, holding her face pressed close against his shoulder. As the men above pulled at the rope, keeping it as far as possible from the side of the vessel, the boatswain fended himself off with his feet. In a few seconds he was seized by eager hands and pulled over the rail, tenderly holding and guarding the child all the while. In an instant she was in the arms of her mother, who had thrown herself upon her knees and pressed her close to her loving heart. The child put her little arms around her neck and clung to her. Then looking up and seeing the grey pallor of her face, which even her great joy could not in a moment efface, she stroked it and said:

'Poor mother! Poor mother! And now I have made you all wet!' Then, feeling her father's hand on her head she turned and leaped into his arms, where he held her close.

Harold was the next to ascend. He came amid a regular tempest of cheers, the seamen joining with the passengers. The officers, led by the Captain waving his cap from the bridge, joined in the paean.

The boat was cast loose. An instant after the engine bells tinkled: 'Full speed ahead.'

Mrs. Stonehouse had no eyes but for her child, except for one other. When Harold leaped down from the rail she rushed at him, all those around instinctively making way for her. She flung her arms around him and kissed him, and then before he could stop her sank to her knees at his feet, and taking his hand kissed it. Harold was embarrassed beyond all thinking. He tried to take away his hand, but she clung tight to it.

'No, no!' she cried. 'You saved my child!'

Harold was a gentleman and a kindly one. He said no word till she had risen, still holding his hand, when he said quietly:

‘There! there! Don’t cry. I was only too happy to be of service. Any other man on board would have done the same. I was the nearest, and therefore had to be first. That was all!’

Mr. Stonehouse came to him and said as he grasped Harold’s hand so hard that his fingers ached:

‘I cannot thank you as I would. But you are a man and will understand. God be good to you as you have been good to my child; and to her mother and myself!’ As he turned away Pearl, who had now been holding close to her mother’s hand, sprang to him holding up her arms. He raised her up and kissed her. Then he placed her back in her mother’s arms.

All at once she broke down as the recollection of danger swept back upon her. ‘Oh, Mother! Mother!’ she cried, with a long, low wail, which touched every one of her hearers to the heart’s core.

‘The hot blankets are all ready. Come, there is not a moment to be lost. I’ll be with you when I have seen the men attended to!’

So the mother, holding her in her arms and steadied by two seamen lest she should slip on the wet and slippery deck, took the child below.

Harold was taken by another set of men, who rubbed him down till he glowed, and poured hot brandy and water into him till he had to almost use force against the superabundance of their friendly ministrations.

For the remainder of that day a sort of solemn gladness ruled on the *Scoriac*. The Stonehouse family remained in their suite, content in glad thankfulness to be with Pearl, who lay well covered up on the sofa sleeping off the effects of the excitement and the immersion, and the result of the potation which the Doctor had forced upon her. Harold was simply shy, and objecting to the publicity which he felt to be his fate, remained in his cabin till the trumpet had blown the dinner call.

CHAPTER XXV—A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD

After dinner Harold went back to his cabin; locking himself in, he lay down on the sofa. The gloom of his great sorrow was heavy on him; the reaction from the excitement of the morning had come.

He was recalled to himself by a gentle tapping. Unlocking and opening the door he saw Mr. Stonehouse, who said with trouble in his voice:

‘I came to you on account of my little child.’ There he stopped with a break in his voice. Harold, with intent to set his mind at ease and to stave off further expressions of gratitude, replied:

‘Oh, pray don’t say anything. I am only too glad that I was privileged to be of service. I only trust that the dear little girl is no worse for her—her adventure!’

‘That is why I am here,’ said the father quickly. ‘My wife and I are loth to trouble you. But the poor little thing has worked herself into a paroxysm of fright and is calling for you. We have tried in vain to comfort or reassure her. She will not be satisfied without you. She keeps calling on “The Man” to come and help her. I am loth to put you to further strain after all you have gone through to-day; but if you would come—’ Harold was already in the passage as he spoke:

‘Of course I’m coming. If I can in any way help it is both a pleasure and a duty to be with her.’ Turning to the father he added:

‘She is indeed a very sweet and good child. I shall never forget how she bore herself whilst we waited for aid to come.’

‘You must tell her mother and me all about it,’ said the father; much moved.

When they came close to the Stonehouses’ suite of rooms they heard Pearl’s voice rising with a pitiful note of fear:

‘Where is The Man? Oh! where is The Man? Why doesn’t he come to me? He can save me! I want to be with The Man!’ When the door opened and she saw him she gave shriek of delight, and springing from the arms of her mother fairly leaped into Harold’s arms which were outstretched to receive her. She clung to him and kissed him again and again, rubbing her little hands all over his face as though to prove to herself that he was real and not a dream. Then with a sigh she laid her head on his breast, the reaction of sleep coming all at once to her. With a gesture of silence Harold sat down, holding the child in his arms. Her mother laid a thick shawl over and sat down close to Harold. Mr. Stonehouse stood quiet in the doorway with the child’s nurse peering anxiously over his shoulder.

After a little while, when he thought she was asleep, Harold rose and began to place her gently in the bunk. But the moment he did so she waked with a scream. The fright in her eyes was terrible. She clung to him, moaning and crying out between her sobs:

‘Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me!’ Harold was much moved and held the little thing tight in his strong arms, saying to her:

‘No darling! I shan’t leave you! Look in my eyes, dear, and I will promise you, and then you will be happy. Won’t you?’

She looked quickly up in his face. Then she kissed him lovingly, and rested her head, but not sleepily this time, on his breast said:

‘Yes! I’m not afraid now! I’m going to stay with The Man!’ Presently Mrs. Stonehouse, who had been thinking of ways and means, and of the comfort of the strange man who had been so good to her child, said:

‘You will sleep with mother to-night, darling. Mr. . . . The Man,’ she said this with an appealing look of apology to Harold, ‘The Man will stay by you till you are asleep . . . ’ But she interrupted, not fretfully or argumentatively, but with a settled air of content:

‘No! I’m going to sleep with The Man!’

‘But, dear one,’ the mother expostulated, ‘The Man will want sleep too.’

‘All right, mother. He can sleep too. I’ll be very good and lie quite quiet; but oh! mother, I can’t sleep unless his arms are round me. I’m afraid if they’re not the sea will get me!’ and she clung closer to Harold, tightening her arms round his neck.

‘You will not mind?’ asked Mrs. Stonehouse timidly to Harold; and, seeing acquiescence in his face, added in a burst of tearful gratitude:

‘Oh! you are good to her to us all!’

‘Hush!’ Harold said quietly. Then he said to Pearl, in a cheerful matter-of-fact way which carried conviction to the child’s mind:

‘Now, darling, it is time for all good little girls to be asleep, especially when they have had an—an interesting day. You wait here till I put my pyjamas on, and then I’ll come back for you. And mother and father shall come and see you nicely tucked in!’

‘Don’t be long!’ the child anxiously called after him as he hurried away. Even trust can have its doubts.

In a few minutes Harold was back, in pyjamas and slipper and a dressing-gown. Pearl, already wrapped in a warm shawl by her mother, held out her arms to Harold, who lifted her.

The Stonehouses’ suite of rooms was close to the top of the companion-way, and as Harold’s stateroom was on the saloon deck, the little procession had, much to the man’s concern, run the gauntlet of the thong of passengers whom the bad weather had kept indoors. When he came out of the day cabin carrying the child there was a

rush of all the women to make much of the little girl. They were all very kind and no troublesome; their interest was natural enough, and Harold stopped whilst they petted the little thing.

The little procession followed. Mr. and Mrs. Stonehouse coming next, and last the nurse, who manifested a phase of the anxiety of a hen who sees her foster ducklings waddling toward a pond.

When Harold was in his bunk the little maid was brought in.

When they had all gone and the cabin was dark, save for the gleam from the nightlight which the careful mother had placed out of sight in the basin at the foot of the bunk, Harold lay a long time in a negative state, if such be possible, in so far as thought was concerned.

Presently he became conscious of a movement of the child his arms; a shuddering movement, and a sort of smothered groan. The little thing was living over again in sleep the perils and fears of the day. Instinctively she put up her hands and felt the a round her. Then with a sigh clasped her arms round his neck, and with a peaceful look laid her head upon his breast. Even through the gates of sleep her instinct had recognised and realised protection.

And then this trust of a little child brought back the man to his nobler self. Once again came back to him that love which he had had, and which he knew now that he had never lost, for the little child that he had seen grow into full womanhood; whose image must dwell in his heart of hearts for evermore.

The long night's sleep quite restored Pearl. She woke fairly early and without any recurrence of fear. At first she lay still, fearing she would wake The Man, but finding that he was awake—he had not slept a wink all night—she kissed him and then scrambled out of bed.

It was still early morning, but early hours rule on shipland. Harold rang for the steward, and when the man came he told him to tell Mr. Stonehouse that the child was awake. His delight when he found the child unfrightened looking out of the port was unbounded.

CHAPTER XXVI—A NOBLE OFFER

That day Harold passed in unutterable gloom. The reaction was strong on him; and all his woe, his bitter remembrance of the past and his desolation for the future, were with him unceasingly.

In the dusk of the evening he wandered out to his favourite spot, the cable-tank on top of the aft wheelhouse. Here he had been all alone, and his loneliness had the added advantage that from the isolated elevation he could see if anyone approached. He had been out there during the day, and the Captain, who had noticed his habit had had rigged up a canvas dodger on the rail on the weather side. When he sat down on the coiled hawsers in the tank he was both secluded and sheltered. In this peaceful corner his thoughts ran freely and in sympathy with the turmoil of wind and wave.

How unfair it all was! Why had he been singled out for such misery? What gleam of hope or comfort was left to his miserable life since he had heard the words of Stephen; those dreadful words which had shattered in an instant all the cherished hopes of his life. Too well he remembered the tone and look of scorn with which the horrible truths had been conveyed to him. In his inmost soul he accepted them as truths; Stephen's soul had framed them and Stephen's lips had sent them forth.

From his position behind the screen he did not see the approaching figure of Mr. Stonehouse, and was astonished when he saw his head rise above the edge of the tank as he climbed the straight Jacob's ladder behind the wheelhouse. The elder man paused as he saw him and said in an apologetic way:

'Will you forgive my intruding on your privacy? I wanted to speak to you alone; and as I saw you come here a while ago I thought it would be a good opportunity.' Harold was rising as he spoke.

'By all means. This place is common property. But all the same I am honoured in your seeking me.' The poor fellow wished to be genial; but despite his efforts there was a strange formality in the expression of his words. The elder man understood, and said as he hurried forward and sank beside him:

'Pray don't stir! Why, what a cosy corner this is. I don't believe at this moment there is such peace in the ship!'

Once again the bitterness of Harold's heart broke out in sudden words:

'I hope not! There is no soul on board to whom I could wish such evil!' The old man said as he laid his hand softly on the other's shoulder:

'God help you, my poor boy, if such pain is in your heart!' Mr. Stonehouse looked out at the sea, at last turning his face to him again he spoke:

'If you feel that I intrude on you I earnestly ask you to forgive me; but I think that the years between your age and mine as well as my feeling towards the great obligation

which I owe you will plead for excuse. There is something I would like to say to you, sir; but I suppose I must not without your permission. May I have it?'

'If you wish, sir. I can at least hear it.'

The old man bowed and went on:

'I could not but notice that you have some great grief bearing upon you; and from one thing or another—I can tell you the data if you wish me to do so—I have come to the conclusion that you are leaving your native land because of it.' Here Harold, wakened to amazement by the readiness with which his secret had been divined, said quickly, rather as an exclamation than interrogation:

'How on earth did you know that!' His companion, taking it as a query, answered:

'Sir, at your age and with your strength life should be a joy; and yet you are sad: Companionship should be a pleasure; yet you prefer solitude. That you are brave and unselfish I know; I have reason, thank God! to know it. That you are kindly and tolerant is apparent from your bearing to my little child this morning; as well as your goodness of last night, the remembrance of which her mother and I will bear to our graves; and to me now. I have not lived all these years without having had trouble in my own heart; and although the happiness of late years has made it dim, my gratitude to you who are so sad brings it all back to me.' He bowed, and Harold, wishing to avoid speaking of his sorrow, said:

'You are quite right so far as I have a sorrow; and it is because of it I have turned my back on home. Let it rest at that!' His companion bowed gravely and went on.

'I take it that you are going to begin life afresh in the new country. In such case I have a proposition to make. I have a large business; a business so large that I am unable to manage it all myself. I was intending that when I arrived at home I would set about finding a partner. The man I want is not an ordinary man. He must have brains and strength and daring.' He paused. Harold felt what was coming, but realised, as he jumped at the conclusion, that it would not do for him to take for granted that he was the man sought. He waited; Mr. Stonehouse went on:

'As to brains, I am prepared to take the existence of such on my own judgment. I have been reading men, and in this aspect specially, all my life. The man I have thought of has brains. I am satisfied of that, without proof. I have proof of the other qualities.' He paused again; as Harold said nothing he continued in a manner ill at ease:

‘My difficulty is to make the proposal to the man I want. It is so difficult to talk business to a man to whom you under great obligation; to whom you owe everything. He might take a friendly overture ill.’ There was but one thing to be said and Harold said it. His heart warmed to the kindly old man and he wished to spare him pain; even if he could not accept him proposition:

‘He couldn’t take it ill; unless he was an awful bounder.’

‘It was you I thought of!’

‘I thought so much, sir;’ said Harold after a pause, ‘and I thank you earnestly and honestly. But it is impossible.’

‘Oh, my dear sir!’ said the other, chagrined as well as surprised. ‘Think again! It is really worth your while to think of it, no matter what your ultimate decision may be!’

Harold shook his head. There was a long silence. The old man wished to give his companion time to think; and indeed he thought that Harold was weighing the proposition in his mind. As for Harold, he was thinking how best he could make his absolute refusal inoffensive. He must, he felt, give some reason; and his thoughts were bent on how much of the truth he could safely give without endangering his secret. Therefore he spoke at last in general terms:

‘I can only ask you, sir, to bear with me and to believe that I am very truly and sincerely grateful to you for your trust. But the fact is, I cannot go anywhere amongst people. Of course you understand that I am speaking in confidence; to you alone and to none other?’

‘Absolutely!’ said Mr. Stonehouse gravely. Harold went on:

‘I must be alone. I can only bear to see people on this ship because it is a necessary way to solitude.’

‘You “cannot go anywhere amongst people”! Pardon me. I don’t wish to be unduly inquisitive; but on my word I fail to understand!’ Harold was in a great difficulty. Common courtesy alone forbade that he should leave the matter where it was; and in addition both the magnificently generous offer which had been made to him, and the way in which accident had thrown him to such close intimacy with Pearl’s family, required that he should be at least fairly frank. At last in a sort of cold desperation he said:

‘I cannot meet anyone . . . There it something that happened . . . Something I did . . . Nothing can make it right . . . All I can do is to lose myself in the wildest, grimmest, wilderness in the world; and fight my pain . . . my shame . . . !’

A long silence. Then the old man’s voice came clear and sweet, something like music, in the shelter from the storm:

‘But perhaps time may mend things. God is very good . . . !’ Harold answered out of the bitterness of his heart. He felt that his words were laden with an anger which he did not feel, but he did not see his way to alter them:

‘Nothing can mend this thing! It is at the farthest point of evil; and there is no going on or coming back. Nothing can wipe out what is done; what is past!’

Again silence, and again the strong, gentle voice:

‘God can do much! Oh my dear young friend, you who have been such a friend to me and mine, think of this.’

‘God Himself can do nothing here! It is done! And that is the end!’ He turned his head; it was all he could do to keep from groaning. The old man’s voice vibrated with earnest conviction as he spoke:

‘You are young and strong and brave! Your heart is noble! You can think quickly in moments of peril; therefore your brain is sound and alert. Now, may I ask you a favour? it is not much. Only that you will listen, without interruption, to what, if I have your permission, I am going to say. Do not ask me anything; do not deny; do not interrupt! Only listen! May I ask this?’

‘By all means! It is not much!’ he almost felt like smiling as he spoke. Mr. Stonehouse, after a short pause, as if arranging his thoughts, spoke:

‘Let me tell you what I am. I began life with nothing but a fair education such as all our American boys get. But from a good mother I got an idea that to be honest was the best of all things; from a strenuous father, who, however, could not do well for himself, I learned application to work and how best to use and exercise such powers as were in me. From the start things prospered with me. Men who knew me trusted me; some came with offers to share in my enterprise. Thus I had command of what capital I could use; I was able to undertake great works and to carry them through. Fortune kept growing and growing; for as I got wealthier I found newer and larger and more productive uses for my money. And in all my work I can say before God I never willingly wronged any man. I am proud to be able to say that my name stands good wherever it has been used. It may seem egotistical that I say such things of myself. It

may seem bad taste; but I speak because I have a motive in so doing. I want you to understand at the outset that in my own country, wherever I am known and in my own work, my name is a strength.'

He paused a while. Harold sat still; he knew that such man would not, could not, speak in such a way without a strong motive; and to learn that motive he waited.

'When you were in the water making what headway you could in that awful sea—when my little child's life hung in the balance, and the anguish of my wife's heart nearly tore my heart in two, I said to myself, "If we had a son I should wish him to be like that." I meant it then, and I mean it now! Come to me as you are! Faults, and past, and all. Forget the past! Whatever it was we will together try to wipe it out. Much may be done in restoring where there has been any wrong-doing. Take my name as your own. It will protect you from the result of what ever has been, and give you an opportunity to find your place again. You are not bad in heart I know. Whatever you have done has not been from base motives. Few of us are spotless as to facts. You and I will show ourselves—for unless God wills to the opposite we shall confide in none other—that a strong, brave man may win back all that was lost. Let me call you by my name and hold you as the son of my heart; and it will be a joy and pleasure to my declining years.'

As he had spoken, Harold's thought's had at first followed in some wonderment. But gradually, as his noble purpose unfolded, based as it was on a misconception as to the misdoing of which he himself had spoken, he had been almost stricken dumb. At the first realisation of what was intended he could not have spoken had he tried; but at the end he had regained his thoughts and his voice. There was still wonderment in it, as realising from the long pause that the old man had completed his suggestion, he spoke:

'If I understand aright you are offering me your name! Offering to share your honour with me. With me, whom, if again I understand, you take as having committed some crime?'

'I inferred from what you said and from your sadness, your desire to shun your kind, that there was, if not a crime, some fault which needed expiation.'

'But your honour, sir; your honour!' There was a proud look in the old man's eyes as he said quietly:

'It was my desire, is my desire, to share with you what I have that is best; and that, I take it, is not the least valuable of my possessions, such as they are! And why not? You have given to me all that makes life sweet; without which it would be

unbearable. That child who came to my wife and me when I was old and she had passed her youth is all in all to us both. Had your strength and courage been for barter in the moments when my child was quivering between life and death, I would have cheerfully purchased them with not half but all! Sir, I should have given my soul! I can say this now, for gratitude is above all barter; and surely it is allowed to a father to show gratitude for the life of his child!'

This great-hearted generosity touched Harold to the quick. He could hardly speak for a few minutes. Then instinctively grasping the old man's hand he said:

'You overwhelm me. Such noble trust and generosity as you have shown me demands a return of trust. But I must think! Will you remain here and let me return to you in a little while?'

He rose quickly and slipped down the iron ladder, passing into the darkness and the mist and the flying spray.

CHAPTER XXVII—AGE'S WISDOM

Harold went to and fro on the deserted deck. All at once the course he had to pursue opened out before him. He was aware that what the noble-minded old man offered him was fortune, great fortune in any part of the world. He would have to be refused, but the refusal should be gently done. He, believing that the other had done something very wrong, had still offered to share with him his name, his honour. Such confidence demanded full confidence in return; the unwritten laws which governed the men amongst whom he had been brought up required it.

And the shape that confidence should take? He must first disabuse his new friend's mind of criminal or unworthy cause for his going away. For the sake of his own name and that of his dead father that should be done. Then he would have to suggest the real cause . . . He would in this have to trust Mr. Stonehouse's honour for secrecy. But he was worthy of trust. He would, of course, give no name, no clue; but he would put things generally in a way that he could understand.

When his mind was so far made up he wanted to finish the matter, so he turned to the wheelhouse and climbed the ladder again. It was not till he sat in the shelter by his companion that he became aware that he had become wet with the spray. The old man wishing to help him in his embarrassment said:

'Well?' Harold began at once; the straightforward habit of his life stood to him now:

‘Let me say first, sir, what will I know give you pleasure.’ The old man extended his hand; he had been hoping for acceptance, and this seemed like it. Harold laid his hand on it for an instant only, and then raised it as if to say ‘Wait’:

‘You have been so good to me, so nobly generous in your wishes that I feel I owe you a certain confidence. But as it concerns not myself alone I will ask that it be kept a secret between us two. Not to be told to any other; not even your wife!’

