

have to be true to his promise whatever happened.

"I expect I had better make a clean breast of it," he said at length in desperation. "The truth is bound to come out sooner or later."

CHAPTER V

HESITATION

IT is proverbially easy to make resolutions, proverbially difficult to carry them into effect. Geoff had so many things to talk about on the evening of his arrival that he said nothing about his engagement.

The next day presented no favorable opportunity, nor the day following that. So a week passed away, and the great secret remained untold; what was worse still, he discovered that his courage was a steadily diminishing quantity. Over the dinner table and in the drawing-room the affairs of their neighbors had been talked about from time to time. And it appeared that a young fellow who lived with his parents two or three doors away had become engaged to a rather pretty nurse who was studying at one of the London hospitals. Geoff's brother Watty got hold of the story first, and retailed it as a good joke. Mrs. Lincoln chimed in that it was much too serious a matter to joke about. Dr. Lincoln characterized

the young couple as a pair of silly children who ought to be locked up in separate nurseries until they had learned sense.

All this made his own case increasingly difficult. Like all young men, he had a horror of being laughed at. And if the whole neighborhood was laughing at Billy Smith and commiserating his parents, what would happen when his own case became known?

If his father got angry and Watty became supercilious, he would have no one to whom to turn for comfort. Perhaps, under all circumstances, he had better let his family discover the secret of his engagement by slow degrees.

After a week of idleness at home he went to the Temple to work up his law. There was no time to be wasted. He was anxious to get through his exams. as soon as possible. The sooner he was called the sooner would come the chance of earning his own bread.

During the first week or two he missed Eve terribly. He had got so completely into the habit of walking across to Rose Villa and feasting his eyes on her fair face that when he could no longer do so he felt intensely miserable. It was a great satisfaction to him that she had become so necessary to his peace of mind. It seemed proof, and the best possible proof, that he had not made any great mistake after all in proposing to her.

But when two or three weeks had

passed away and he began to accommodate himself to his new surroundings, the sense of loss gradually wore away; he ceased to miss her, ceased to long for her company, and was quite content to receive a letter from her every now and then, and was not troubled at all if she missed a post or two. Also, he found answering her letters something of a task. There was so little to write about. Every day seemed a replica of the day that had preceded it. If he had been violently in love he could have gone on repeating the same story with variations *ad infinitum*; but as he was not violently in love he had to fall back on news, and news after awhile became exceedingly scarce.

It was not until late in August that his engagement became known to the family. In London Eve's letters were rarely sent to his home address, but while they were away on their holidays in a small village on the north coast of Devon all the letters came by the same post and to the same address. Every morning, Dr. Lincoln would go through the pile and pass on the letters to the different members to whom they were addressed. Every other morning, with almost the regularity of clockwork, came a letter for Geoff, always in the same handwriting and bearing the Oxford postmark.

He spoke to his wife about it. She had had her suspicions for more than a fort-

night. Indeed, she had been worrying herself for nearly a month.

"It's without doubt a woman's hand-writing," he remarked meditatively.

"I do hope he's not got entangled with a girl," she said plaintively.

"So do I, most sincerely."

"Girls nowadays are so forward and cunning."

"Not more so than they have always been."

"Oh, yes, Tom, there's no comparison. Why, when I was a girl——"

"When you were a girl, mother," he interrupted with a laugh, "girls were girls and boys were boys."

"Oh, yes, but the behaviour——"

"Let's not discuss that," he said, in the same jocular tone. "The question is, shall we say anything to Geoff?"

"I'm surprised he has not taken you into his confidence. You've been such a companion to your boys."

"Perhaps there's nothing to be confidential about. Let us hope so, at any rate."

Later in the day the doctor intercepted Geoff as he was walking on the cliffs alone. He was not a man who believed in beating about the bush. If there was anything unpleasant to be known he would rather know it at once.

"Dreaming, Geoff?" he questioned in a jocular tone.

"I was enjoying the sea-breeze."

"Find it dull here?"

"Not a bit. It's a delightful change from London."

"Rather be in Oxford, I expect?"

Geoff looked up sharply. There was something in his father's tone that arrested attention. There was a smile, too, lurking round the corners of his mouth.

"Why do you think I would rather be in Oxford?" he questioned.

"You have friends there. Evidently one in particular. Is she very nice?"

"About whom are you talking?"

"The lady who writes to you every other day with such amazing regularity. Not engaged to her, I hope?"