‘I will hold your secret sacred. Even from my wife; the first secret I shall have ever kept from her.’

‘First, then, let me say, and this is what I know will rejoice you, that I am not leaving home and country because of any crime I have committed; not from any offence against God or man, or law. Thank God! I am free from such. I have always tried to live uprightly . . . ’ Here a burst of pain overcame him, and with a dry sob he added: ‘And that is what makes the terrible unfairness of it all!’

The old man laid a kindly hand on his shoulder and kept it there for a few moments.

‘My poor boy! My poor boy!’ was all he said. Harold shook himself as if to dislodge the bitter thoughts. Mastering himself he went on:

‘There was a lady with whom I was very much thrown in contact since we were children. Her father was my father’s friend. My friend too, God knows; for almost with his dying breath he gave sanction to my marrying his daughter, if it should ever be that she should care for me in that way. But he wished me to wait, and, till she was old enough to choose, to leave her free. For she is several years younger than I am; and I am not very old yet—except in heart! All this, you understand, was said in private to me; none other knew it. None knew of it even till this moment when I tell you that such a thing has been.’ He paused; the other said:

‘Believe me that I value your confidence, beyond all words!’ Harold felt already the good effects of being able to speak of his pent-up trouble. Already this freedom from the nightmare loneliness of his own thoughts seemed to be freeing his very soul.

‘I honestly kept to his wishes. Before God, I did! No man who loved a woman, honoured her, worshipped her, could have been more scrupulously careful as to leaving her free. What it was to me to so hold myself no one knows; no one ever will know. For I loved her, do love her, with every nerve and fibre of my heart. All our lives we had been friends; and I believed we loved and trusted each other. But . . . but then there came a day when I found by chance that a great trouble threatened her. Not from anything wrong that she had done; but from something perhaps foolish,

harmlessly foolish except that she did not know . . . ’ He stopped suddenly, fearing he might have said overmuch of Stephen’s side of the affair. ‘When I came to her aid, however, meaning the best, and as single-minded as a man can be, she misunderstood my words, my meaning, my very coming; and she said things which cannot be unsaid. Things . . . matters were so fixed that I could not explain; and I had to listen. She said things that I did not believe she could have said to me, to anyone. Things that I did not think she could have thought . . . I dare say she was right in some ways. I suppose I bungled in my desire to be unselfish. What she said came to me in new lights upon what I had done . . . But anyhow her statements were such that I felt I could not, should not, remain. My very presence must have been a trouble to her hereafter. There was nothing for it but to come away. There was no place for me! No hope for me! There is none on this side of the grave! . . . For I love her still, more than ever. I honour and worship her still, and ever will, and ever must! . . . I am content to forego my own happiness; but I feel there is a danger to her from what has been. That there is and must be to her unhappiness even from the fact that it was I who was the object of her wrath; and this adds to my woe. Worst of all is . . . the thought and the memory that she should have done so; she who . . . she . . . ’

He turned away overcome and hid his face in his hands. The old man sat still; he knew that at such a moment silence is the best form of sympathy. But his heart glowed; the wisdom of his years told him that he had heard as yet of no absolute bar to his friend’s ultimate happiness.

‘I am rejoiced, my dear boy, at what you tell me of your own conduct. It would have made no difference to me had it been otherwise. But it would have meant a harder and longer climb back to the place you should hold. But it really seems that nothing is so hopeless as you think. Believe me, my dear young friend who are now as a son to my heart, that there will be bright days for you yet . . . ’ He paused a moment, but mastering himself went on in a quiet voice:

‘I think you are wise to go away. In the solitudes and in danger things that are little in reality will find their true perspective; and things that are worthy will appear in their constant majesty.’

He stood, and laying once again his hand on the young man’s shoulder said:

‘I recognise that I—that we, for my wife and little girl would be at one with me in my wish, did they know of it, must not keep you from your purpose of fighting out your trouble alone. Every man, as the Scotch proverb says, must “dree his own weird.” I shall not, I must not, ask you for any promise; but I trust that if ever you do come back

you will make us all glad by seeing you. And remember that what I said of myself and of all I have—all—holds good so long as I shall live!'

Before Harold could reply he had slipped down the ladder and was gone.

During the rest of the voyage, with the exception of one occasion, he did not allude to the subject again by word or implication, and Harold was grateful to him for it.

On the night before Fire Island should be sighted Harold was in the bow of the great ship looking out with eyes in which gleamed no hope. To him came through the darkness Mr. Stonehouse. He heard the footsteps and knew them; so with the instinct of courtesy, knowing that his friend would not intrude on his solitude without purpose, he turned and met him. When the American stood beside him he said, studiously avoiding looking at his companion:

'This is the last night we shall be together, and, if I may, there is one thing I would like to say to you.'

'Say all you like, sir,' said Harold as heartily as he could, 'I am sure it is well meant; and for that at any rate I shall be grateful to you.'

'You will yet be grateful, I think!' he answered gravely. 'When it comes back to you in loneliness and solitude you will, I believe, think it worth being grateful for. I don't mean that you will be grateful to me, but for the thing itself. I speak out of the wisdom of many years. At your time of life the knowledge cannot come from observation. It may my poor boy, come through pain; and if what I think is correct you will even in due time be grateful to the pain which left such golden residuum.' He paused, and Harold grew interested. There was something in the old man's manner which presaged a truth; he, at least, believed it. So the young man listened at first with his ears; and as the other spoke, his heart listened too:

'Young men are apt to think somewhat wrongly of women they love and respect. We are apt to think that such women are of a different clay from ourselves. Nay! that they are not compact of clay at all, but of some faultless, flawless material which the Almighty keeps for such fine work. It is only in middle age that men—except scamps, who learn this bad side of knowledge young—realise that women are human beings like themselves. It may be, you know, that you may have misjudged this young lady! That you have not made sufficient allowance for her youth, her nature, even the circumstances under which she spoke. You have told me that she was in some deep grief or trouble. May it not have been that this in itself unnerved her, distorted her views, aroused her passion till all within and around was tinged with the jaundice of her concern, her humiliation—whatever it was that destroyed for the time that normal

self which you had known so long. May it not have been that her bitterest memory even since may be of the speaking of these very words which sent you out into the wide world to hide yourself from men. I have thought, waking and sleeping, of your position ever since you honoured me with your confidence; and with every hour the conviction has strengthened in me that there is a way out of this situation which sends a man like you into solitude with a heart hopeless and full of pain; and which leaves her perhaps in greater pain, for she has not like you the complete sense of innocence. But at present there is no way out but through time and thought. Whatever may be her ideas or wishes she is powerless. She does not know your thoughts, no matter how she may guess at them. She does not know where you are or how to reach you, no matter how complete her penitence may be. And oh! my dear young friend, remember that you are a strong man, and she is a woman. Only a woman in her passion and her weakness after all. Think this all over, my poor boy! You will have time and opportunity where you are going. God help you to judge wisely!' After a pause of a few seconds he said abruptly: 'Good night!' and moved quickly away.

* * * * *

When the time for parting came Pearl was inconsolable. Not knowing any reason why The Man should not do as she wished she was persistent in her petitions to Harold that he should come with her, and to her father and mother that they should induce him to do so. Mrs. Stonehouse would have wished him to join them if only for a time. Her husband, unable to give any hint without betraying confidence, had to content himself with trying to appease his little daughter by vague hopes rather than promises that her friend would join them at some other time.

When the *Scoriac* was warped at the pier there was a tendency on the part of the passengers to give Harold a sort of public send-off; but becoming aware of it he hurried down the gangway without waiting. Having only hand luggage, for he was to get his equipment in New York, he had cleared and passed the ring of customs officers before the most expeditious of the other passengers had collected their baggage. He had said good-bye to the Stonehouses in their own cabin. Pearl had been so much affected at saying good-bye, and his heart had so warmed to her, that at last he had said impulsively:

'Don't cry, darling. If I am spared I shall come back to you within three years. Perhaps I will write before then; but there are not many post-offices where I am going to!'

Children are easily satisfied. Their trust makes a promise a real thing; and its acceptance is the beginning of satisfaction. But for weeks after the parting she had

often fits of deep depression, and at such times her tears always flowed. She took note of the date, and there was never a day that she did not think of and sigh for The Man.

And The Man, away in the wilds of Alaska, was feeling, day by day and hour by hour, the chastening and purifying influences of the wilderness. Hot passions cooled before the breath of the snowfield and the glacier. The moaning of a tortured spirit was lost in the roar of the avalanche and the scream of the cyclone. Pale sorrow and cold despair were warmed and quickened by the fierce sunlight which came suddenly and stayed only long enough to vitalise all nature.

And as the first step to understanding, The Man forgot himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII—DE LANNOY

Two years!

Not much to look back upon, but a world to look forward to. To Stephen, dowered though she was with rare personal gifts and with wealth and position accorded to but few, the hours of waiting were longer than the years that were past. Yet the time had new and startling incidents for her. Towards Christmas in the second year the Boer war had reached its climax of evil. As the news of disaster after disaster was flashed through the cable she like others felt appalled at the sacrifices that were being exacted by the God of War.

One day she casually read in The Times that the Earl de Lannoy had died in his London mansion, and further learned that he had never recovered from the shock of hearing that his two sons and his nephew had been killed. The paragraph concluded: “By his death the title passes to a distant relative. The new Lord de Lannoy is at present in India with his regiment, the 35th or ‘Grey’ Hussars, of which he is Colonel.” She gave the matter a more than passing thought, for it was sad to find a whole family thus wiped out at a blow.

Early in February she received a telegram from her London solicitor saying that he wished to see her on an important matter. Her answer was: “Come at once”; and at tea-time Mr. Copleston arrived. He was an old friend and she greeted him warmly. She was a little chilled when he answered with what seemed unusual deference:

‘I thank your Ladyship for your kindness!’ She raised her eyebrows but made no comment: she was learning to be silent under surprise. When she had handed the old gentleman his tea she said:

‘My aunt has chosen to remain away, thinking that you might wish to see me privately. But I take it that there is nothing which she may not share. I have no secrets from her.’

He rubbed his hands genially as he replied:

‘Not at all; not at all! I should like her to be present. It will, I am sure, be a delight to us all.’

Again raised eyebrows; again silence on the subject. When a servant answered her bell she told him to ask Miss Rowly if she would kindly join them.

Aunt Laetitia and the solicitor were old cronies, and their greeting was most friendly. When the old gentlewoman had seated herself and taken her cup of tea, Mr. Copleston said to Stephen, with a sort of pomposity:

‘I have to announce your succession to the Earldom de Lannoy!’

Stephen sat quite still. She knew the news was true; Mr. Copleston was not one who would jest on a business subject, and too accurate a lawyer to make an error in a matter of fact. But the fact did not seem to touch her. It was not that she was indifferent to it; few women could hear such news without a thrill. Mr. Copleston seemed at a loss. Miss Rowly rose and quietly kissed her, and saying simply, ‘God bless you, my dear!’ went back to her seat.

Realising that Mr. Copleston expected some acknowledgment, Stephen held out her hand to him and said quietly:

‘Thank you!’

After a long pause she added quietly:

‘Now, won’t you tell us about it? I am in absolute ignorance; and don’t understand.’

‘I had better not burden you, at first, with too many details, which can come later; but give you a rough survey of the situation.’

‘Your title of Countess de Lannoy comes to you through your ancestor Isobel, third and youngest daughter of the sixth Earl; Messrs Collinbrae and Jackson, knowing that my firm acted for your family, communicated with us. Lest there should be any error we followed most carefully every descendant and every branch of the family, for we thought it best not to communicate with you till your right of inheritance was beyond dispute. We arrived independently at the same result as Messrs. Collinbrae and Jackson. There is absolutely no doubt whatever of your claim. You will petition the

Crown, and on reference to the House of Lords the Committee for Privileges will admit your right. May I offer my congratulations, Lady de Lannoy on your acquisition? By the way, I may say that all the estates of the Earldom, which have been from the first kept in strict entail, go with the title de Lannoy.'

During the recital Stephen was conscious of a sort of bitter comment on the tendencies of good fortune.

'Too late! too late!' something seemed to whisper, 'what delight it would have been had Father inherited . . . If Harold had not gone . . . !' All the natural joy seemed to vanish, as bubbles break into empty air.

To Aunt Laetitia the new title was a source of pride and joy, far greater than would have been the case had it come to herself. She had for so many years longed for new honours for Stephen that she had almost come to regard them as a right whose coming should not be too long delayed. Miss Rowly had never been to Lannoy; and, indeed, she knew personally nothing of the county Angleshire in which it was situated. She was naturally anxious to see the new domain; but kept her feeling concealed during the months that elapsed until Stephen's right had been conceded by the Committee for Privileges. But after that her impatience became manifest to Stephen, who said one day in a teasing, caressing way, as was sometimes her wont:

'Why, Auntie, what a hurry you are in! Lannoy will keep, won't it?'

'Oh, my dear,' she replied, shaking her head, 'I can understand your own reticence, for you don't want to seem greedy and in a hurry about your new possessions. But when people come to my age there's no time to waste. I feel I would not have complete material for happiness in the World-to-come, if there were not a remembrance of my darling in her new home!'

Stephen was much touched; she said impulsively:

'We shall go to-morrow, Auntie. No! Let us go to-day. You shall not wait an hour that I can help!' She ran to the bell; but before her hand was on the cord the other said:

'Not yet! Stephen dear. It would flurry me to start all at once; to-morrow will be time enough. And that will give you time to send word so that they will be prepared for your coming.'

How often do we look for that to-morrow which never comes? How often do we find that its looked-for rosy tints are none other than the gloom-laden grey of the present?

Before the morrow's sun was high in the heavens Stephen was hurriedly summoned to her aunt's bedside. She lay calm and peaceful; but one side of her face was alive and the other seemingly dead. In the night a paralytic stroke had seized her. The doctors said she might in time recover a little, but she would never be her old active self again. She herself, with much painful effort, managed to convey to Stephen that she knew the end was near. Stephen, knowing the wish of her heart and thinking that it might do her good to gratify her wish, asked if she should arrange that she be brought to Lannoy. Feebly and slowly, word by word, she managed to convey her idea.

'Not now, dear one. I shall see it all in time!—Soon! And I shall understand and rejoice!' For a long time she lay still, holding with her right hand, which was not paralysed, the other's hand. Then she murmured:

'You will find happiness there!' She said no more; but seemed to sleep.

From that sleep she never woke, but faded slowly, softly away.

Stephen was broken-hearted. Now, indeed, she felt alone and desolate. All were gone. Father, uncle, aunt!—And Harold. The kingdoms of the Earth which lay at her feet were of no account. One hour of the dead or departed, any of them, back again were worth them all!

Normanstand was now too utterly lonely to be endurable; so Stephen determined to go, for a time at any rate, to Lannoy. She was becoming accustomed to be called 'my lady' and 'your ladyship,' and the new loneness made her feel better prepared to take her place amongst new surroundings.

In addition, there was another spur to her going. Leonard Everard, knowing of her absolute loneliness, and feeling that in it was a possibility of renewing his old status, was beginning to make himself apparent. He had learned by experience a certain wisdom, and did not put himself forward obtrusively. But whenever they met he looked at her so meekly and so lovingly that it brought remembrances which came with blushes. So, all at once, without giving time for the news to permeate through the neighbourhood, she took her way to Lannoy with a few servants.

Stephen's life had hitherto been spent inland. She had of course now and again been for short periods to various places; but the wonder of the sea as a constant companion had been practically unknown to her.

Now at her new home its full splendour burst upon her; and so impressed itself upon her that new life seemed to open.

Lannoy was on the north-eastern coast, the castle standing at the base of a wide promontory stretching far into the North Sea. From the coast the land sloped upward to a great rolling ridge. The outlook seaward was over a mighty expanse of green sward, dotted here and there with woods and isolated clumps of trees which grew fewer and smaller as the rigour of the northern sea was borne upon them by the easterly gales.

The coast was a wild and lonely one. No habitation other than an isolated fisher's cottage was to be seen between the little fishing-port at the northern curve away to the south, where beyond a waste of sandhills and strand another tiny fishing-village nestled under a high cliff, sheltering it from northerly wind. For centuries the lords of Lannoy had kept their magnificent prospect to themselves; and though they had treated their farmers and cottagers well, none had ever been allowed to settle in the great park to seaward of the castle.

From the terrace of the castle only than one building, other than the cottage on the headland, could be seen. Far off on the very crest of the ridge was the tower of an old windmill.

CHAPTER XXIX—THE SILVER LADY

When it was known that Lady de Lannoy had come to Lannoy there was a prompt rush of such callers as the county afforded. Stephen, however, did not wish to see anyone just at present. Partly to avoid the chance meeting with strangers, and partly because she enjoyed and benefited by the exercise, she was much away from home every day. Sometimes, attended only by a groom, she rode long distances north or south along the coast; or up over the ridge behind the castle and far inland along the shaded roads through the woods; or over bleak wind-swept stretches of moorland. Sometimes she would walk, all alone, far down to the sea-road, and would sit for hours on the shore or high up on some little rocky headland where she could enjoy the luxury of solitude.

Now and again in her journeyings she made friends, most of them humble ones. She was so great a lady in her station that she could be familiar without seeming to condescend. The fishermen of the little ports to north and south came to know her, and to look gladly for her coming. Their goodwives had for her always a willing curtsy and a ready smile. As for the children, they looked on her with admiration and love, tempered with awe. She was so gentle with them, so ready to share their pleasures and interests, that after a while they came to regard her as some strange embodiment of Fairydom and Dreamland. Many a little heart was made glad by the arrival of some

item of delight from the Castle; and the hearts of the sick seemed never to hope, or their eyes to look, in vain.

One friend she made who became very dear and of great import. Often she had looked up at the old windmill on the crest of the ridge and wondered who inhabited it; for that some one lived in it, or close by, was shown at times by the drifting smoke. One day she made up her mind to go and see for herself. She had a fancy not to ask anyone about it. The place was a little item of mystery; and as such to be treasured and exploited, and in due course explored. The mill itself was picturesque, and the detail at closer acquaintance sustained the far-off impression. The roadway forked on the near side of the mill, reuniting again the further side, so that the place made a sort of island—mill, out-offices and garden. As the mill was on the very top of the ridge the garden which lay seawards was sheltered by the building from the west, and from the east by a thick hedge of thorn and privet, which quite hid it from the roadway. Stephen took the lower road. Finding no entrance save a locked wooden door she followed round to the western side, where the business side of the mill had been. It was all still now and silent, and that it had long fallen into disuse was shown by the grey faded look of everything. Grass, green and luxuriant, grew untrodden between the cobble-stones with which the yard was paved. There was a sort of old-world quietude about everything which greatly appealed to Stephen.

Stephen dismounted and walked round the yard admiring everything. She did not feel as if intruding; for the gateway was wide open.

A low door in the base of the mill tower opened, and a maid appeared, a demure pretty little thing of sixteen or seventeen years, dressed in a prim strait dress and an old-fashioned Puritan cap. Seeing a stranger, she made an ejaculation and drew back hastily. Stephen called out to her:

'Don't be afraid, little girl! Will you kindly tell me who lives here?' The answer came with some hesitation:

'Sister Ruth.'

'And who is Sister Ruth?' The question came instinctively and without premeditation. The maid, embarrassed, held hard to the half-open door and shifted from foot to foot uneasily.

'I don't know!' she said at last. 'Only Sister Ruth, I suppose!' It was manifest that the matter had never afforded her anything in the nature of a problem. There was an embarrassing silence. Stephen did not wish to seem, or even to be, prying; but her curiosity was aroused. What manner of woman was this who lived so manifestly

alone, and who had but a Christian name! Stephen, however, had all her life been accustomed to dominance, and at Normanstand and Norwood had made many acquaintances amongst her poorer neighbours. She was just about to ask if she might see Sister Ruth, when behind the maid in the dark of the low passage-way appeared the tall, slim figure of a silver woman. Truly a silver woman! The first flash of Stephen's thought was correct. White-haired, white-faced, white-capped, white-kerchiefed; in a plain-cut dress of light-grey silk, without adornment of any kind. The whole ensemble was as a piece of old silver. The lines of her face were very dignified, very sweet, very beautiful. Stephen felt at once that she was in the presence of no common woman. She looked an admiration which all her Quaker garments could not forbid the other to feel. She was not the first to speak; in such a noble presence the dignity of Stephen's youth imperatively demanded silence, if not humility. So she waited. The Silver Lady, for so Stephen ever after held her in her mind, said quietly, but with manifest welcome:

'Didst thou wish to see me? Wilt thou come in?' Stephen answered frankly:

'I should like to come in; if you will not think me rude. The fact is, I was struck when riding by with the beautiful situation of the mill. I thought it was only an old mill till I saw the garden hedges; and I came round to ask if I might go in.' The Silver Lady came forward at a pace that by itself expressed warmth as she said heartily:

'Indeed thou mayest. Stay! it is tea-time. Let us put thy horse in one of the sheds; there is no man here at present to do it. Then thou shalt come with me and see my beautiful view!' She was about to take the horse herself, but Stephen forestalled her with a quick: 'No, no! pray let me. I am quite accustomed.' She led the horse to a shed, and having looped the rein over a hook, patted him and ran back. The Silver Lady gave her a hand, and they entered the dark passage together.

Stephen was thinking if she ought to begin by telling her name. But the Haroun al Raschid feeling for adventure incognito is an innate principle of the sons of men. It was seldom indeed that her life had afforded her such an opportunity.

The Silver Lady on her own part also wished for silence, as she looked for the effect on her companion when the glory of the view should break upon her. When they had climbed the winding stone stair, which led up some twenty feet, there was a low wide landing with the remains of the main shaft of the mill machinery running through it. From one side rose a stone stair curving with the outer wall of the mill tower and guarded by a heavy iron rail. A dozen steps there were, and then a landing a couple of yards square; then a deep doorway cut in the thickness of the wall, round which the winding stair continued.

The Silver Lady, who had led the way, threw open the door, and motioned to her guest to enter. Stephen stood for a few moments, surprised as well as delighted, for the room before her as not like anything which she had ever seen or thought of.

It was a section of almost the whole tower, and was of considerable size, for the machinery and even the inner shaft had been removed. East and south and west the wall had been partially cut away so that great wide windows nearly the full height of the room showed the magnificent panorama. In the depths of the ample windows were little cloistered nooks where one might with a feeling of super-solitude be away from and above the world.

The room was beautifully furnished and everywhere were flowers, with leaves and sprays and branches where possible.

Even from where she stood in the doorway Stephen had a bird's-eye view of the whole countryside; not only of the coast, with which she was already familiar, and on which her windows at the Castle looked, but to the south and west, which the hill rising steep behind the castle and to southward shut out.

The Silver Lady could not but notice her guest's genuine admiration.

'Thou likest my room and my view. There is no use asking thee, I see thou dost!' Stephen answered with a little gasp.

'I think it is the quaintest and most beautiful place I have ever seen!'

'I am so glad thou likest it. I have lived here for nearly forty years; and they have been years of unutterable peace and earthly happiness! And now, thou wilt have some tea!'

Stephen left the mill that afternoon with a warmth of heart that she had been a stranger to for many a day. The two women had accepted each other simply. 'I am called Ruth,' said the Silver Lady. 'And I am Stephen,' said the Countess de Lannoy in reply. And that was all; neither had any clue to the other's identity. Stephen felt that some story lay behind that calm, sweet personality; much sorrow goes to the making of fearless quietude. The Quaker lady moved so little out of her own environment that she did not even suspect the identity of her visitor. All that she knew of change was a notice from the solicitor to the estate that, as the headship had lapsed into another branch of the possessing family, she must be prepared, if necessary, to vacate her tenancy, which was one 'at will.'

It was not long before Stephen availed herself of the permission to come again. This time she made up her mind to tell who she was, lest the concealment of her identity might lead to awkwardness. At that meeting friendship became union.

The natures of the two women expanded to each other; and after a very few meetings there was established between them a rare confidence. Even the personal austerity of Quakerdom, or the state and estate of the peeress, could not come between. Their friendship seemed to be for the life of one. To the other it would be a memory.

The Silver Lady never left the chosen routine of her own life. Whatever was the reason of her giving up the world, she kept it to herself; and Stephen respected her reticence as much as she did her confidence.

It had become a habit, early in their friendship, for Stephen to ride or walk over to the windmill in the dusk of the evening when she felt especially lonely. On one such occasion she pushed open the outer door, which was never shut, and took her way up the stone stair. She knew she would find her friend seated in the window with hands folded on lap, looking out into the silent dusk with that absorbed understanding of things which is holier than reverence, and spiritually more active than conscious prayer.

She tapped the door lightly, and stepped into the room.

With a glad exclamation, which coming through her habitual sedateness showed how much she loved the young girl, Sister Ruth started to her feet. There was something of such truth in the note she had sounded, that the lonely girl's heart went out to her in abandoned fulness. She held out her arms; and, as she came close to the other, fell rather than sank at her feet. The elder woman recognised, and knew. She made no effort to restrain her; but sinking back into her own seat laid the girl's head in her lap, and held her hands close against her breast.

'Tell me,' she whispered. 'Won't you tell me, dear child, what troubles you? Tell me! dear. It may bring peace!'

'Oh, I am miserable, miserable, miserable!' moaned Stephen in a low voice whose despair made the other's heart grow cold. The Silver Lady knew that here golden silence was the best of help; holding close the other's hands, she waited. Stephen's breast began to heave; with an impulsive motion she drew away her hands and put them before her burning face, which she pressed lower still on the other's lap. Sister Ruth knew that the trouble, whatever it was, was about to find a voice. And then came in a low shuddering whisper a voice muffled in the folds of the dress:

'I killed a man!'

In all her life the Silver Lady had never been so startled or so shocked. She had grown so to love the bright, brilliant young girl that the whispered confession cut through the

silence of the dusk as a shriek of murder goes through the silent gloom of night. Her hands flew wide from her breast, and the convulsive shudder which shook her all in an instant woke Stephen through all her own deep emotion to the instinct of protection of the other. The girl looked up, shaking her head, and said with a sadness which stilled all the other's fear:

'Ah! Don't be frightened! It is not murder that I tell you of. Perhaps if it were, the thought would be easier to bear! He would have been hurt less if it had been only his body that I slew. Well I know now that his life would have been freely given if I wished it; if it had been for my good. But it was the best of him that I killed; his soul. His noble, loving, trusting, unselfish soul. The bravest and truest soul that ever had place in a man's breast! . . . ' Her speaking ended with a sob; her body sank lower.

Sister Ruth's heart began to beat more freely. She understood now, and all the womanhood, all the wifehood, motherhood suppressed for a lifetime, awoke to the woman's need. Gently she stroked the beautiful head that lay so meekly on her lap; and as the girl sobbed with but little appearance of abatement, she said to her softly:

'Tell me, dear child. Tell me all about it! See! we are alone together. Thou and I; and God! In God's dusk; with only the silent land and sea before us! Won't thou trust me, dear one, and speak!'

And then, as the shadows fell, and far-off lights at sea began to twinkle over the waste of waters, Stephen found voice and told without reserve the secret of her shame and her remorse.

At last, when her broken voice had trailed away into gentle catchings of the breath, the older woman, knowing that the time come for comfort, took her in her strong arms, holding her face wet against her own, their tears mingling.

'Cry on, dear heart!' she said as she kissed her. 'Cry on! It will do thee good!' She was startled once again as the other seemed for an instant to grow rigid in her arms, and raising her hands cried out in a burst of almost hysterical passion:

'Cry! cry! Oh my God! my God!' Then becoming conscious of her wet face she seemed to become in an instant all limp, and sank on her knees again. There was so different a note in her voice that the other's heart leaped as she heard her say:

'God be thanked for these tears! Oh, thank God! Thank God!' Looking up she saw through the gloom the surprise in her companion's eyes and answered their query in words:

‘Oh! you don’t know! You can’t know what it is to me! I have not cried since last I saw him pass from me in the wood!’

* * * * *

That time of confession seemed to have in some way cleared, purified and satisfied Stephen’s soul. Life was now easier to bear. She was able to adapt herself, justifiably to the needs of her position; and all around her and dependent on her began to realise that amongst them was a controlling force, far-reaching sympathy, and a dominant resolution that made for good.

She began to shake off the gloom of her sorrows and to take her place in her new high station. Friends there were in many, and quondam lovers by the score. Lovers of all sorts. Fortune-hunters there were be sure, not a few. But no need was there for baseness when the lady herself was so desirable; so young, so fair, so lovable. That she was of great estate and ‘richly left’ made all things possible to any man who had sufficient acquisitiveness, or a good conceit of himself. In a wide circle of country were many true-lovers who would have done aught to win her praise.

And so in the East the passing of the two years of silence and gloom seemed to be the winning of something brighter to follow.

CHAPTER XXX—THE LESSON OF THE WILDERNESS

In the West the two years flew. Time seemed to go faster there, because life was more strenuous. Harold, being mainly alone, found endless work always before him. From daylight to dark labour never ceased; and for his own part he never wished that it should. In the wilderness, and especially under such conditions as held in Northern Alaska, labour is not merely mechanical. Every hour of the day is fraught with danger in some new form, and the head has to play its part in the strife against nature. In such a life there is not much time for thinking or brooding.

At first, when the work and his surroundings were strange to him, Harold did many useless things and ran many unnecessary risks. But his knowledge grew with experience. Privations he had in plenty; and all the fibre of his body and the strength of his resolution and endurance were now and again taxed to their utmost. But with a man of his nature and race the breaking strain is high; and endurance and resolution are qualities which develop with practice.

Gradually his mind came back to normal level; he had won seemingly through the pain that shadowed him. Without anguish he could now think, remember, look forward. Then it was that the kindly wisdom of the American came back to him, and

came to stay. He began to examine himself as to his own part of the unhappy transaction; and stray moments of wonderment came as to whether the fault may not, at the very base, have his own. He began to realise that it is insufficient in this strenuous world to watch and wait; to suppress one's self; to put aside, in the wish to benefit others, all the hopes, ambitions, cravings which make for personal gain.

Thus it was that Harold's thoughts, ever circling round Stephen, came back with increasing insistence to his duty towards her. He often thought, and with a bitter feeling against himself that it came too late, of the dying trust of her father:

'Guard her and cherish her, as if you were indeed my son and she your sister . . . If it should be that you and Stephen should find that there is another affection between you remember I sanction it. But give her time! I trust that to you! She is young, and the world is all before her. Let her choose . . . And be loyal to her, if it is another! It may be a hard task; but I trust you, Harold!'

Here he would groan, as all the anguish of the past would rush back upon him; and keenest of all would be the fear, suspicion, thought which grew towards belief, that he may have betrayed that trust. . . .

At first the side of this memory personal to his own happiness was faintly emphasised; the important side was of the duty to Stephen. But as time went on the other thought became a sort of corollary; a timid, halting, blushing thought which followed sheepishly, borne down by trembling hope. No matter what adventure came to him, the thought of neglected duty returned ever afresh. Once, when he lay sick for weeks in an Indian wigwam, the idea so grew with each day of the monotony, that when he was able to crawl out by himself into the sunshine he had almost made up his mind to start back for home.

Luck is a strange thing. It seems in some mysterious way to be the divine machinery for adjusting averages. Whatever may be the measure of happiness or unhappiness, good or evil, allotted to anyone, luck is the cause or means of counter-balancing so that the main result reaches the standard set.

From the time of Harold's illness Dame Fortune seemed to change her attitude to him. The fierce frown, nay! the malignant scowl, to which he had become accustomed, changed to a smile. Hitherto everything seemed to have gone wrong with him; but now all at once all seemed to go right. He grew strong and hardy again. Indeed, he seemed by contrast to his late helplessness to be so strong and hard that it looked as if that very illness had done him good instead of harm. Game was plentiful, and he never seemed to want. Everywhere he went there were traces of

gold, as though by some instinct he was tracking it to its home. He did not value gold for its own sake; but he did for the ardour of the search. Harold was essentially a man, and as a man an adventurer. To such a man of such a race adventure is the very salt of existence.

The adventurer's instinct took with it the adventurer's judgment; Harold was not content with small results. Amidst the vast primeval forces there were, he felt, vast results of their prehistoric working; and he determined to find some of them. In such a quest, purpose is much. It was hardly any wonder, then, that in time Harold found himself alone in the midst of one of the great treasure-places of the world. Only labour was needed to take from the earth riches beyond the dreams of avarice. But that labour was no easy problem; great and difficult distance had to be overcome; secrecy must be observed, for even a whisper of the existence of such a place would bring a horde of desperadoes. But all these difficulties were at least sources of interest, if not in themselves pleasures. The new Harold, seemingly freshly created by a year of danger and strenuous toil, of self-examining and humiliation, of the realisation of duty, and—though he knew it not as yet—of the dawning of hope, found delight in the thought of dangers and difficulties to be overcome. Having taken his bearings exactly so as to be safe in finding the place again, he took his specimens with him and set out to find the shortest and best route to the nearest port.

At length he came to the port and set quietly about finding men. This he did very carefully and very systematically. Finally, with the full complement, and with ample supply of stores, he started on his expedition to the new goldfields.

It is not purposed to set out here the extraordinary growth of Robinson City, for thus the mining camp soon became. Its history has long ago been told for all the world. In the early days, when everything had to be organised and protected, Harold worked like a giant, and with a system and energy which from the first established him as a master. But when the second year of his exile was coming to a close, and Robinson City was teeming with life and commerce, when banks and police and soldiers made life and property comparatively safe, he began to be restless again. This was not the life to which he had set himself. He had gone into the wilderness to be away from cities and from men; and here a city had sprung up around him and men claimed him as their chief. Moreover, with the restless feeling there began to come back to him the old thoughts and the old pain.

But he felt strong enough by this time to look forward in life as well as backward. With him now to think was to act; so much at least he had gained from his position of dominance in an upspringing city. He quietly consolidated such outlying interests as

he had, placed the management of his great estate in the hands of a man he had learned to trust, and giving out that he was going to San Francisco to arrange some business, left Robinson City. He had already accumulated such a fortune that the world was before him in any way he might choose to take.

Knowing that at San Francisco, to which he had booked, he would have to run the gauntlet of certain of his friends and business connections, he made haste to leave the ship quietly at Portland, the first point she touched on her southern journey. Thence he got on the Canadian Pacific Line and took his way to Montreal.

What most arrested his attention, and in a very disconcerting way, were the glimpses of English life one sees reproduced so faithfully here and there in Canada. The whole of the past rushed back on him so overpoweringly that he was for the moment unnerved. The acute feeling of course soon became mitigated; but it was the beginning of a re-realisation of what had been, and which grew stronger with each mile as the train swept back eastward.

At first he tried to fight it; tried with all the resources of his strong nature. His mind was made up, he assured himself over and over again. The past was past, and what had been was no more to him than to any of the other passengers of the train. Destiny had long ago fulfilled itself. Stephen no doubt had by now found some one worthy of her and had married. In no dream, sleeping or waking, could he ever admit that she had married Leonard; that was the only gleam of comfort in what had grown to be remorse for his neglected duty.

And so it was that Harold An Wolf slowly drifted, though he knew it not, into something of the same intellectual position which had dominated him when he had started on his journeying and the sunset fell nightly on his despairing face. The life in the wilderness, and then in the dominance and masterdom of enterprise, had hardened and strengthened him into more self-reliant manhood, giving him greater forbearance and a more practical view of things.

When he took ship in the *Dominion*, a large cargo-boat with some passengers running to London, he had a vague purpose of visiting in secret Norcester, whence he could manage to find out how matters were at Normanstand. He would then, he felt, be in a better position to regulate his further movements. He knew that he had already a sufficient disguise in his great beard. He had nothing to fear from the tracing of him on his journey from Alaska or the interest of his fellow-passengers. He had all along been so fortunate as to be able to keep his identity concealed. The name John Robinson told nothing in itself, and the width of a whole great continent lay between him and the place of his fame. He was able to take his part freely amongst both the passengers

and the officers. Even amongst the crew he soon came to be known; the men liked his geniality, and instinctively respected his enormous strength and his manifest force of character. Men who work and who know danger soon learn to recognise the forces which overcome both. And as sufficient time had not elapsed to impair his hardihood or lower his vast strength he was facile princeps. And so the crew acknowledged him; to them he was a born Captain whom to obey would be a natural duty.

After some days the weather changed. The great ship, which usually rested even-keeled on two waves, and whose bilge keels under normal conditions rendered rolling impossible, began to pitch and roll like a leviathan at play. The decks, swept by gigantic seas, were injured wherever was anything to injure. Bulwarks were torn away as though they had been compact of paper. More than once the double doors at the head of the companion stairs had been driven in. The bull's eye glasses of some of the ports were beaten from their brazen sockets. Nearly all the boats had been wrecked, broken or torn from their cranes as the great ship rolled heavily in the trough, or giant waves had struck her till she quivered like a frightened horse.

At that season she sailed on the far northern course. Driven still farther north by the gales, she came within a short way of south of Greenland. Then avoiding Moville, which should have been her place of call, she ran down the east of Britain, the wild weather still prevailing.

CHAPTER XXXI—THE LIFE-LINE

On the coast of Angleshire the weather in the early days of September had been stormy. With the south-west wind had come deluges of rain, not a common thing for the time of year on the east coast. Stephen, whose spirits always rose with high wind, was in a condition of prolonged excitement. She could not keep still; every day she rode long distances, and found a wonderful satisfaction in facing the strong winds. Like a true horsewoman she did not mind the wet, and had glorious gallops over the grassy ridge and down the slopes on the farther side, out on the open road or through the endless grass rides amid the pine woods.

On the Tuesday morning the storm was in full sweep, and Stephen was in wild spirits. Nothing would do her but to go out on the tower of the castle where she could walk about, and leaning on the crenellated parapet look over all the coast stretching far in front and sweeping away to the left and right. The prospect so enchanted her, and the fierce sweep of the wind so suited her exalted mood, that she remained there all the morning. The whole coast was a mass of leaping foam and flying spray, and far away to the horizon white-topped waves rolled endlessly. That day she did not even ride out, but contented herself with watching the sea and the storm from the

tower. After lunch she went to her tower again; and again after tea. The storm was now furious. She made up her mind that after dinner she would ride down and see its happenings close at hand.

When she had finished dinner she went to her room to dress for her ride. The rush and roar of the storm were in her ears, and she was in wild tumultuous spirits. All her youth seemed to sweep back on her; or perhaps it was that the sickness of the last two years was swept away. Somewhere deep down in Stephen's heart, below her intention or even her consciousness, was a desire to be her old self if only for an hour. And to this end externals were of help. Without weighing the matter in her mind, and acting entirely on impulse, she told her maid to get the red habit she had not worn for years. When she was dressed she sent round to have out her white Arab; while it was getting ready she went once more to the tower to see the storm-effect in the darkening twilight. As she looked, her heart for an instant stood still. Half-way to the horizon a great ship, ablaze in the bows, was driving through the waves with all her speed. She was heading towards the little port, beyond which the shallows sent up a moving wall of white spray.

Stephen tore down the turret stair, and gave hurried directions to have beds prepared in a number of rooms, fires everywhere, and plenty of provisions. She also ordered that carriages should be sent at once to the fishing port with clothing and restoratives. There would, she felt, be need for such help before a time to be measured by minutes should have passed; and as some of her servants were as yet strange to her ways she did not leave anything to chance. One carriage was to go for the doctor who lived at Lannoy, the village over the hill, whence nothing could be seen of what was happening. She knew that others within sight or hailing would be already on their way. Work was afoot, and had she time, or thought of it, she would have chosen a more sedate garb. But in the excitement no thought of herself came to her.

In a few seconds she was in the saddle, tearing at full speed down the road that led to the port. The wind was blowing so strongly in her face that only in the lulls could she hear the hoof-strokes of the groom's horse galloping behind her.

At first the height of the road allowed her to see the ship and the port towards which she was making. But presently the road dipped, and the curving of the hill shut both from her sight; it was only when she came close that she could see either again.

Now the great ship was close at hand. The flames had gained terribly, and it was a race for life or death. There was no time do more than run her aground if life was to be saved at all. The captain, who in the gaps of the smoke could be seen upon the bridge, knew his work well. As he came near the shoal he ran a little north, and then

turned sharply so as to throw the boat's head to the south of the shoal. Thus the wind would drive fire and smoke forward and leave the after part of the vessel free for a time.

The shock of her striking the sand was terrific, though the tinkle of the bell borne in on the gale showed that the engines had been slowed down. The funnels were shaken down, and the masts broke off, falling forward. A wild shriek from a hundred throats cleft the roaring of wind and wave. The mast fell, the foremast, with all its cumbering top-hamper on the bridge, which was in an instant blotted out of existence, together with the little band of gallant men who stood on it, true to their last duty. As the wind took the smoke south a man was seen to climb on the wreck of the mast aft and make fast the end of a great coil of rope which he carried. He was a huge man with a full dark beard. Two sailors working with furious haste helped him with the rope. The waves kept raising the ship a little, each time bumping her on the sand with a shock. The people on deck held frantically to the wreckage around them.