"I hope to marry her when I am in a position to do so."

Dr. Lincoln stopped short in his walk and faced his son. "I'm sorry. You're much too young, and it's a pity to be handicapped so early in the race."

"I don't know why you should speak of it as a handicap. Why should it not be a help and an incentive?"

"In your position, Geoff, it is not well to have one's attention divided. However, I suppose that can't be helped now, but you need not have kept it so dark."

"You all made such fun of Billy Smith that I did not care to become the laughing stock of the family."

"Won't you tell me all about it, Geoff?" he questioned at length, and there was a note of pathos in his voice that was by no means usual.

Geoff began to talk in a low voice and with eyes averted. He was glad to get the secret off his mind. He admitted that perhaps in his courting he had been somewhat hasty and impetuous, but there was a reason for that. He said nothing of Bart Gordon's interest in the matter. It was just David Wiggs. He had plenty of money, a suave tongue, and unflinching pertinacity. He had got round the old professor and was gradually wearing down Eve's resistance. If he (Geoff) had not come along he would have married her by this time, and Eve would have been made miserable for life.

"And would you have proposed to her, Geoff, if there had been no David Wiggs on the prowl?"

"Perhaps not, father. Or, at any rate, not so soon. But one could not stand by and see that boulder walking off with the prettiest girl in Oxford."

"I am glad to hear she has been well brought up and is of good family. She must visit us when we get back."

"I'm sure you'll like her, father. She's a girl in a thousand, and she's quite willing to wait any length of time."

CHAPTER VI

IN LONDON

EVE came up to London in September. The weather was glorious, with only the faintest suggestion of autumn in the air. Geoff met her at Paddington with his father's motor.

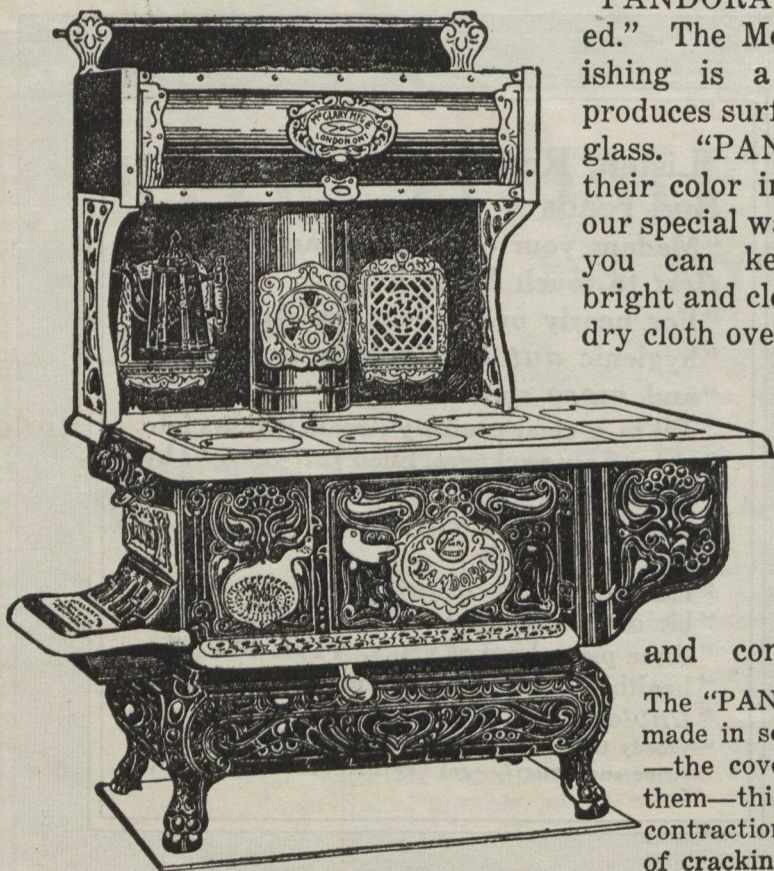
He scarcely recognized her for a moment. She wore a big hat that threw her face completely in shadow.

"Oh, Geoff," was all she could say, and he took both her hands in his and looked into her face. He wanted to kiss her then and there, but refrained—there were too many people about. He did not like her hat—he decided that on the spot—but no headgear could utterly spoil her loveliness; her smile was as sweet as ever, and her eyes shone with unusual brightness.

"It was just lovely of your mother to invite me to visit her," Eve said at length.

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