Then the bearded man, stripping to his waist and cutting off his trousers above the knee, fastened an end of the rope round his waist. The sailors stood ready one behind the other to pay it out. As a great wave rolled under the ship, he threw himself into the sea.

In the meantime the coastguard had fixed Board of Trade rocket-apparatus, and in a few seconds the prolonged roar of a rocket was heard. It flew straight towards the ship, rising at a high angle so as to fall beyond it. But the force of the wind took it up as it rose, and the gale increased so that it rose nearly vertically; and in this position the wind threw it south of its objective, and short of it. Another rocket was got ready at once, and blue lights were burned so that the course of the venturous swimmer might be noted. He swam strongly; but the great weight of the rope behind kept pulling him back, and the southern trend of the tide current and the force of the wind kept dragging him from the pier. Within the bar the waves were much less than without; but they were still so unruly that no boat in the harbour—which was not a lifeboat station—could venture out. Indeed, in the teeth of the storm it would have been a physical impossibility to have driven one seaward.

As the gathered crowd saw Stephen approach they made way for her. She had left her horse with the groom, and despite the drenching spray fought a way against the wind out on the pier. As in the glare of the blue light, which brought many things into harsh unnatural perspective, she caught sight of the set face of the swimmer rising and falling with the waves, her heart leaped. This was indeed a man! a brave man; and all the woman in her went out to him. For him, and to aid him and his work, she would

have given everything, done anything; and in her heart, which beat in an ecstasy of anxiety, she prayed with that desperate conviction of hope which comes in such moments of exaltation.

But it soon became apparent that no landing could be effected. The force of the current and the wind were taking the man too far southward for him ever to win a way back. Then one of coastguards took the lead-topped cane which they use for throwing practice, and, after carefully coiling the line attached it so that it would run free, managed with a desperate effort to fling it far out. The swimmer, to whom it fell close, fought towards it frantically; and as the cord began to run through the water, managed to grasp it. A wild cheer rose from the shore and the ship. A stout line was fastened to the shore end of the cord, and the swimmer drew it out to him. He bent it on the rope which trailed behind him; then, seeing that he was himself a drag on it, with the knife which he drew from the sheath at the back of his waist, he cut himself free. One of the coastguards on the pier, helped by a host of willing hands, began drawing the end of the rope on shore. The swimmer still held the line thrown to him, and several men on the pier began to draw on it. Unhappily the thin cord broke under the strain, and within a few seconds the swimmer had drifted out of possible help. Seeing that only wild rocks lay south of the sea-wall, and that on them seas beat furiously, he turned and made out for sea. In the light beyond the glare he could see vaguely the shore bending away to the west in a deep curve of unbroken white leaping foam. There was no hope of landing there. To the south was the headland, perhaps two miles away as the crow flies. Here was the only chance for him. If he could round the headland, he might find shelter beyond; or somewhere along the farther shore some opening might present itself. Whilst the light from the blue fires still reached him he turned and made for the headland.

In the meantime on ship and on shore men worked desperately. Before long the end of the hawser was carried round on the high cliff, and pulled as taut as the force at hand could manage, and made fast. Soon endless ropes were bringing in passengers and crew as fast as place could be found for them. It became simply a race for time. If the fire, working against the wind, did not reach the hawser, and if the ship lasted the furious bumping on the sandbank, which threatened to shake her to pieces each moment, all on board might yet be saved.

Stephen's concern was now for the swimmer alone. Such a gallant soul should not perish without help, if help could be on this side of heaven. She asked the harbour-master, an old fisherman who knew every inch of the coast for miles, if anything could be done. He shook his head sadly as he answered:

‘I fear no, my lady. The lifeboat from Granport is up north, no boat from here could get outside the harbour. There’s never a spot in the bay where he could land, even in a less troubled sea than this. Wi’ the wind ashore, there’s no hope for ship or man here that cannot round the point. And a stranger is no like to do that.’

‘Why not?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘Because, my lady, there’s a wheen o’ sunken rocks beyond the Head. No one that didn’t know would ever think to keep out beyond them, for the cliff itself goes down sheer. He’s a gallant soul yon; an’ it’s a sore pity he’s goin’ to his death. But it must be! God can save him if He wishes; but I fear none other!’

Even as he spoke rose to Stephen’s mind a memory of an old churchyard with great trees and the scent of many flowers, and a child’s voice that sounded harsh through the monotonous hum of bees:

‘To be God, and able to do things!’

Oh; to be God, if but an hour; and able to do things! To do anything to help a brave man! A wild prayer surged up in the girl’s heart:

‘Oh! God, give me this man’s life! Give it to me to atone for the other I destroyed! Let me but help him, and do with me as Thou wilt!’

The passion of her prayer seemed to help her, and her brain cleared. Surely something could be done! She would do what she could; but first she must understand the situation. She turned again to the old harbour-master:

‘How long would it take him to reach the headland, if he can swim so far?’ The answer came with a settled conviction bearing hope with it:

‘The wind and tide are wi’ him, an’ he’s a strong swimmer. Perhaps half an hour will take him there. He’s all right in himself. He can swim it, sure. But alack! it’s when he gets there his trouble will be, when none can warn him. Look how the waves are lashing the cliff; and mark the white water beyond! What voice can sound to him out in those deeps? How could he see if even one were there to warn?’

Here was a hope at any rate. Light and sound were the factors of safety. Some good might be effected if she could get a trumpet; and there were trumpets in the rocket-cart. Light could be had—must be had if all the fences round the headland had to be gathered for a bonfire! There was not a moment to be lost. She ran to the rocket-cart, and got a trumpet from the man in charge. Then she ran to where she had left her horse. She had plenty of escort, for by this time many gentlemen had arrived on

horseback from outlying distances, and all offered their services. She thanked them and said:

'You may be useful here. When all these are ashore send on the rocket-cart, and come yourselves to the headland as quick as you can. Tell the coastguards that all those saved are to be taken to the castle. In the rocket-cart bring pitch and tar and oil, and anything that will flame. Stay!' she cried to the chief boatman. 'Give me some blue lights!' His answer chilled her:

'I'm sorry, my lady, but they are all used. There are the last of them burning now. We have burned them ever since that man began to swim ashore.'

'Then hurry on the rocket-cart!' she said as she sprang to the saddle, and swept out on the rough track that ran by the cliffs, following in bold curves the windings of the shore. The white Arab seemed to know that his speed was making for life. As he swept along, far outdistancing the groom, Stephen's heart went out in silent words which seemed to keep time to the gallop:

'Oh, to be God, and be able to do things! Give me this man's life, oh, God! Give me this man's life, to atone for that noble one which I destroyed!'

Faster and faster, over rough road, cattle track, and grassy sward; over rising and falling ground; now and again so close to the edge of the high cliff that the spume swept up the gulleys in the rocks like a snowstorm, the white Arab swept round the curve of the bay, and came out on the high headland where stood the fisher's house. On the very brink of the cliff all the fisher folk, men, women and children, stood looking at the far-off burning ship, from which the flames rose in leaping columns.

So intent were all on the cliff that they did not notice her coming; as the roar of the wind came from them to her, they could not hear her voice when she spoke from a distance. She had drawn quite close, having dismounted and hung her rein over the post of the garden paling, when one of the children saw her, and cried out:

'The lady! the lady! an' she's all in red!' The men were so intent on something that they did not seem to hear. They were peering out to the north, and were arguing in dumb show as though on something regarding which they did not agree. She drew closer, and touching the old fisherman on the shoulder, called out at his ear:

'What is it?' He answered without turning, keeping his eyes fixed:

'*I* say it's a man swimmin'. Joe and Garge here say as it's only a piece o' wood or sea-wrack. But I know I'm right. That's a man swimmin', or my old eyes have lost their

power!' His words carried conviction; the seed of hope in her beating heart grew on the instant into certainty.

'It *is* a man. I saw him swim off towards here when he had taken the rope on shore. Do not turn round. Keep your eyes on him so that you may not lose sight of him in the darkness!' The old man chuckled.

'This darkness! Hee! hee! There be no differ to me between light and dark. But I'll watch him! It's you, my lady! I shan't turn round to do my reverence as you tell me to watch. But, poor soul, it'll not be for long to watch. The Skyres will have him, sure enow!'

'We can warn him!' she said, 'when he comes close enough. I have a trumpet here!' He shook his head sorrowfully:

'Ah! my lady, what trumpet could sound against that storm an' from this height?' Stephen's heart sank. But there was still hope. If the swimmer's ears could not be reached, his eyes might. Eagerly she looked back for the coming of the rocket-cart. Far off across the deep bay she could see its lamp sway as it passed over the rough ground; but alas! it would never arrive in time. With a note of despair in her voice she asked:

'How long before he reaches the rocks?' Still without turning the old man answered:

'At the rate he's going he will be in the sweep of the current through the rocks within three minutes. If he's to be saved he must turn seaward ere the stream grips him.'

'Would there be time to build a bonfire?'

'No, no! my lady. The wood couldn't catch in the time!'

For an instant a black film of despair seemed to fall on her. The surging of the blood in her head made her dizzy, and once again the prayer of the old memory rang in her brain:

'Oh to be God, and able to do things!'

On the instant an inspiration flashed through her. She, too could do things in a humble way. She could do something at any rate. If there was no time to build a fire, there was a fire already built.

The house would burn!

The two feet deep of old thatch held down with nets and battened with wreck timber would flare like a beacon. Forthwith she spoke:

‘Good people, this noble man who has saved a whole shipload of others must not die without an effort. There must be light so that he can see our warning to pass beyond the rocks! The only light can be from the house. I buy it of you. It is mine; but I shall pay you for it and build you such another as you never thought of. But it must be fired at once. You have one minute to clear out all you want. In, quick and take all can. Quick! quick! for God’s sake! It is for a brave man’s life!’

The men and women without a word rushed into the house. They too knew the danger, and the only hope there was for a life. The assurance of the Countess took the sting from the present loss. Before the minute, which she timed watch in hand, was over, all came forth bearing armloads of their lares and penates. Then one of the younger men ran in again and out bearing a flaming stick from the fire. Stephen nodded, he held it to the northern edge of the thatch. The straw caught in a flash and the flame ran up the slope and along the edge of the roof like a quick match. The squeaking of many rats was heard and their brown bodies streamed over the roof. Before another minute had passed a great mass of flame towered into the sky and shed a red light far out over the waste of sea.

It lit up the wilderness of white water where the sea churned savagely amongst the sunken rocks; and it lit too the white face of a swimmer, now nearly spent, who rising and falling with each wave, drifted in the sea whose current bore him on towards the fatal rocks.

CHAPTER XXXII—‘TO BE GOD AND ABLE TO DO THINGS’

When the swimmer saw the light he looked up; even at the distance they could see the lift of his face; but he did not seem to realise that there was any intention in the lighting, or that it was created for his benefit. He was manifestly spent with his tremendous exertions, and with his long heavy swim in the turbulent sea. Stephen’s heart went out to him in a wave of infinite pity. She tried to use the trumpet. But simple as it is, a trumpet needs skill or at least practice in its use; she could only make an unintelligible sound, and not much even of that. One of the young men said:

‘Let me try it, my lady!’ She handed him the trumpet and he in turn used with a will. But it was of no avail; even his strong lungs and lusty manhood availed nothing in the teeth of that furious gale. The roof and the whole house was now well alight, and the flame roared and leapt. Stephen began to make gestures bidding the swimmer, in case he might see her and understand, move round the rocks. But he made no change in his direction, and was fast approaching a point in the tide-race whence to avoid the sunken rocks would be an impossibility. The old whaler, accustomed to use all his wits in times of difficulty, said suddenly:

‘How can he understand when we’re all between him and the light. We are only black shadows to him; all he can see are waving arms!’ His sons caught his meaning and were already dashing towards the burning house. They came back with piles of blazing wood and threw them down on the very edge of the cliff; brought more and piled them up, flinging heaps of straw on the bonfire and pouring on oil and pitch till the flames rose high. Stephen saw what was necessary and stood out of the way, but close to the old whaler, where the light fell on both of their faces as they looked in the direction of the swimmer. Stephen’s red dress itself stood out like a flame. The gale tearing up the front of the cliff had whirled away her hat; in the stress of the wind her hair was torn from its up-pinning and flew wide, itself like leaping flame.

Her gestures as she swept her right arm round, as though demonstrating the outward curve of a circle, or raising the hand above her head motioned with wide palm and spread fingers ‘back! back!’ seemed to have reached the swimmer’s intelligence. He half rose in the water and looked about. As if seeing something that he realised, he sank back again and began swim frantically out to sea. A great throb of joy made Stephen almost faint. At last she had been able to do something to help this gallant man. In half a minute his efforts seemed to tell in his race for life. He drew sufficiently far from dangerous current for there to be a hope that he might be saved if he could last out the stress to come.

The fishermen kept watch in silent eagerness; and in their presence Stephen felt a comfort, though, like her, they could do nothing at present.

When the swimmer had passed sufficiently far out to be clear of the rocks, the fire began to lose its flame, though not its intensity. It would be fiery still for hours to come, and of great heat; but the flames ceased to leap, and in the moderated light Stephen only saw the white face for one more instant ere it faded out of her ken, when, turning, the man looked towards the light and made a gesture which she did not understand: for he put for an instant both hands before his face.

Just then there was a wild noise on the cliff. The rocket-cart drawn by sixteen splendid horses, some of them hunters, came tearing up the slope, and with it many men on horseback afoot. Many of the runners were the gentlemen who had given their horses for the good work.

As the coastguards jumped from the cart, and began to get out the rocket stand, the old whaler pointed out the direction where the swimmer’s head could still be seen. Some of the sailors could see it too; though to Stephen and the laymen it was invisible. The chief boatman shook his head:

‘No use throwing a line there! Even if he got it we could never drag him alive through these rocks. He would be pounded to death before twenty fathom!’ Stephen’s heart grew cold as she listened. Was this the end? Then with a bitter cry she wailed:

‘Oh! can nothing be done? Can nothing be done? Can no boat come from the other side of the point? Must such a brave man be lost!’ and her tears began to flow.

One of the young men who had just arrived, a neighbouring squire, a proved wastrel but a fine horseman, who had already regarded Stephen at the few occasions of their meeting with eyes of manifest admiration, spoke up:

‘Don’t cry, Lady de Lannoy. There’s a chance for him yet. I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Bless you! oh! bless you!’ she cried impulsively as she caught his hand. Then came the chill of doubt. ‘But what can you do?’ she added despairingly.

‘Hector and I may be able to do something together.’ Turning to one of the fishermen he asked:

‘Is there any way down to the water in the shelter of the point?’

‘Ay! ay! sir,’ came the ready answer. ‘There’s the path as we get down by to our boats.’

‘Come on, then!’ he said. ‘Some of you chaps show us a light on the way down. If Hector can manage the scramble there’s a chance. You see,’ he said, turning again to Stephen, ‘Hector can swim like a fish. When he was a racer I trained him in the sea so that none of the touts could spy out his form. Many’s the swim we’ve had together; and in rough water too, though in none so wild as this!’

‘But it is a desperate chance for you!’ said Stephen, woman-like drawing somewhat back from a danger she had herself evoked. The young man laughed lightly:

‘What of that! I may do one good thing before I die. That fine fellow’s life is worth a hundred of my wasted one! Here! some of you fellows help me with Hector. We must take him from the cart and get a girth on him instead of the saddle. We shall want something to hold on to without pulling his head down by using the bridle.’

He, followed by some others, ran to the rocket-cart where the horses stood panting, their steam rising in a white cloud in the glow of the burning house. In an incredibly short time the horse was ready with only the girth. The young squire took him by the mane and he followed eagerly; he had memories of his own. As they passed close to Stephen the squire said to one of his friends:

‘Hold him a minute, Jack!’ He ran over to Stephen and looked at her hard:

‘Good-bye! Wish me luck; and give us light!’ Tears were in her eyes and a flush on her cheek as she took his hand and clasped it hard:

‘Oh, you brave man! God bless you!’ He stooped suddenly and impulsively kissed the back of her hand lightly and was gone. For a fleeting moment she was angry. No man had kissed her hand before; but the thought of his liberty was swept away by another:

‘Little enough when he may be going to his death!’

It was a sight to see that man and horse, surrounded by an eager crowd of helpers, scrambling down the rough zigzag, cut and worn in the very face of the cliff. They stumbled, and slipped; pebbles and broken rock fell away under their feet. Alone close to the bonfire stood Stephen, following every movement with racing blood and beating heart. The bonfire was glowing; a constant stream of men and women were dragging and hauling all sorts of material for its increase. The head of the swimmer could be seen, rising and falling amid the waves beyond the Skyres.

When about twenty feet from the water-level the path jutted out to one side left of the little beach whereon the sea now broke fiercely. This was a place where men watched, and whence at times they fished with rods; the broad rock overhung the water. The fire above, though it threw shadows, made light enough for everything. The squire held up his hand.

‘Stop! We can take off this rock, if the water is deep enough. How much is it?’

‘Ten fathoms sheer.’

‘Good!’ He motioned to them all to keep back. Then threw off all his clothes except shirt and trousers. For an instant he patted Hector and then sprang upon his back. Holding him by the mane he urged him forward with a cry. The noble animal did not hesitate an instant. He knew that grasp of the mane; that cry; that dig of the spurless heels. He sprang forward with wide dilated nostrils, and from the edge of the jutting rock jumped far out into the sea. Man and horse disappeared for a few seconds, but rose safely. The man slid from the horse’s back; and, holding by the girth with one hand, swam beside him out to sea in the direction the swimmer must come on rounding the sunken rocks.

A wild cheer broke from all on the cliff above and those already scrambling back up the zigzag. Stephen kept encouraging the men to bring fuel to the bonfire:

‘Bring everything you can find; the carts, the palings, the roofs, the corn, the dried fish; anything and everything that will burn. We must have light; plenty of light! Two brave men’s lives are at stake now!’

The whole place was a scene of activity. Stephen stood on the edge of the cliff with the old whaler and the chief boatman and some of the women. The rest of the coastguards were by orders of their chief rigging up a whip which they thought might be necessary to hoist the men up from the water, if they could ever get close enough. One of the young men who had ridden with the rocket-cart kept tight hold of Hector's bridle; he knew it would be wanted if the horse ever had a chance of landing.

* * * * *

When Harold turned away from the dazzling blue lights on the pier, and saw the far white line of the cliffs beyond the bay, his heart sank within him. Even his great strength and hardihood, won by work and privation in the far North-West, had been already taxed in the many days of the battling with the gale when all on board who could lend a hand were taken into service. Again by the frantic struggle of the last hour or two, when the ship ran shoreward at the utmost of her speed in the last hope of beaching in time to save life. Finally in that grim struggle to draw the life-line shoreward. The cold and then the great heat, and on top of it the chill of the long swim, seemed to have struck at him. Alone on the dark sea, for soon the current and his own exertions were taking him away from the rocks, the light of the burning ship was ceasing to be effective. It was just enough to hinder his vision; looking from the patch of light which bathed the light and him he could just see far off the white water which marked the cliff fronts, and on the edge of his horizon the grim moving white wall where the waves broke on the headland.

On and on he toiled. His limbs were becoming more cramped with the cold and the terrible strain of swimming in such waves. But still the brave heart bore him up; and resolutely, sternly he forced himself afresh to the effort before him. He reasoned that where there was such a headland standing out so stark into the sea there ought to be some shelter in its lee. If he could pass it he might find calmer water and even a landing-place beyond.

Here at least was hope. He would try to round the point at any rate. Now he drew so close that the great rocks seemed to tower vast above him. He was not yet close enough to feel as though lapped in their shadow; but even the overcast sky seemed full of light above the line of the cliff. There was a strange roaring, rushing sound around him. He thought that it was not merely the waves dashing on the rocks, but that partly it came from his own ears; that his ebbing strength was feeling the frantic struggle which he was making. The end was coming, he thought; but still he kept valiantly on, set and silent, as is the way with brave men.

Suddenly from the top of the cliff a bright light flashed. He looked at it sideways as he fought his way on, and saw the light rise and fall and flicker as the flames leaped. High over him he saw fantastic figures which seemed to dance on the edge of the high cliff. They had evidently noticed him, and were making signals of some sort; but what the motions were he could not see or understand, for they were but dark silhouettes, edged with light, against the background of fire. The only thing he could think was that they meant to encourage him, and so he urged himself to further effort. It might be that help was at hand!

Several times as he turned his head sideways he saw the figures and the light, but not so clearly; it was as though the light was lessening in power. When again he looked he saw a new fire leap out on the edge of the cliff, and some figures to the right of it. They were signalling in some way. So, pausing in his swimming, he rose a little from the water and looked at them.

A thrill shot through him, and a paralysing thought that he must have gone mad. With his wet hand he cleared his eyes, though the touching them pained him terribly, and for an instant saw clearly:

There on the edge of the cliff, standing beside some men and waving her arms in a wild sweep as though motioning frantically 'Keep out! keep out!' was a woman. Instinctively he glanced to his left and saw a white waste of leaping water, through which sharp rocks rose like monstrous teeth. On the instant he saw the danger, and made out seaward, swimming frantically to clear the dangerous spot before the current would sweep him upon the rocks.

But the woman! As one remembers the last sight when the lightning has banished sight, so that vision seemed burned into his brain. A woman with a scarlet riding-habit and masses of long red hair blowing in the gale like leaping flame! Could there be two such persons in the world? No! no! It was a vision! A vision of the woman he loved, come to save him in the direst moment of great peril!

His heart beat with new hope; only the blackness of the stormy sea was before him as he strove frantically on.

Presently when he felt the current slacken, for he had been swimming across it and could feel its power, he turned and looked back. As he did so he murmured aloud:

'A dream! A vision! She came to warn me!' For as he looked all had disappeared. Cliff and coastline, dark rocks and leaping seas, blazing fire, and the warning vision of the woman he loved.

Again he looked where the waste of sea churning amongst the sunken rocks had been. He could hear the roaring of waters, the thunder of great waves beating on the iron-bound coast; but nothing could he see. He was alone on the wild sea; in the dark.

Then truly the swift shadow of despair fell upon him.

'Blind Blind!' he moaned, and for the moment, stricken with despair, sank into the trough of the waves. But the instinctive desire for life recalled him. Once more he fought his way up to the surface, and swam blindly, desperately on. Seeing nothing, he did not know which way he was going. He might have heard better had his eyes been able to help his ears; but in the sudden strange darkness all the senses were astray. In the agony of his mind he could not even feel the pain of his burnt face; the torture of his eyes had passed. But with the instinct of a strong man he kept on swimming blindly, desperately.

* * * * *

It seemed as if ages of untold agony had gone by, when he heard a voice seemingly beside him:

'Lay hold here! Catch the girth!' The voice came muffled by wind and wave. His strength was now nearly at its last.

The shock of his blindness and the agony of the moments that had passed had finished his exhaustion. But a little longer and he must have sunk into his rest. But the voice and the help it promised rallied him for a moment. He had hardly strength to speak, but he managed to gasp out:

'Where? where? Help me! I am blind!' A hand took his and guided it to a tightened girth. Instinctively his fingers closed round it, and he hung on grimly. His senses were going fast. He felt as if it was all a strange dream. A voice here in the sea! A girth! A horse; he could hear its hard breathing.

The voice came again.

'Steady! Hold on! My God! he's fainted! I must tie him on!' He heard a tearing sound, and something was wound round his wrists. Then his nerveless fingers relaxed their hold; and all passed into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXXIII—THE QUEEN'S ROOM

To Stephen all that now happened seemed like a dream. She saw Hector and his gallant young master forge across the smoother water of the current whose boisterous stream had been somewhat stilled in the churning amongst the rocks, and

then go north in the direction of the swimmer who, strange to say, was drifting in again towards the sunken rocks. Then she saw the swimmer's head sink under the water; and her heart grew cold. Was this to be the end! Was such a brave man to be lost after such gallant effort as he had made, and just at the moment when help was at hand!

The few seconds seemed ages. Instinctively she shut her eyes and prayed again. 'Oh! God. Give me this man's life that I may atone!'

God seemed to have heard her prayer. Nay, more! He had mercifully allowed her to be the means of averting great danger. She would never, could never, forget the look on the man's face when he saw, by the flame that she had kindled, ahead of him the danger from the sunken rocks. She had exulted at the thought. And now . . .

She was recalled by a wild cheer beside her. Opening her eyes she saw that the man's head had risen again from the water. He was swimming furiously, this time seaward. But close at hand were the heads of the swimming horse and man . . . She saw the young squire seize the man . . .

And then the rush of her tears blinded her. When she could see again the horse had turned and was making back again to the shelter of the point. The squire had his arm stretched across the horse's back; he was holding up the sailor's head, which seemed to roll helplessly with every motion of the cumbering sea.

For a little she thought he was dead, but the voice of the old whaler reassured her:

'He was just in time! The poor chap was done!' And so with beating heart and eyes that did not flinch now she watched the slow progress to the shelter of the point. The coastguards and fishermen had made up their minds where the landing could be made, and were ready; on the rocky shelf, whence Hector had at jumped, they stood by with lines. When the squire had steered and encouraged the horse, whose snorting could be heard from the sheltered water, till he was just below the rocks, they lowered a noosed rope. This he fastened round the senseless man below his shoulders. One strong, careful pull, and he was safe on land; and soon was being borne up the steep zigzag on the shoulders of the willing crowd.

In the meantime other ropes were passed down to the squire. One he placed round his own waist; two others he fastened one on each side of the horse's girth. Then his friend lowered the bridle, and he managed to put it on the horse and attached a rope to it. The fishermen took the lines, and, paying out as they went so as to leave plenty of slack line, got on the rocks just above the little beach whereon, sheltered though it

was, the seas broke heavily. There they waited, ready to pull the horse through the surf when he should have come close enough.

Stephen did not see the rescue of the horse; for just then a tall grave man spoke to her:

'Pardon me, Lady de Lannoy, but is the man to be brought up to the Castle? I am told you have given orders that all the rescued shall be taken there.' She answered unhesitatingly:

'Certainly! I gave orders before coming out that preparation was to be made for them.'

'I am Mr. Hilton. I have just come down to do lacum tenens for Dr. Winter at Lannoch Port. I rode over on hearing there was a wreck, and came here with the rocket-cart. I shall take charge of the man and bring him up. He will doubtless want some special care.'

'If you will be so good!' she answered, feeling a diffidence which was new to her. At that moment the crowd carrying the senseless man began to appear over the cliff, coming up the zig-zag. The Doctor hurried towards him; she followed at a little distance, fearing lest she should hamper him. Under his orders they laid the patient on the weather side of the bonfire so that the smoke would not reach him. The Doctor knelt by his side.

An instant after he looked up and said:

'He is alive; his heart is beating, though faintly. He had better be taken away at once. There is no means here of shelter.'

'Bring him in the rocket-cart; it is the only conveyance here,' cried Stephen. 'And bring Mr. Hepburn too. He also will need some care after his gallant service. I shall ride on and advise my household of your coming. And you good people come all to the Castle. You are to be my guests if you will so honour me. No! No! Really I should prefer to ride alone!'

She said this impulsively, seeing that several of the gentlemen were running for their horses to accompany her. 'I shall not wait to thank that valiant young gentleman. I shall see him at Lannoy.'

As she was speaking she had taken the bridle of her horse. One of the young men stooped and held his hand; she bowed, put her foot in it and sprang to the saddle. In an instant she was flying across country at full speed, in the dark. A wild mood was on

her, reaction from the prolonged agony of apprehension. There was little which she would not have done just then.

The gale whistled round her and now and again she shouted with pure joy. It seemed as if God Himself had answered her prayer and given her the returning life!

By the time she had reached the Castle the wild ride had done its soothing work. She was calm again, comparatively; her wits and feelings were her own.

There was plenty to keep her occupied, mind and body. The train of persons saved from the wreck were arriving in all sorts of vehicles, and as clothes had to be found for them as well as food and shelter there was no end to the exertions necessary. She felt as though the world were not wide enough for the welcome she wished to extend. Its exercise was a sort of reward of her exertions; a thank-offering for the response to her prayer. She moved amongst her guests, forgetful of herself; of her strange attire; of the state of dishevelment and grime in which she was, the result of the storm, her long ride over rough ground with its share of marshes and pools, and the smoke from the bonfire and the blazing house. The strangers wondered at first, till they came to understand that she was the Lady Bountiful who had stretched her helpful hands to them. Those who could, made themselves useful with the new batches of arrivals. The whole Castle was lit from cellar to tower. The kitchens were making lordly provision, the servants were carrying piles of clothes of all sorts, and helping to fit those who came still wet from their passage through or over the heavy sea.

In the general disposition of chambers Stephen ordered to be set apart for the rescued swimmer the Royal Chamber where Queen Elizabeth had lain; and for Mr. Hepburn that which had been occupied by the Second George. She had a sort of idea that the stranger was God's guest who was coming to her house; and that nothing could be too good for him. As she waited for his coming, even though she swept to and fro in her ministrations to others, she felt as though she trod on air. Some great weight seemed to have been removed from her. Her soul was free again!

At last the rocket-cart arrived, and with it many horsemen and such men and women as could run across country with equal speed to the horses labouring by the longer road.

The rescued man was still senseless, but that alone did not seem to cause anxiety to the Doctor, who hurried him at once into the prepared room. When, assisted by some of the other men, he had undressed him, rubbed him down and put him to bed, and had seen some of the others who had been rescued from the wreck, he sought out Lady de Lannoy. He told her that his anxiety was for the man's sight; an

announcement which blanched his hearer's cheeks. She had so made up her mind as to his perfect safety that the knowledge of any kind of ill came like a cruel shock. She questioned Mr. Hilton closely; so closely that he thought it well to tell her at once all that he surmised and feared:

'That fine young fellow who swam out with his horse to him, tells me that when he neared him he cried out that he was blind. I have made some inquiries from those on the ship, and they tell me that he was a passenger, named Robinson. Not only was he not blind then, but he was the strongest and most alert man on the ship. If it be blindness it must have come on during that long swim. It may be that before leaving the ship he received some special injury—indeed he has several cuts and burns and bruises—and that the irritation of the sea-water increased it. I can do nothing till he wakes. At present he is in such a state that nothing can be done for him. Later I shall if necessary give him a hypodermic to ensure sleep. In the morning when I come again I shall examine him fully.'

'But you are not going away to-night!' said Stephen in dismay. 'Can't you manage to stay here? Indeed you must! Look at all these people, some of whom may need special attention or perhaps treatment. We do not know yet if any may be injured.' He answered at once:

'Of course I shall stay if you wish it. But there are two other doctors here already. I must go over to my own place to get some necessary instruments for the examination of this special patient. But that I can do in the early morning.'

'Can I not send for what you want; the whole household are at your service. All that can be done for that gallant man must be done. You can send to London for special help if you wish. If that man is blind, or in danger of blindness, we must have the best oculist in the world for him.'

'All shall be done that is possible,' said he earnestly. 'But till I examine him in the morning we can do nothing. I am myself an oculist; that is my department in St. Stephen's Hospital. I have an idea of what is wrong, but I cannot diagnose exactly until I can use the ophthalmoscope.' His words gave Stephen confidence. Laying her hand on his arm unconsciously in the extremity of pity she said earnestly:

'Oh, do what you can for him. He must be a noble creature; and all that is possible must be done. I shall never rest happily if through any failing on my part he suffers as you fear.'

‘I shall do all I can,’ he said with equal earnestness, touched with her eager pity. ‘And I shall not trust myself alone, if any other can be of service. Depend upon it, Lady de Lannoy, all shall be as you wish.’

There was little sleep in the Castle that night till late. Mr. Hilton slept on a sofa in the Queen’s Room after he had administered a narcotic to his patient.

As soon as the eastern sky began to quicken, he rode, as he had arranged during the evening, to Dr. Winter’s house at Lannoch Port where he was staying. After selecting such instruments and drugs as he required, he came back in the dogcart.

It was still early morning when he regained the Castle. He found Lady de Lannoy up and looking anxiously for him. Her concern was somewhat abated when he was able to tell her that his patient still slept.

It was a painful scene for Mr. Hilton when his patient woke. Fortunately some of the after-effects of the narcotic remained, for his despair at realising that he was blind was terrible. It was not that he was violent; to be so under his present circumstances would have been foreign to Harold’s nature. But there was a despair which was infinitely more sad to witness than passion. He simply moaned to himself:

‘Blind! Blind!’ and again in every phase of horrified amazement, as though he could not realise the truth: ‘Blind! Blind!’ The Doctor laid his hand on his breast and said very gently:

‘My poor fellow, it is a dreadful thing to face, to think of. But as yet I have not been able to come to any conclusion; unable even to examine you. I do not wish to encourage hopes that may be false, but there are cases when injury is not vital and perhaps only temporary. In such case your best chance, indeed your only chance, is to keep quiet. You must not even think if possible of anything that may excite you. I am now about to examine you with the ophthalmoscope. You are a man; none of us who saw your splendid feat last night can doubt your pluck. Now I want you to use some of it to help us both. You, for your recovery, if such is possible; me, to help me in my work. I have asked some of your late companions who tell me that on shipboard you were not only well and of good sight, but that you were remarkable even amongst strong men. Whatever it is you suffer from must have come on quickly. Tell me all you can remember of it.’

The Doctor listened attentively whilst Harold told all he could remember of his sufferings. When he spoke of the return of old rheumatic pains his hearer said involuntarily: ‘Good!’ Harold paused; but went on at once. The Doctor recognised that he had rightly appraised his remark, and by it judged that he was a well-educated

man. Something in the method of speaking struck him, and he said, as nonchalantly as he could:

'By the way, which was your University?'

'Cambridge. Trinity.' He spoke without thinking, and the instant he had done so stopped. The sense of his blindness rushed back on him. He could not see; and his ears were not yet trained to take the place of his eyes. He must guard himself. Thenceforward he was so cautious in his replies that Mr. Hilton felt convinced there was some purpose in his reticence. He therefore stopped asking questions, and began to examine him. He was unable to come to much result; his opinion was shown in his report to Lady de Lannoy:

'I am unable to say anything definite as yet. The case is a most interesting one; as a case and quite apart from the splendid fellow who is the subject of it. I have hopes that within a few days I may be able to know more. I need not trouble you with surgical terms; but later on if the diagnosis supports the supposition at present in my mind I shall be able to speak more fully. In the meantime I shall, with your permission, wait here so that I may watch him myself.'

'Oh you are good. Thank you! Thank you!' said Stephen. She had so taken the man under her own care that she was grateful for any kindness shown to him.

'Not at all,' said Mr. Hilton. 'Any man who behaved as that fellow did has a claim on any of us who may help him. No time of mine could be better spent.'

When he went back to the patient's room he entered softly, for he thought he might be asleep. The room was, according to his instructions, quite dark, and as it was unfamiliar to him he felt his way cautiously. Harold, however, heard the small noise he made and said quietly:

'Who is there?'

'It is I; Hilton.'

'Are you alone?'

'Yes.'

'Look round the room and see. Then lock the door and come and talk to me if you will. You will pity a poor blind fellow, I know. The darkness has come down upon me so quickly that I am not accustomed to it!' There was a break in his voice which moved the other. He lit a candle, feeling that the doing so would impress his patient, and went round the room; not with catlike movement this time—he wanted the other

to hear him. When he had turned the key in the lock, as sharply as he could, he came to the bedside and sat down. Harold spoke again after a short pause:

'Is that candle still lit?'

'Yes! Would you like it put out?'

'If you don't mind! Again I say pity me and pardon me. But I want to ask you something privately, between our two selves; and I will feel more of equality than if you were looking at me, whilst I cannot see you.' Mr Hilton blew out the candle.

'There! We are equal now.'

'Thank you!' A long pause; then he went on:

'When a man becomes suddenly blind is there usually, or even occasionally, any sort of odd sight? . . . Does he see anything like a dream, a vision?'

'Not that I know of. I have never heard of such a case. As a rule people struck blind by lightning, which is the most common cause, sometimes remember with extraordinary accuracy the last thing they have seen. Just as though it were photographed on the retina!'

'Thank you! Is such usually the recurrence of any old dream or anything they have much thought of?'

'Not that I know of. It would be unusual!' Harold waited a long time before he spoke again. When he did so it was in a different voice; a constrained voice. The Doctor, accustomed to take enlightenment from trivial details, noted it:

'Now tell me, Mr. Hilton, something about what has happened. Where am I?'

'In Lannoy Castle.'

'Where is it?'

'In Angleshire!'

'Who does it belong to?'

'Lady de Lannoy. The Countess de Lannoy; they tell me she is a Countess in her own right.'

'It is very good of her to have me here. Is she an old lady?'

'No! A young one. Young and very beautiful.' After a pause before his query:

‘What’s she like? Describe her to me!’

‘She is young, a little over twenty. Tall and of a very fine figure. She has eyes like black diamonds, and hair like a flame!’ For a long time Harold remained still. Then he said:

‘Tell me all you know or have learned of this whole affair. How was I rescued, and by whom?’ So the Doctor proceeded to give him every detail he knew of. When he was quite through, the other again lay still for a long time. The silence was broken by a gentle tap at the door. The Doctor lit a candle. He turned the key softly, so that no one would notice that the door was locked. Something was said in a low whisper. Then the door was gently closed, and the Doctor returning said:

‘Lady Lannoy wants, if it will not disturb you, to ask how you are. Ordinarily I should not let anyone see you. But she is not only your hostess, but, as I have just told you, it was her ride to the headland, where she burned the house to give you light, which was the beginning of your rescue. Still if you think it better not . . . !’

‘I hardly like anybody to see me like this!’ said Harold, feebly seeking an excuse.

‘My dear man,’ said the other, ‘you may be easy in your mind, she won’t see much of you. You are all bandages and beard. She’ll have to wait a while before she sees you.’

‘Didn’t she see me last night?’

‘Not she! Whilst we were trying to restore you she was rushing back to the Castle to see that all was ready for you, and for the others from the wreck.’ This vaguely soothed Harold.

If his surmise was correct, and if she had not seen him then, it was well that he was bandaged now. He felt that it would not do to refuse to let her see him; it might look suspicious. So after pausing a short while he said in a low voice:

‘I suppose she had better come now. We must not keep her waiting!’ When the Doctor brought her to his bedside Stephen felt in a measure awed. His bandaged face and head and his great beard, singed in patches, looked to her in the dim light rather awesome. In a very gentle voice she said kind things to the sick man, who acknowledged them in a feeble whisper. The Doctor, a keen observer, noticed the change in his voice, and determined to understand more. Stephen spoke of his bravery, and of how it was due to him that all on the ship were saved; and as she spoke her emotion moved her so much that her sweet voice shook and quivered. To the ears of the man who had now only sound to guide him, it was music of the sweetest he had ever heard. Fearing lest his voice should betray him, he whispered his own thanks feebly and in few words.

When Stephen went away the Doctor went with her; it was more than an hour before he returned. He found his patient in what he considered a state of suppressed excitement; for, though his thoughts were manifestly collected and his words were calm, he was restless and excited in other ways. He had evidently been thinking of his own condition; for shortly after the Doctor came in he said:

'Are we alone?'

'Quite!'

'I want you to arrange that there shall not be any nurse with me.'

'My dear sir! Don't handicap me, and yourself, with such a restriction. It is for your own good that you should have regular and constant attention.'

'But I don't wish it. Not for the present at all events. I am not accustomed to a nurse, and shall not feel comfortable. In a few days perhaps . . . ' The decided tone of his voice struck the other. Keeping his own thoughts and intentions in abeyance, even to himself, he answered heartily:

'All right! I shall not have any nurse, at present.'

'Thanks!' There was relief in the tone which seemed undue, and Mr. Hilton again took mental note. Presently he asked a question, but in such a tone that the Doctor pricked up his ears. There was a premeditated self-suppression, a gravity of restraint, which implied some falsity; some intention other than the words conveyed:

'It must have been a job to carry me up those stairs.' The Doctor was doubting everything, but as the safest attitude he stuck to literal truth so far as his words conveyed it:

'Yes. You are no light weight!' To himself he mused:

'How did he know there were stairs? He cannot know it; he was senseless! Therefore he must be guessing or inquiring!' Harold went on:

'I suppose the Castle is on high ground. Can you see far from the windows? I suppose we are up a good height?'

'From the windows you can see all round the promontory. But we are not high up; that is, the room is not high from the ground, though the Castle is from the sea.' Harold asked again, his voice vibrating in the note of gladness:

'Are we on the ground floor then?'

‘Yes.’

‘And I suppose the gardens are below us?’

‘Yes.’ The answer was given quickly, for a thought was floating through him: Why did this strong brave man, suddenly stricken blind, wish to know whether his windows were at a height? He was not surprised when his patient reaching out a hand rested it on his arm and said in an imploring tone:

‘It should be moonlight; full moon two nights ago. Won’t you pull up the blind and describe to me all you see? . . . Tell me fully . . . Remember, I am blind!’

This somehow fixed the Doctor’s thought:

‘Suicide! But I must convey the inutility of such effort by inference, not falsity.’

Accordingly he began to describe the scene, from the very base of the wall, where below the balcony the great border was glorious with a mass of foliage plants, away to the distant sea, now bathed in the flood of moonlight. Harold asked question after question; the Doctor replying accurately till he felt that the patient was building up a concrete idea of his surroundings near and far. Then he left him. He stood for a long time out in the passage thinking. He said to himself as he moved away:

‘The poor fellow has some grim intention in his mind. I must not let him know that I suspect; but to-night I will watch without his knowing it!’

CHAPTER XXXIV—WAITING

Mr. Hilton telegraphed at once countermanding, for the present, the nurse for whom he had sent.

That night, when the household had all retired, he came quietly to his patient’s room, and entering noiselessly, sat silent in a far corner. There was no artificial right; the patient had to be kept in darkness. There was, however, a bright moonlight; sufficient light stole in through the edges of the blinds to allow him, when his eyes grew accustomed, to see what might happen.

Harold lay quite still till the house was quiet. He had been thinking, ever since he had ascertained the identity of Stephen. In his weakness and the paralysing despair of his blindness all his former grief and apprehension had come bank upon him in a great wave; veritably the tide of circumstances seemed to run hard against him. He had had no idea of forcing himself upon Stephen; and yet here he was a guest in her house, without her knowledge or his own. She had saved his life by her energy and resource. Fortunately she did not as yet know him; the bandages, and his act in

suppressing his voice, had so far protected him. But such could not last for long. He could not see to protect himself, and take precautions as need arose. And he knew well that Stephen's nature would not allow her to be satisfied without doing all that was possible to help one who had under her eyes made a great effort on behalf of others, and to whom there was the added bond that his life was due to her. In but a little time she must find out to whom she ministered.

What then would happen? Her kindness was such that when she realised the blindness of her old friend she might so pity him that out of the depths of her pity she would forgive. She would take back all the past; and now that she knew of his old love for her, would perhaps be willing to marry him. Back flooded the old memory of her independence and her theory of sexual equality. If out of any selfish or mistaken idea she did not hesitate to ask a man to marry her, would it be likely that when the nobler and more heroic side of her nature spoke she would hesitate to a similar act in pursuance of her self-sacrifice?

So it might be that she would either find herself once again flouted, or else married to a man she did not love.

Such a catastrophe should not happen, whatever the cost to him. He would, blind as he was, steal away in the night and take himself out of her life; this time for ever. Better the ingratitude of an unknown man, the saving of whose life was due to her, than the long dull routine of a spoiled life, which would otherwise be her unhappy lot.

When once this idea had taken root in his mind he had taken such steps as had been open to him without endangering the secrecy of his motive. Thanks to his subtle questioning of the Doctor, he now knew that his room was close to the ground, so that he would easily drop from the window and steal away with out immediate danger of any restraining accident. If he could once get away he would be all right. There was a large sum to his credit in each of two London banks. He would manage somehow to find his way to London; even if he had to walk and beg his way.

He felt that now in the silence of the night the time had come. Quietly he rose and felt his way to the door, now and again stumbling and knocking against unknown obstacles in the manner of the recently blind. After each such noise he paused and listened. He felt as if the very walls had ears. When he reached the door he turned the key softly. Then he breathed more freely. He felt that he was at last alone and free to move without suspicion.

Then began a great and arduous search; one that was infinitely difficult and exasperating; and full of pathos to the sympathetic man who watched him in silence. Mr. Hilton could not understand his movements as he felt his way about the room, opening drawers and armoires, now and again stooping down and feeling along the floor. He did not betray his presence, however, but moved noiselessly away as the other approached. It was a hideously real game of blindman's-buff, with perhaps a life as the forfeit.

Harold went all over the room, and at last sat down on the edge of his bed with a hollow suppressed groan that was full of pain. He had found his clothes, but realised that they were now but rags. He put on the clothes, and then for a long time sat quiet, rocking gently to and fro as one in pain, a figure of infinite woe. At last he roused himself. His mind was made up; the time for action had come. He groped his way towards the window looking south. The Doctor, who had taken off his shoes, followed him with catlike stealthiness.

He easily threw open the window, for it was already partly open for ventilation.

When Mr. Hilton saw him sit on the rail of the balcony and begin to raise his feet, getting ready to drop over, he rushed forward and seized him. Harold instinctively grappled with him; the habit of his Alaskan life amidst continual danger made in such a case action swift as thought. Mr. Hilton, with the single desire to prevent him from killing himself, threw himself backward and pulled Harold with him to the stone floor.

Harold, as he held him in a grip of iron, thundered out, forgetful in the excitement of the moment the hushed voice to which he had limited himself:

'What do you want? who are you?'

'H-s-s-sh! I am Mr. Hilton.' Harold relaxed the rigour of his grasp but still held him firmly:

'How did you come here? I locked my door!'

'I have been in the room a long time. I suspected something, and came to watch; to prevent your rash act.'

'Rash act! How?'

'Why, man, if you didn't kill, you would at least cripple yourself.'

'How can I cripple myself when the flower-bed is only a few feet below?'

‘There are other dangers for a man who—a man in your sad state. And, besides, have I no duty to prevent a suicide!’ Here a brilliant idea struck Harold. This man had evidently got some wrong impression; but it would serve to shield his real purpose. He would therefore encourage it. For the moment, of course, his purpose to escape unnoticed was foiled; but he would wait, and in due time seize another opportunity. In a harder and more determined tone than he had yet used he said:

‘I don’t see what right you have to interfere. I shall kill myself if I like.’

‘Not whilst you are in my care!’ This was spoken with a resolution equal to his own. Then Mr. Hilton went on, more softly and with infinite compassion: ‘Moreover, I want to have a talk with you which may alter your views.’ Harold interrupted, still playing the game of hiding his real purpose:

‘I shall do as I wish; as I intend.’

‘You are injuring yourself even now by standing in the draught of that open window. Your eyes will feel it before long . . . Are you mad . . . ?’

Harold felt a prick like a pin in his neck; and turned to seize his companion. He could not find him, and for a few moments stumbled through the dark, raging . . .

It seemed a long time before he remembered anything. He had a sense of time lapsed; of dreamland thoughts and visions. Then gradually recollection came back. He tried to move; but found it impossible. His arms and legs were extended wide and were tied; he could feel the cord hurting his wrists and ankles as he moved. To him it was awful to be thus blind and helpless; and anger began to surge up. He heard the voice of Mr. Hilton close by him speaking in a calm, grave, sympathetic tone:

‘My poor fellow, I hated to take such a step; but it was really necessary for your own safety. You are a man, and a brave one. Won’t you listen to me for a few minutes? When you have heard what I have to say I shall release you. In the meantime I apologise for the outrage, as I dare say you consider it!’ Harold was reasonable; and he was now blind and helpless. Moreover, there was something in the Doctor’s voice that carried a sense of power with it.

‘Go on! I shall listen!’ He compelled himself to quietude. The Doctor saw, and realised that he was master of himself. There were some snips of scissors, and he was free.

‘See! all I want is calm for a short time, and you have it. May I go on?’

‘Go on!’ said Harold, not without respect. The Doctor after a pause spoke:

‘My poor fellow, I want you to understand that I wish to help you, to do all in my power to restore to you that which you seem to have lost! I can sympathise with your desire to quit life altogether now that the best part of it, sight, seems gone. I do not pretend to judge the actions of my fellows; and if you determine to carry out your purpose I shall not be able to prevent you for ever. I shall not try to. But you certainly shall not do so till you know what I know! I had wished to wait till I could be a little more certain before I took you into confidence with regard to my guessing as to the future. But your desire to destroy yourself forces my hand. Now let me tell you that there is a possibility of the removal of the cause of your purpose.’

‘What do you mean?’ gasped Harold. He was afraid to think outright and to the full what the other’s words seemed to imply.

‘I mean,’ said the other solemnly, ‘that there is a possibility, more than a possibility, that you may recover your sight!’ As he spoke there was a little break in his voice. He too was somewhat unnerved at the situation.

Harold lay still. The whole universe seemed to sway, and then whirl round him in chaotic mass. Through it at length he seemed to hear the calm voice:

‘At first I could not be sure of my surmise, for when I used the ophthalmoscope your suffering was too recent to disclose the cause I looked for. Now I am fairly sure of it. What I have since heard from you has convinced me; your having suffered from rheumatic fever, and the recrudescence of the rheumatic pain after your terrible experience of the fire and that long chilling swim with so seemingly hopeless an end to it; the symptoms which I have since noticed, though they have not been as enlightening to me as they might be. Your disease, as I have diagnosed it, is an obscure one and not common. I have not before been able to study a case. All these things give me great hopes.’

‘Thank God! Thank God!’ the voice from the bed was now a whisper.

‘Thank God! say I too. This that you suffer from is an acute form of inflammation of the optic nerve. It may of course end badly; in permanent loss of sight. But I hope—I believe, that in your case it will not be so. You are young, and you are immensely strong; not merely muscularly, but in constitution. I can see that you have been an athlete, and no mean one either. All this will stand to you. But it will take time. It will need all your own help; all the calm restraint of your body and your mind. I am doing all that science knows; you must do the rest!’ He waited, giving time to the other to realise his ideas. Harold lay still for a long time before he spoke:

‘Doctor.’ The voice was so strangely different that the other was more hopeful at once. He had feared opposition, or conflict of some kind. He answered as cheerily as he could:

‘Yes! I am listening.’

‘You are a good fellow; and I am grateful to you, both for what you have done and what you have told me. I cannot say how grateful just yet; hope unmans me at present. But I think you deserve that I should tell you the truth!’ The other nodded; he forgot that the speaker could not see.

‘I was not intending to commit suicide. Such an idea didn’t even enter my head. To me, suicide is the resource of a coward. I have been in too many tight places to ever fear that.’

‘Then in the name of goodness why were you trying to get out of that window?’

‘I wanted to escape; to get away!’

‘In your shirt and trousers; and they are not over much! Without even slippers!’ A faint smile curled round the lips of the injured man. Hope was beginning to help already.

‘Even that way!’

‘But man alive! you were going to your death. How could you expect to get away in such an outfit without being discovered? When you were missed the whole countryside would have been up, and even before the hue-and-cry the first person who saw you would have taken charge of you.’

‘I know! I know! I had thought of it all. But I was willing to chance it. I had my own reasons!’ He was silent a while. The Doctor was silent too. Each man was thinking in his own way. Presently the Doctor spoke:

‘Look here, old chap! I don’t want to pry into your secrets; but, won’t you let me help you? I can hold my tongue. I want to help you. You have earned that wish from any man, and woman too, who saw the burning ship and what you did to save those on board. There is nothing I would not do for you. Nothing! I don’t ask you to tell me all; only enough for me to understand and help. I can see that you have some overpowering wish to get away. Some reason that I cannot fathom, certainly without a clue. You may trust me, I assure you. If you could look into my face, my eyes, you would understand. But—There! take my hand. It may tell you something!’

Harold took the hand placed in his, and held it close. He pressed his other hand over it also, as though the effect of the two hands would bring him double knowledge. It

was infinitely pathetic to see him trying to make his untrained fingers do the duty of his trained eyes. But, trained or not, his hands had their instinct. Laying down gently the hand he held he said, turning his bandaged eyes in the direction of his companion:

'I shall trust you! Are we alone; absolutely alone?'

'Absolutely!'

'Have I your solemn promise that anything I say shall never go beyond yourself?'

'I promise. I can swear, if it will make your mind more easy in the matter.'

'What do you hold most sacred in the world?' Harold had an odd thought; his question was its result.

'All told, I should think my profession! Perhaps it doesn't seem to you much to swear by; but it is all my world! But I have been brought up in honour, and you may trust my promise—as much as anything I could swear.'

'All right! My reason for wanting to get away was because I knew Lady de Lannoy!'

'What!' Then after a pause: 'I should have thought that was a reason for wanting to stay. She seems not only one of the most beautiful, but the sweetest woman I ever met.'

'She is all that! And a thousand times more!'

'Then why—Pardon me!'

'I cannot tell you all; but you must take it that my need to get away is imperative.' After pondering a while Mr. Hilton said suddenly:

'I must ask your pardon again. Are you sure there is no mistake. Lady de Lannoy is not married; has not been. She is Countess in her own right. It is quite a romance. She inherited from some old branch of more than three hundred years ago.' Again Harold smiled; he quite saw what the other meant.

He answered gravely

'I understand. But it does not alter my opinion; my purpose. It is needful—absolutely and imperatively needful that I get away without her recognising me, or knowing who I am.'

'She does not know you now. She has not seen you yet.'

‘That is why I hoped to get away in time; before she should recognise me. If I stay quiet and do all you wish, will you help me?’

‘I will! And what then?’

‘When I am well, if it should be so, I shall steal away, this time clothed, and disappear out of her life without her knowing. She may think it ungrateful that one whom she has treated so well should behave so badly. But that can’t be helped. It is the lesser evil of the two.’

‘And I must abet you? All right! I will do it; though you must forgive me if you should ever hear that I have abused you and said bad things of you. It will have to be all in the day’s work if I am not ultimately to give you away. I must take steps at once to keep her from seeing you. I shall have to invent some story; some new kind of dangerous disease, perhaps. I shall stay here and nurse you myself!’ Harold spoke in joyful gratitude:

‘Oh, you *are* good. But can you spare the time? How long will it all take?’

‘Some weeks! Perhaps!’ He paused as if thinking. ‘Perhaps in a month’s time I shall unbandage your eyes. You will then see; or . . . ’

‘I understand! I shall be patient!’

In the morning Mr. Hilton in reporting to Lady de Lannoy told her that he considered it would be necessary to keep his patient very quiet, both in mind and body. In the course of the conversation he said:

‘Anything which might upset him must be studiously avoided. He is not an easy patient to deal with; he doesn’t like people to go near him. I think, therefore, it will be well if even you do not see him. He seems to have an odd distrust of people, especially of women. It may be that he is fretful in his blindness, which is in itself so trying to a strong man. But besides, the treatment is not calculated to have a very buoyant effect. It is apt to make a man fretful to lie in the dark, and know that he has to do so for indefinite weeks. Pilocarpin, and salicylate of soda, and mercury do not tend towards cheerfulness. Nor do blisters on the forehead add to the content of life!’

‘I quite understand,’ said Stephen, ‘and I will be careful not to go near him till he is well. Please God! it may bring him back his sight. Thank you a thousand times for your determination to stay with him.’

So it was that for more than two weeks Harold was kept all alone. No one attended him but the Doctor. He slept in the patient’s room for the whole of the first week, and

never had him out of sight for more than a few minutes at a time. He was then able to leave him alone for longer periods, and settled himself in the bedroom next to him. Every hour or two he would visit him. Occasionally he would be away for half a day, but never for more. Stephen rigidly observed the Doctor's advice herself, and gave strict orders that his instructions were to be obeyed.

Harold himself went through a period of mental suffering. It was agony to him to think of Stephen being so near at hand, and yet not to be able to see her, or even to hear her voice. All the pain of his loss of her affection seemed to crowd back on him, and with it the new need of escaping from her unknown. More than ever he felt it would not do that she should ever learn his identity. Her pity for him, and possibly her woman's regard for a man's effort in time of stress, might lead through the gates of her own self-sacrifice to his restoration to his old place in her affections. Nay! it could not be his old place; for at the close of those days she had learned of his love for her.

CHAPTER XXXV—A CRY

The third week had nearly elapsed, and as yet no one was allowed to see the patient.

For a time Stephen was inclined to be chagrined. It is not pleasant to have even the most generous and benevolent intentions thwarted; and she had set her mind on making much of this man whom fate and his own bravery had thrown athwart her life. But in these days Stephen was in some ways a changed woman. She had so much that she wished to forget and that she would have given worlds to recall, that she could not bear even to think of any militant or even questioning attitude. She even began to take herself to task more seriously than she had ever done with regard to social and conventional duties. When she found her house full of so many and so varied guests, it was borne in upon her that such a position as her own, with such consequent duties, called for the presence of some elder person of her own sex and of her own class.

No better proof of Stephen's intellectual process and its result could be adduced than her first act of recognition: she summoned an elderly lady to live with her and matronise her house. This lady, the widow of a distant relation, complied with all the charted requirements of respectability, and had what to Stephen's eyes was a positive gift: that of minding her own business and not interfering in any matter whatever. Lady de Lannoy, she felt, was her own master and quite able to take care of herself. Her own presence was all that convention required. So she limited herself to this duty, with admirable result to all, herself included. After a few days Stephen would almost forget that she was present.

Mr. Hilton kept bravely to his undertaking. He never gave even a hint of his hopes of the restoration of sight; and he was so assiduous in his attention that there arose no opportunity of accidental discovery of the secret. He knew that when the time did come he would find himself in a very unpleasant situation. Want of confidence, and even of intentional deceit, might be attributed to him; and he would not be able to deny nor explain. He was, however; determined to stick to his word. If he could but save his patient's sight he would be satisfied.

But to Stephen all the mystery seemed to grow out of its first shadowy importance into something real. There was coming to her a vague idea that she would do well not to manifest any concern, any anxiety, any curiosity. Instinct was at work; she was content to trust it, and wait.

One forenoon she received by messenger a letter which interested her much. So much that at first she was unwilling to show it to anyone, and took it to her own boudoir to read over again in privacy. She had a sort of feeling of expectancy with regard to it; such as sensitive natures feel before a thunderstorm. The letter was natural enough in itself. It was dated that morning from Varilands, a neighbouring estate which marched with Lannoy to the south.

'My Dear Madam,—Will you pardon me a great liberty, and allow my little girl and me to come to see you to-day? I shall explain when we meet. When I say that we are Americans and have come seven thousand miles for the purpose, you will, I am sure, understand that it is no common interest which has brought us, and it will be the excuse for our eagerness. I should write you more fully, but as the matter is a confidential one I thought it would be better to speak. We shall be doubly grateful if you will have the kindness to see us alone. I write as a mother in making this appeal to your kindness; for my child—she is only a little over eight years old—has the matter so deeply in her heart that any disappointment or undue delay would I fear affect her health. We presume to take your kindness for granted and will call a little before twelve o'clock.

'I may perhaps say (in case you should feel any hesitation as to my *bona fides*) that my husband purchased some years ago this estate. We were to have come here to live in the early summer, but were kept in the West by some important business of his.

'Believe me, yours sincerely,
'Alice Stonehouse.'

Stephen had, of course, no hesitation as to receiving the lady. Even had there been objection, the curiosity she had in common with her kind would have swept

difficulties aside. She gave orders that when Mrs. Stonehouse arrived with her daughter they were to be shown at once into the Mandarin drawing-room. That they would probably stay for lunch. She would see them alone.

A little before twelve o'clock Mrs. Stonehouse and Pearl arrived, and were shown into the room where Lady de Lannoy awaited them. The high sun, streaming in from the side, shone on her beautiful hair, making it look like living gold. When the Americans came in they were for an instant entranced by her beauty. One glance at Mrs. Stonehouse's sweet sympathetic face was enough to establish her in Stephen's good graces forever. As for Pearl, she was like one who has unexpectedly seen a fairy or a goddess. She had been keeping guardedly behind her mother, but on the instant she came out fearlessly into the open.

Stephen advanced quickly and shook hands with Mrs. Stonehouse, saying heartily:

'I am so glad you have come. I am honoured in being trusted.'

'Thank you so much, Lady de Lannoy. I felt that you would not mind, especially when you know why we came. Indeed I had no choice. Pearl insisted on it; and when Pearl is urgent—we who love her have all to give way. This is Pearl!'

In an instant Stephen was on her knees by the beautiful child.

The red rosebud of a mouth was raised to her kiss, and the little arms went lovingly round her neck and clung to her. As the mother looked on delighted she thought she had never seen a more beautiful sight. The two faces so different, and yet with so much in common. The red hair and the flaxen, both tints of gold. The fine colour of each heightened to a bright flush in their eagerness. Stephen was so little used to children, and yet loved them so, that all the womanhood in her, which is possible motherhood, went out in an instant to the lovely eager child. She felt the keenest pleasure when the little thing, having rubbed her silk-gloved palms over her face, and then holding her away so that she could see her many beauties, whispered in her ear:

'How pretty you are!'

'You darling!' whispered Stephen in reply. 'We must love each other very much, you and I!'

When the two ladies had sat down, Stephen holding Pearl in her lap, Mrs. Stonehouse said:

'I suppose you have wondered, Lady de Lannoy, what has brought us here?'

'Indeed I was very much interested.'

‘Then I had better tell you all from the beginning so that you may understand.’ She proceeded to give the details of the meeting with Mr. Robinson on the *Scoriac*. Of how Pearl took to him and insisted on making him her special friend; of the terrible incident of her being swept overboard, and of the gallant rescue. Mrs. Stonehouse was much moved as she spoke. All that fearful time, of which the minutes had seemed years of agony, came back to her so vividly at times that she could hardly speak. Pearl listened too; all eagerness, but without fear. Stephen was greatly moved and held Pearl close to her all the time, as though protecting her. When the mother spoke of her feeling when she saw the brave man struggling up and down the giant waves, and now and again losing sight of him in the trough of the sea, she put out one hand and held the mother’s with a grasp which vibrated in sympathy, whilst the great tears welled over in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Pearl, watching her keenly, said nothing, but taking her tiny cambric handkerchief from her pocket silently wiped the tears away, and clung all the tighter. It was her turn to protect now!

Pearl’s own time for tears came when her mother began to tell this new and sympathetic friend of how she became so much attached to her rescuer that when she knew he would not be coming to the West with them, but going off to the wildest region of the far North, her health became impaired; and that it was only when Mr. Robinson promised to come back to see her within three years that she was at all comforted. And how, ever since, she had held the man in her heart and thought of him every day; sleeping as well as waking, for he was a factor in her dreams!

Stephen was more than ever moved, for the child’s constancy touched her as well as her grief. She strained the little thing in her strong young arms, as though the fervency of her grasp would bring belief and comfort; as it did. She in her turn dried the others’ eyes. Then Mrs. Stonehouse went on with her story:

‘We were at Banff, high up in the Rockies, when we read of the burning and wrecking of the *Dominion*. It is, as you know, a Montreal boat of the Allan Line; so that naturally there was a full telegraphic report in all the Canadian papers. When we read of the brave man who swam ashore with the line and who was unable to reach the port but swam out across the bay, Pearl took it for granted that it must have been “The Man,” as she always called Mr. Robinson. When by the next paper we learned that the man’s name *was* Robinson nothing would convince her that it was not *her* Mr. Robinson. My husband, I may tell you, had firmly come to the same conclusion. He had ever since the rescue of our child always looked for any news from Alaska, whither he knew Mr. Robinson had gone. He learned that up away in the very far North a new goldfield had been discovered by a man of the same name; and that a new town, Robinson City, began to grow up in the wilderness, where the condition of life from the cold was a

new experience to even the most hardy gold miners. Then we began to think that the young hero who had so gallantly saved our darling was meeting some of his reward . . . !'

She paused, her voice breaking. Stephen was in a glow of holy feeling. Gladness, joy, gratitude, enthusiasm; she knew not which. It all seemed like a noble dream which was coming true. Mrs. Stonehouse went on:-

'From Californian papers of last month we learned that Robinson, of Robinson City, had sailed for San Francisco, but had disappeared when the ship touched at Portland; and then the whole chain of his identity seemed complete. Nothing would satisfy Pearl but that we should come at once to England and see "The Man," who was wounded and blind, and do what we could for him. Her father could not then come himself; he had important work on hand which he could not leave without some preparation. But he is following us and may be here at any time.

'And now, we want you to help us, Lady de Lannoy. We are not sure yet of the identity of Mr. Robinson, but we shall know the instant we see him, or hear his voice. We have learned that he is still here. Won't you let us? Do let us see him as soon as ever you can!' There was a pleading tone in her voice which alone would have moved Stephen, even had she not been wrought up already by the glowing fervour of her new friend.

But she paused. She did not know what to say; how to tell them that as yet she herself knew nothing. She, too, in the depths of her own heart knew—*knew*—that it was the same Robinson. And she also knew that both identities were one with another. The beating of her heart and the wild surging of her blood told her all. She was afraid to speak lest her voice should betray her.

She could not even think. She would have to be alone for that.

Mrs. Stonehouse, with the wisdom and power of age, waited, suspending judgment. But Pearl was in a fever of anxiety; she could imagine nothing which could keep her away from The Man. But she saw that there was some difficulty, some cause of delay. So she too added her pleading. Putting her mouth close to Lady de Lannoy's ear she whispered very faintly, very caressingly:

'What is your name? Your own name? Your very own name?'

'Stephen, my darling!'

'Oh, won't you let us see The Man, Stephen; dear Stephen! I love him so; and I do *so* want to see him. It is ages till I see him! Won't you let me? I shall be so good—Stephen!' And she strained her closer in her little arms and kissed her all over face,

cheeks and forehead and eyes and mouth wooingly. Stephen returned the embrace and the kisses, but remained silent a little longer. Then she found voice:

'I hardly know what to say. Believe me, I should—I shall, do all I can; but the fact is that I am not in authority. The Doctor has taken him in charge and will not let anyone go near him: He will not even have a nurse, but watches and attends to him himself. He says it might be fatal if anything should occur to agitate him. Why, even I am not allowed to see him!'

'Haven't you seen him yet at all; ever, ever, Stephen?' asked Pearl, all her timidity gone. Stephen smiled—a wan smile it was, as she answered:

'I saw him in the water, but it was too far away to distinguish. And it was only by firelight.'

'Oh yes, I know,' said Pearl; 'Mother and Daddy told me how you had burned the house down to give him light. Didn't you want to see him more after that? I should!' Stephen drew the impulsive child closer as she answered:

'Indeed I did, dear. But I had to think of what was good for him. I went to his room the next day when he was awake, and the Doctor let me come in for only a moment.'

'Well! What did you see. Didn't you know him?' She forgot that the other did not know him from her point of view. But the question went through Stephen's heart like a sword. What would she not have given to have known him! What would she not give to know him now! . . . She spoke mechanically:

'The room was quite dark. It is necessary, the Doctor says, that he be kept in the dark. I saw only a big beard, partly burned away by the fire; and a great bandage which covered his eyes!' Pearl's hold relaxed, she slipped like an eel to the floor and ran over to her mother. Her new friend was all very well, but no one would do as well as mother when she was in trouble.

'Oh mother, mother! My Robinson had no beard!' Her mother stroked her face comfortingly as she answered:

'But, my dear, it is more than two years since you saw him. Two years and three months, for it was in June that we crossed.' How the date thrilled Stephen. It verified her assumption.

Mrs. Stonehouse did not notice, but went on:

‘His beard would have grown. Men wear beards up in the cold place where he was.’ Pearl kissed her; there was no need for words. Throwing herself again on Stephen’s knees she went on with her questioning:

‘But didn’t you hear him?’

‘I heard very little, darling. He was very weak. It was only the morning after the wreck, and he spoke in a whisper!’ Then with an instinct of self-preservation she added: ‘But how could I learn anything by hearing him when he was a stranger to me? I had never even heard of Mr. Robinson!’

As she was speaking she found her own ideas, the proofs of her own conviction growing. This was surely another link in the chain of proving that all three men were but one. But in such case Harold must know; must have tried to hide his identity!

She feared, with keen eyes upon her, to pursue the thought. But her blood began to grow cold and her brain to swim. With an effort she went on:

‘Even since then I have not been allowed to go near him. Of course I must obey orders. I am waiting as patiently as I can. But we must ask the Doctor if he thinks his patient will see you—will let you see him—though he will not let me.’ This she added with a touch of what she felt: regret rather than bitter ness. There was no room for bitterness in her full heart where Harold was concerned.

‘Will you ask the Doctor now?’ Pearl did not let grass grow under her feet. For answer Stephen rang the bell, and when a servant appeared asked:

‘Is Mr. Hilton in the house?’

‘I think not, your Ladyship. He said he was going over to Port Lannoch. Shall I inquire if he left word at what time he would be back?’

‘If you please!’ The man returned in a few minutes with the butler, who said:

‘Mr. Hilton said, your Ladyship, that he expected to be back by one o’clock at latest.’

‘Please ask him on his arrival if he will kindly come here at once. Do not let us be disturbed until then.’ The butler bowed and withdrew.

‘Now,’ said Stephen, ‘as we have to wait till our tyrant comes, won’t you tell me all that went on after The Man had left you?’ Pearl brightened up at once. Stephen would have given anything to get away even for a while. Beliefs and hopes and fears were surging up, till she felt choking. But the habit of her life, especially her life of the last

two years, gave her self-control. And so she waited, trying with all her might to follow the child's prattle.

After a long wait Pearl exclaimed: 'Oh! I do wish that Doctor would come. I want to see The Man!' She was so restless, marching about the room, that Stephen said:

'Would you like to go out on the balcony, darling; of course if Mother will let you? It is quite safe, I assure you, Mrs. Stonehouse. It is wide and open and is just above the flower-borders, with a stone tail. You can see the road from it by which Mr. Hilton comes from Port Lannoch. He will be riding.' Pearl yielded at once to the diversion. It would at any rate be something to do, to watch. Stephen opened the French window and the child ran out on the balcony.

When Stephen came back to her seat Mrs. Stonehouse said quietly:

'I am glad she is away for a few minutes. She has been over wrought, and I am always afraid for her. She is so sensitive. And after all she is only a baby!'

'She is a darling!' said Stephen impulsively; and she meant it. Mrs. Stonehouse smiled gratefully as she went on:

'I suppose you noticed what a hold on her imagination that episode of Mollie Watford at the bank had. Mr. Stonehouse is, as perhaps you know, a very rich man. He has made his fortune himself, and most honourably; and we are all very proud of him, and of it. So Pearl does not think of the money for itself. But the feeling was everything; she really loves Mr. Robinson; as indeed she ought! He has done so much for us that it would be a pride and a privilege for us to show our gratitude. My husband, between ourselves, wanted to make him his partner. He tells me that, quite independent of our feeling towards him, he is just the man he wanted. And if indeed it was he who discovered the Alaskan goldfield and organised and ruled Robinson City, it is a proof that Mr. Stonehouse's judgment was sound. Now he is injured, and blind; and our little Pearl loves him. If indeed he be the man we believe he is, then we may be able to do something which all his millions cannot buy. He will come to us, and be as a son to us, and a brother to Pearl. We will be his eyes; and nothing but love and patience will guide his footsteps!' She paused, her mouth quivering; then she went on:

'If it is not our Mr. Robinson, then it will be our pleasure to do all that is necessary for his comfort. If he is a poor man he will never want . . . It will be a privilege to save so gallant a man from hardship . . . ' Here she came to a stop.

Stephen too was glad of the pause, for the emotion which the words and their remembrances evoked was choking her. Had not Harold been as her own father's son. As her own brother! . . . She turned away, fearing lest her face should betray her.

All at once Mrs. Stonehouse started to her feet, her face suddenly white with fear; for a cry had come to their ears. A cry which even Stephen knew as Pearl's. The mother ran to the window.

The balcony was empty. She came back into the room, and, ran to the door.

But on the instant a voice that both women knew was heard from without:

'Help there! Help, I say! The child has fainted. Is there no one there? And I am blind!'

CHAPTER XXXVI—LIGHT

Harold had been in a state of increasing restlessness. The month of waiting which Dr. Hilton had laid down for him seemed to wear away with extraordinary slowness; this was increased by the lack of companionship, and further by the cutting off of even the little episodes usual to daily life. His patience, great as it was naturally and trained as it had been by the years of self-repression, was beginning to give way. Often and often there came over him a wild desire to tear off the irksome bandages and try for himself whether the hopes held out to him were being even partially justified. He was restrained only by the fear of perpetual blindness, which came over him in a sort of cold wave at each reaction. Time, too, added to his fear of discovery; but he could not but think that his self-sought isolation must be a challenge to the curiosity of each and all who knew of it. And with all these disturbing causes came the main one, which never lessened but always grew: that whatever might happen Stephen would be further from him than ever. Look at the matter how he would; turn it round in whatsoever possible or impossible way, he could see no relief to this gloomy conclusion.

For it is in the nature of love that it creates or enlarges its own pain. If troubles or difficulties there be from natural causes, then it will exaggerate them into nightmare proportions. But if there be none, it will create them. Love is in fact the most serious thing that comes to man; where it exists all else seem as phantoms, or at best as actualities of lesser degree. During the better part of two years his troubles had but slept; and as nothing wakes the pangs of old love better than the sound of a voice, all the old acute pain of love and the agony that followed its denial were back with him. Surely he could never, never believe that Stephen did not mean what she had said to him that morning in the beech grove. All his new resolution not to hamper her with the burden of a blind and lonely-hearted man was back to the full.

In such mood had he been that morning. He was additionally disturbed because the Doctor had gone early to Port Lannoch; and as he was the only person with whom he could talk, he clung to him with something of the helpless feeling of a frightened child to its nurse.

The day being full of sunshine the window was open, and only the dark-green blind which crackled and rustled with every passing breeze made the darkness of the room. Harold was dressed and lay on a sofa placed back in the room, where the few rays of light thus entering could not reach him. His eyes and forehead were bandaged as ever. For some days the Doctor, who had his own reasons and his own purpose, had not taken them off; so the feeling of blind helplessness was doubly upon him. He knew he was blind; and he knew also that if he were not he could not in his present condition see.

All at once he started up awake. His hearing had in the weeks of darkness grown abnormally acute, and some trifling sound had recalled him to himself. It might have been inspiration, but he seemed to be conscious of some presence in the room.

As he rose from the sofa, with the violent motion of a strong man startled into unconscious activity, he sent a shock of fear to the eager child who had strayed into the room through the open window. Had he presented a normal appearance, she would not have been frightened. She would have recognised his identity despite the changes, and have sprung to him so impulsively that she would have been in his arms before she had time to think. But now all she saw was a great beard topped with a mass of linen and lint, which obscured all the rest of the face and seemed in the gloom like a gigantic and ominous turban.

In her fright she screamed out. He in turn, forgetful for the moment of his intention of silence, called aloud:

'Who is that?' Pearl, who had been instinctively backing towards the window by which she had entered, and whose thoughts in her fright had gone back to her mother—refuge in time of danger—cried out:

'Mother, Mother! It is him! It is The Man!' She would have run towards him in spite of his forbidding appearance; but the shock had been too much for her. The little knees trembled and gave way; the brain reeled; and with a moan she sank on the floor in a swoon.

Harold knew the voice the instant she spoke; there was no need for the enlightening words

‘Pearl! Pearl!’ he cried. ‘Come to me, darling!’ But as he spoke he heard her moan, and the soft thud of her little body on the thick carpet. He guessed the truth and groped his way towards where the sound had been, for he feared lest he might trample upon her in too great eagerness. Kneeling by her he touched her little feet, and then felt his way to her face. And as he did so, such is the double action of the mind, even in the midst of his care the remembrance swept across his mind of how he had once knelt in just such manner in an old church by another little senseless form. In his confusion of mind he lost the direction of the door, and coming to the window pushed forward the flapping blind and went out on the balcony. He knew from the freshness of the air and the distant sounds that he was in the open. This disturbed him, as he wished to find someone who could attend to the fainting child. But as he had lost the way back to the room now, he groped along the wall of the Castle with one hand, whilst he held Pearl securely in the other. As he went he called out for help.

When he came opposite the window of the Mandarin room Mrs. Stonehouse saw him; she ran to him and caught Pearl in her arms. She was so agitated, so lost in concern for the child that she never even thought to speak to the man whom she had come so far to seek. She wailed over the child:

‘Pearl! Pearl! What is it, darling? It is Mother!’ She laid the girl on the sofa, and taking the flowers out of a glass began to sprinkle water on the child’s face. Harold knew her voice and waited in patience. Presently the child sighed; the mother, relieved, thought of other things at last and looked around her.

There was yet another trouble. There on the floor, where she had slipped down, lay Lady de Lannoy in a swoon. She called out instinctively, forgetting for the moment that the man was blind, but feeling all the old confidence which he had won in her heart:

‘Oh! Mr. Robinson, help me! Lady de Lannoy has fainted too, and I do not know what to do!’ As she spoke she looked up at him and remembered his blindness. But she had no time to alter her words; the instant she had spoken Harold, who had been leaning against the window-sash, and whose mind was calmer since with his acute hearing he too had heard Pearl sigh, seemed to leap into the room.

‘Where is she? Where is she? Oh, God, now am I blind indeed!’

It gave her a pang to hear him and to see him turn helplessly with his arms and hands outstretched as though he would feel for her in the air.

Without pause, and under an instinctive and uncontrollable impulse, he tore the bandages from his eyes. The sun was streaming in. As he met it his eyes blinked and a cry burst from him; a wild cry whose joy and surprise pierced even through the shut portals of the swooning woman's brain. Not for worlds would she ever after have lost the memory of that sound:

'Light! light! Oh, God! Oh, God! I am not blind!'

But he looked round him still in terrified wonder:

'Where is she? Where is she? I cannot see her! Stephen! Stephen! where are you?' Mrs. Stonehouse, bewildered, pointed where Stephen's snow-white face and brilliant hair seemed in the streaming sunlight like ivory and gold:

'There! There!' He caught her arm mechanically, and putting his eyes to her wrist, tried to look along her pointed finger. In an instant he dropped her arm moaning.

'I cannot see her! What is it that is over me? This is worse than to be blind!' He covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

He felt light strong fingers on his forehead and hands; fingers whose touch he would have known had they been laid on him were he no longer quick. A voice whose music he had heard in his dreams for two long years said softly:

'I am here, Harold! I am here! Oh! do not sob like that; it breaks my heart to hear you!' He took his hands from his face and held hers in them, staring intently at her as though his passionate gaze would win through every obstacle.

That moment he never forgot. Never could forget! He saw the room all rich in yellow. He saw Pearl, pale but glad-eyed, lying on a sofa holding the hand of her mother, who stood beside her. He saw the great high window open, the lines of the covered stone balcony without, the stretch of green sward all vivid in the sunshine, and beyond it the blue quivering sea. He saw all but that for which his very soul longed; without to see which sight itself was valueless . . . But still he looked, and looked; and Stephen saw in his dark eyes, though he could not see her, that which made her own eyes fill and the warm red glow on her face again . . . Then she raised her eyes again, and the gladness of her beating heart seemed the answer to his own.

For as he looked he saw, as though emerging from a mist whose obscurity melted with each instant, what was to him the one face in all the world. He did not think then of its beauty—that would come later; and besides no beauty of one born of woman could outmatch the memorised beauty which had so long held his heart. But that he had so schooled himself in long months of gloomy despair, he would have taken her in his

arms there and then; and, heedless of the presence of others, have poured out his full heart to her.

Mrs. Stonehouse saw and understood. So too Pearl, who though a child was a woman-child; softly they rose up to steal away. But Stephen saw them; her own instincts, too, told her that her hour had not come. What she hoped for must come alone! So she called to her guests:

'Don't go! Don't go, Mrs. Stonehouse. You know now that Harold and I are old friends, though neither of us knew it—till this moment. We were brought up as . . . almost as brother and sister. Pearl, isn't it lovely to see your friend . . . to see The Man again?'

She was so happy that she could only express herself, with dignity, through the happiness of others.

Pearl actually shrieked with joy as she rushed across the room and flung herself into Harold's arms as he stooped to her. He raised her; and she kissed him again and again, and put her little hands all over his face and stroked, very, very gently, his eyes, and said:

'Oh, I am so glad! And so glad your poor eyes are unbind again! May I call you Harold, too?'

'You darling!' was all he could say as he kissed her, and holding her in one arm went across and shook hands with Mrs. Stonehouse, who wrung his hand hard.

There was a little awkwardness in the group, for none of them knew what would be best to do next. In the midst of it there came a light knock at the door, and Mr. Hilton entered saying:

'They told me you wished to see me at once—Hulloa!' He rushed across the room and took Harold by the shoulders, turning his face to the light. He looked in his eyes long and earnestly, the others holding their breaths. Presently he said, without relaxing his gaze:

'Did you see mistily at first?'

'Yes.'

'Seeing at the periphery; but the centre being opaque?'

'Yes! How did you know? Why, I couldn't see'—see pointing to Stephen—'Lady de Lannoy; though her face was right in front of me!'

Dr. Hilton took his hands from his patient's shoulders and shook him warmly by both hands:-

'I am glad, old fellow! It was worth waiting for, wasn't it? But I say, it was a dangerous thing to take off those bandages before I permitted. However, it has done no harm! But it was lucky that I mistrusted your patience and put the time for the experiment a week later than I thought necessary . . . What is it?' He turned from one to the other questioningly; there was a look on Harold's face that he did not quite comprehend.

'H-s-h,' said the latter warningly, 'I'll tell you all about it . . . some time!'

The awkward pause was broken by Pearl, who came to the Doctor and said:

'I must kiss you, you know. It was you who saved The Man's eyes. Stephen has told me how you watched him!' The Doctor was somewhat taken aback; as yet he was ignorant of Pearl's existence. However, he raised the child in his arms and kissed her, saying:

'Thank you, my dear! I did all I could. But he helped much himself; except at the very last. Don't you ever go and take off bandages, if you should ever have the misfortune to have them on, without the doctor's permission!' Pearl nodded her head wisely and then wriggled out of his arms and came again to Harold, looking up at him protectingly and saying in an old-fashioned way:

'How are you feeling now? None the worse, I hope, *Harold*!'

The Man lifted her up and kissed her again. When he set her down she came over to Lady de Lannoy and held up her arms to be lifted:

'And I must kiss you again too, Stephen!' If Lady de Lannoy hadn't loved the sweet little thing already she would have loved her for that!

The door was opened, and the butler announced:

'Luncheon is served, your Ladyship.'

* * * * *

After a few days Harold went over to Varilands to stay for a while with the Stonehouses. Mr. Stonehouse had arrived, and both men were rejoiced to meet again. The elder never betrayed by word or sign that he recognised the identity of the other person of the drama of whom he had told him and who had come so accidentally into his life; and the younger was grateful to him for it. Harold went

almost every day to Lannoy, and sometimes the Stonehouses went with him; at other times Stephen paid flying visits to Varilands. She did not make any effort to detain Harold; she would not for worlds have made a sign which might influence him. She was full now of that diffidence which every woman has who loves. She felt that she must wait; must wait even if the waiting lasted to her grave. She felt, as every woman does who really loves, that she had found her Master.

And Harold, to whom something of the same diffidence was an old story, got the idea that her reticence was a part of the same feeling whose violent expression had sent him out into the wilderness. And with the thought came the idea of his duty, implied in her father's dying trust: 'Give her time! . . . Let her choose!' For him the clock seemed to have stopped for two whole years, and he was back at the time when the guardianship of his boy life was beginning to yield to the larger and more selfish guardianship of manhood.

Stephen, noticing that he did not come near her as closely as she felt he might, and not realising his true reason—for when did love ever realise the true reason of the bashfulness of love?—felt a chillness which in turn reacted on her own manner.

And so these two ardent souls, who yearned for each other's love and the full expression of it, seemed as if they might end after all in drifting apart. Each thought that their secret was concealed. But both secrets were already known to Mrs. Stonehouse, who knew nothing; and to Mr. Stonehouse, who knew everything. Even Pearl had her own ideas, as was once shown in a confidence when they were alone in Stephen's bedroom after helping her to finish her dressing, just as Stephen herself had at a similar age helped her Uncle Gilbert. After some coy leading up to the subject of pretty dresses, the child putting her little mouth to the other's ear whispered:

'May I be your bridesmaid, Stephen?' The woman was taken aback; but she had to speak at once, for the child's eyes were on her:

'Of course you will, darling. But I—I may never be married.'

'You! You must! I know someone who will make you!' Stephen's heart beat hard and rapidly. The child's talk, though sweet and dear, was more than embarrassing. With, however, the desire to play with fire, which is a part of the nature of women, she answered:

'You have some queer ideas, little one, in that pretty knowledge-box of yours.'

‘Oh! he never told me. But I know it all the same! And you know it too, Stephen!’ This was getting too close to be without danger; so she tried to divert the thought from herself:

‘My darling, you may guess about other people, though I don’t say you ought; but you must not guess about me!’

‘All right!’ then she held up her arms to be lifted on the other’s knee and said:

‘I want to whisper to you!’ Her voice and manner were so full of feeling that somehow the other was moved. She bent her head, and Pearl taking her neck in her little palms, said:

‘I thought, oh! long ago, that I would marry him myself. But you knew him first . . . And he only saved me . . . But you saved him!’ . . . And then she laid her head down on the throbbing bosom, and sobbed . . .

And Stephen sobbed too.

Before they left the room, Stephen said to her, very gravely, for the issue might be one of great concern:

‘Of course, Pearl dear, our secrets are all between ourselves!’ Pearl crossed her two forefingers and kissed them. But she said nothing; she had sworn! Stephen went on:

‘And, darling, you will remember too that one must never speak or even think if they can help it about anyone’s marrying anyone else till they say so themselves! What is it, dear, that you are smiling at?’

‘I know, Stephen! I musn’t take off the bandage till the Doctor says so!’

Stephen smiled and kissed her. Hand in hand, Pearl chattering merrily, they went down to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXXVII—GOLDEN SILENCE

Each day that passed seemed to add to the trouble in the heart of these young people; to widen the difficulty of expressing themselves. To Stephen, who had accepted the new condition of things and whose whole nature had bloomed again under the sunshine of hope, it was the less intolerable. She had set herself to wait, as had countless thousands of women before her; and as due proportion will, till the final cataclysm abolishes earthly unions. But Harold felt the growth, both positive and negative, as a new torture; and he began to feel that he would be unable to go through with it. In his heart was the constant struggle of hope; and in opposition to it the

seeming realisation of every new fancy of evil. That bitter hour, when the whole of creation was for him turned upside down, was having its sad effect at last. Had it not been for that horrid remembrance he would have come to believe enough in himself to put his future to the test. He would have made an opportunity at which Stephen and himself would have with the fires of their mutual love burned away the encircling mist. There are times when a single minute of commonsense would turn sorrow into joy; and yet that minute, our own natures being the opposing forces, will be allowed to pass.

Those who loved these young people were much concerned about them. Mrs. Stonehouse took their trouble so much to heart that she spoke to her husband about it, seriously advising that one or other of them should make an effort to bring things in the right way for their happiness. The woman was sure of the woman's feeling. It is from men, not women, that women hide their love. By side-glances and unthinking moments women note and learn. The man knew already, from his own lips, of the man's passion. But his lips were sealed by his loyalty; and he said earnestly:

'My dear, we must not interfere. Not now, at any rate; we might cause them great trouble. I am as sure as you are that they really love each other. But they must win happiness by themselves and through themselves alone. Otherwise it would never be to them what it ought to be; what it might be; what it will be!'

So these friends were silent, and the little tragedy developed. Harold's patience began to give way under the constant strain of self-suppression. Stephen tried to hide her love and fear, under the mask of a gracious calm. This the other took for indifference.

At last there came an hour which was full of new, hopeless agony to Stephen. She heard Harold, in a fragment of conversation, speak to Mr. Stonehouse of the need of returning to Alaska. That sounded like a word of doom. In her inmost heart she knew that Harold loved her; and had she been free she would have herself spoken the words which would have drawn the full truth to them both. But how could she do so, having the remembrance of that other episode; when, without the reality of love, she had declared herself? . . . Oh! the shame of it . . . The folly! . . . And Harold knew it all! How could he ever believe that it was real this time! . . .

By the exercise of that self-restraint which long suffering had taught her, Stephen so managed to control herself that none of her guests realised what a blow she had received from a casual word. She bore herself gallantly till the last moment. After the old fashion of her youth, she had from the Castle steps seen their departure. Then she took her way to her own room, and locked herself in. She did not often, in these

days, give way to tears; when she did cry it was as a luxury, and not from poignant cause. Her deep emotion was dry-eyed as of old. Now, she did not cry, she sat still, her hands clasped below her knees, with set white face gazing out on the far-off sea. For hours she sat there lonely; staring fixedly all the time, though her thoughts were whirling wildly. At first she had some vague purpose, which she hoped might eventually work out into a plan. But thought would not come. Everywhere there was the same beginning: a wild, burning desire to let Harold understand her feeling towards him; to blot out, with the conviction of trust and love, those bitter moments when in the madness of her overstrung passion she had heaped such insult upon him. Everywhere the same end: an impasse. He seemingly could not, would not, understand. She knew now that the man had diffidences, forbearances, self-judgments and self-denials which made for the suppression, in what he considered to be her interest, of his own desires. This was tragedy indeed! Again and again came back the remembrance of that bitter regret of her Aunt Laetitia, which no happiness and no pain of her own had ever been able to efface:

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

At last she seemed to understand the true force of pride; which has in it a thousand forces of its own, positive, negative, restrainful. Oh! how blind she had been! How little she had learned from the miseries that the other woman whom she loved had suffered! How unsympathetic she had been; how self-engrossed; how callous to the sensibilities of others! And now to her, in her turn, had come the same suffering; the same galling of the iron fetters of pride, and of convention which is its original expression! Must it be that the very salt of youth must lose its savour, before the joys of youth could be won! What, after all, was youth if out of its own inherent power it must work its own destruction! If youth was so, why not then trust the wisdom of age? If youth could not act for its own redemption . . .

Here the rudiment of a thought struck her and changed the current of her reason. A thought so winged with hope that she dared not even try to complete it! . . . She thought, and thought till the long autumn shadows fell around her. But the misty purpose had become real.

After dinner she went up alone to the mill. It was late for a visit, for the Silver Lady kept early hours. But she found her friend as usual in her room, whose windows

swept the course of the sun. Seeing that her visitor was in a state of mental disturbance such as she had once before exhibited, she blew out the candles and took the same seat in the eastern window she had occupied on the night which they both so well remembered.

Stephen understood both acts, and was grateful afresh. The darkness would be a help to her in what she had to say; and the resumption of the old seat and attitude did away with the awkwardness of new confidence. During the weeks that had passed Stephen had kept her friend informed of the rescue and progress of the injured man. Since the discovery of Harold's identity she had allowed her to infer her feeling towards him.

Shyly she had conveyed her hopes that all the bitter part of the past might be wiped out. To the woman who already knew of the love that had always been, but had only awakened to consciousness in the absence of its object, a hint was sufficient to build upon. She had noticed the gloom that had of late been creeping over the girl's happiness; and she had been much troubled about it. But she had thought it wiser to be silent; she well knew that should unhappily the time for comfort come, it must be precluded by new and more explicit confidence. So she too had been anxiously waiting the progress of events. Now; as she put her arms round the girl she said softly; not in the whisper which implies doubt of some kind, but in the soft voices which conveys sympathy and trust:

'Tell me, dear child!'

And then in broken words shyly spoken, and spoken in such a way that the silences were more eloquent than the words, the girl conveyed what was in her heart. The other listened, now and again stroking the beautiful hair. When all was said, there was a brief pause. The Silver Lady spoke no word; but the pressure of her delicate hand conveyed sympathy.

In but a half-conscious way, in words that came so shrinkingly through the darkness that they hardly reached the ear bent low to catch them, came Stephen's murmured thought:

'Oh, if he only knew! And I can't tell him; I can't! dare not! I must not. How could I dishonour him by bearing myself towards him as to that other . . . worthless . . . ! Oh! the happy, happy girls, who have mothers . . . !' All the muscles of her body seemed to shrink and collapse, till she was like an inert mass at the Silver Lady's feet.

But the other understood!

After a long, long pause; when Stephen's sobbing had died away; when each muscle of her body had become rigid on its return to normal calm; the Silver Lady began to talk of other matters, and conversation became normal. Stephen's courage seemed somehow to be restored, and she talked brightly.

Before they parted the Silver Lady made a request. She said in her natural voice:

'Couldst thou bring that gallant man who saved so many lives, and to whom the Lord was so good in the restoration of his sight, to see me? Thou knowest I have made a resolution not to go forth from this calm place whilst I may remain. But I should like to see him before he returns to that far North where he has done such wonders. He is evidently a man of kind heart; perhaps he will not mind coming to see a lonely woman who is no longer young. There is much I should like to ask him of that land of which nothing was known in my own youth. Perhaps he will not mind seeing me alone.' Stephen's heart beat furiously. She felt suffocating with new hope, for what could be but good from Harold's meeting with that sweet woman who had already brought so much comfort into her own life? She was abashed, and yet radiant; she seemed to tread on air as she stood beside her friend saying farewell. She did not wish to speak. So the two women kissed and parted.

It had been arranged that two days hence the Stonehouse party were to spend the day at Lannoy, coming before lunch and staying the night, as they wanted in the afternoon to return a visit at some distance to the north of Lannoy. Harold was to ride over with them.

When the Varilands party arrived, Stephen told them of Sister Ruth's wish to see Harold. Pearl at once proffered a request that she also should be taken at some other time to see the Silver Lady. Harold acquiesced heartily; and it was agreed that some time in the late afternoon he should pay the visit. Stephen would bring him.

Strangely enough, she felt no awkwardness, no trepidation, as they rode up the steep road to the Mill.

When the introduction had been effected, and half an hour had been consumed in conventional small talk, Stephen, obedience to a look from the Silver Lady, rose. She said in they most natural way she could:

'Now Sister Ruth, I will leave you two alone, if you do not mind. Harold can tell you all you want to know about Alaska; and perhaps, if you are very good, he will tell some of his adventures! Good afternoon, dear. I wish you were to be with us to-night; but I know your rule. I go for my ride. Sultan has had no exercise for five days; and he

looked at me quite reproachfully when we met this morning. Au revoir, Harold. We shall meet at dinner!'

When she had gone Harold came back from the door, and stood in the window looking east. The Silver Lady came and stood beside him. She did not seem to notice his face, but in the mysterious way of women she watched him keenly. She wished to satisfy her own mind before she undertook her self-appointed task.

Her eyes were turned towards the headland towards which Stephen on her white Arab was galloping at breakneck speed. He was too good a horseman himself, and he knew her prowess on horseback too well to have any anxiety regarding such a rider at Stephen. It was not fear, then, that made his face so white, and his eyes to have such an illimitable sadness.

The Silver Lady made up her mind. All her instincts were to trust him. She recognised a noble nature, with which truth would be her surest force.

'Come,' she said, 'sit here, friend; where another friend has often sat with me. From this you can see all the coastline, and all that thou wilt!' Harold put a chair beside the one she pointed out; and when she was seated he sat also. She began at once with a desperate courage:

'I have wanted much to see thee. I have heard much of thee, before thy coming.' There was something in the tone of her voice which arrested his attention, and he looked keenly at her. Here, in the full light, her face looked sadly white and he noticed that her lips trembled. He said with all the kindliness of his nature, for from the first moment he had seen her he had taken to her, her purity and earnestness and sweetness appealing to some aspiration within him:

'You are pale! I fear you are not well! May I call your maid? Can I do anything for you?' She waved her hand gently:

'Nay! It is nothing. It is but the result of a sleepless night and much thought.'

'Oh! I wish I had known! I could have put off my visit; and I could have come any other time to suit you.' She smiled gently:

'I fear that would have availed but little. It was of thy coming that I was concerned.' Seeing his look of amazement, she went on quickly, her voice becoming more steady as she lost sight of herself in her task:

'Be patient a little with me. I am an old woman; and until recently it has been many and many years since the calm which I sought here has been ruffled. I had come to

believe that for me earthly troubles were no more. But there has come into my life a new concern. I have heard so much of thee, and before thy coming.' The recurrence of the phrase struck him. He would have asked how such could be, but he deemed it better to wait. She went on:

'I have been wishful to ask thy advice. But why should not I tell thee outright that which troubles me? I am not used, at least for these many years, to dissemble. I can but trust thee in all; and lean on thy man's mercy to understand, and to aid me!'

'I shall do all in my power, believe me!' said Harold simply. 'Speak freely!' She pointed out of the window, where Stephen's white horse seemed on the mighty sweep of green sward like a little dot.

'It is of her that I would speak to thee!' Harold's heart began to beat hard; he felt that something was coming. The Silver Lady went on:

'Why thinkest thou that she rideth at such speed? It is her habit!' He waited. She continued:

'Doth it not seem to thee that such reckless movement is the result of much trouble; that she seeketh forgetfulness?' He knew that she was speaking truly; and somehow the conviction was borne upon him that she knew his secret heart, and was appealing to it. If it was about Stephen! If her disquiet was about her; then God bless her! He would be patient and grateful. The Quaker's voice seemed to come through his thought, as though she had continued speaking whilst he had paused:

'We have all our own secrets. I have had mine; and I doubt not that thou hast had, may still have, thine own. Stephen hath hers! May I speak to thee of her?'

'I shall be proud! Oh! madam, I thank you with all my heart for your sweet kindness to her. I cannot say what I feel; for she has always been very dear to me!' In the pause before she spoke again the beating of his own heart seemed to re-echo the quick sounds of Stephen's galloping horse. He was surprised at the method of her speech when it did come; for she forgot her Quaker idiom, and spoke in the phrasing of her youth:

'Do you love her still?'

'With all my soul! More than ever!'

'Then, God be thanked; for it is in your power to do much good. To rescue a poor, human, grieving soul from despair!' Her words conveyed joy greater than she knew. Harold did not himself know why the air seemed filled with sounds that

seemed to answer every doubt of his life. He felt, understood, with that understanding which is quicker than thought. The Silver Lady went on now with a rush:

'See, I have trusted you indeed! I have given away another woman's secret; but I do it without fear. I can see that you also are troubled; and when I look back on my own life and remember the trouble that sent me out of the world; a lonely recluse here in this spot far from the stress of life, I rejoice that any act of mine can save such another tragedy as my own. I see that I need not go into detail. You know that I am speaking truth. It was before you came so heroically on this new scene that she told me her secret. At a time when nothing was known of you except that you had disappeared. When she laid bare her poor bleeding heart to me, she did it in such wise that for an instant I feared that it was a murder which she had committed. Indeed, she called it so! You understand that I know all your secret; all her part in it at least. And I know that you understand what loving duty lies before you. I see it in your eyes; your brave, true eyes! Go! and the Lord be with thee!' Her accustomed idiom had returned with prayer. She turned her head away, and, standing up, leaned against the window. Bending over, he took her hand and said simply:

'God bless you! I shall come back to thank you either to-night or to-morrow; and I hope that she will be with me.'

He went quickly out of the room. The woman stood for long looking out of the window, and following with tear-dimmed eyes the movement of his great black horse as he swept across country straight as the crow flies, towards the headland whither Stephen had gone.

* * * * *

Stephen passed over the wide expanse without thought; certainly without memory of it. Never in her after-life could she recall any thought that had passed through her mind from the time she left the open gate of the windmill yard till she pulled up her smoking, panting horse beside the ruin of the fisher's house.

Stephen was not unhappy! She was not happy in any conscious form. She was satisfied rather than dissatisfied. She was a woman! A woman who waited the coming of a man!

For a while she stood at the edge of the cliff, and looked at the turmoil of the tide churning on the rocks below. Her heart went out in a great burst of thankfulness that it was her hand which had been privileged to aid in rescuing so dear a life. Then she looked around her. Ostensibly it was to survey the ruined house; but in reality to

search, even then under her lashes, the whole green expanse sloping up to the windmill for some moving figure. She saw that which made her throat swell and her ears to hear celestial music. But she would not allow herself to think, of that at all events. She was all woman now; all-patient, and all-submissive. She waited the man; and the man was coming!

For a few minutes she walked round the house as though looking at it critically for some after-purpose. After the wreck Stephen had suggested to Trinity House that there should be a lighthouse on the point; and offered to bear the expense of building it. She was awaiting the answer of the Brethren; and of course nothing would be done in clearing the ground for any purpose till the answer had come. She felt now that if that reply was negative, she would herself build there a pleasure-house of her own.

Then she went to the edge of the cliff, and went down the zigzag by which the man and horse had gone to their gallant task. At the edge of the flat rock she sat and thought.

And through all her thoughts passed the rider who even now was thundering over the green sward on his way to her. In her fancy at first, and later in her ears, she could hear the sound of his sweeping gallop.

It was thus that a man should come to a woman!

She had no doubts now. Her quietude was a hymn of grateful praise!

The sound stopped. With all her ears she listened, her heart now beginning to beat furiously. The sea before her, all lines and furrows with the passing tide, was dark under the shadow of the cliff; and the edge of the shadow was marked with the golden hue of sunset.

And then she saw suddenly a pillar of shadow beyond the line of the cliff. It rested but a moment, moved swiftly along the edge, and then was lost to her eyes.

But to another sense there was greater comfort: she heard the clatter of rolling pebbles and the scramble of eager feet. Harold was hastening down the zigzag.

Oh! the music of that sound! It woke all the finer instincts of the woman. All the dross and thought of self passed away. Nature, sweet and simple and true, reigned alone. Instinctively she rose and came towards him. In the simple nobility of her self-surrender and her purpose, which were at one with the grandeur of nature around her, to be negative was to be false.

Since he had spoken with the Silver Lady Harold had swept through the air; the rush of his foaming horse over the sward had been but a slow physical progress, which

mocked the on-sweep of his mind. In is rapid ride he too had been finding himself. By the reading of his own soul he knew now that love needs a voice; that a man's love, to be welcomed to the full, should be dominant and self-believing.

When the two saw each other's eyes there was no need for words. Harold came close, opening wide his arms, Stephen flew to them.

In that divine moment, when their mouths met, both knew that their souls were one.