

"Very well. Then you may expect me at the Laurels within a week, for I am anxious to see your father in person, that we may settle our wedding day, Susie."

"Yes," she murmured, hesitating; "but—but, Julian—you know, of course, that—that my home is very different from this one. You will not be surprised?"

"Of course not, love," I answered as my thoughts reverted to the palatial country residence where I imagined my Susie dwelt. Inwardly I felt thankful that, although I was poor, I could hold up my head in the noblest mansion.

"Stenie," I said that evening to my friend, "I have won the heiress; congratulate me."

"Most heartily. I knew you would win, old fellow, if you made up your mind to do so," he returned.

Yet somehow I fancied that the glad ring was wanting in my friend's voice, and that his kind blue eyes were full of a new sadness.

CHAPTER IV.

Never shall I forget the glad beauty of the June morning when I alighted from the train and stood for the first time in the little station of Risdale. The station itself was a perfect wilderness of roses; they twined up the pillars and over the railings and along the beds, crimson roses, pink roses, and white roses of every size and shape.

"How far is it to the Laurels?" I inquired of the station-master.

"About five miles," was the reply.

"Can I have a trap?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not; they are all out. But Carson the miller is going that way, and he would give you a lift in his cart, I daresay, if you like. It would be better than walking."

The idea of making my appearance at the Laurels in a miller's cart was not pleasant. I regretted that I had not sent notice to Susie of the exact day of my intended visit, that she might have sent her father's carriage to convey me. I accepted the offer of a "lift," internally resolving to be put down at a respectable distance from the Laurels, and to make my appearance there on foot.

Carson the miller was a very jolly fellow. As he seemed to possess a good stock of information concerning the inhabitants of Risdale, I ventured to allure him to speak of the Crallans, whereupon Carson's countenance beamed as he launched into a glowing account of Miss Susie.

"The best young lady in the country-side, sir, let alone the prettiest. I well remember, when my old woman was down with rheumatism last winter, how Miss Susie used to come through all the snow to our house every morning with some little hot thing or other for her. God bless her!" said the miller, and although of course I did not really love Susie, she being, as I have said before, so unlike my ideal, I felt a thrill of pleasure on hearing this.

I intended to keep a sharp look-out, and, at the first glimpse of a mansion, to inquire if it were the Laurels, and, if so, to request to be set down while yet some way off.

Great therefore was my amazement when, after jogging along for an hour or more, my charioteer suddenly stopped near a picturesque stile.

"There, sir; if you just cross the stile, and follow that path through the wheat, you'll come out close by the Laurels," said Carson, pointing with his whip in the direction indicated.

I gave him half-a-crown, though I could ill afford it in my present circumstances, and, vaulting over the stile, was soon blithely following the path, whistling "Gin a body" for very lightness of heart.

After a time I came upon a farm snugly reposing in a slight hollow, a perfect *beau idéal* of an English farm, from the low red-tiled house and out-buildings to the great duck-pond and the dappled cows peacefully grazing in the meadow beyond.

As the path diverged here, I thought it expedient to inquire my way. I therefore strolled through the farm-yard in the hope of meeting some one.

Presently, hearing the sound of laughter near me, I walked round a hay-stack, and found my self in a poultry-yard, where, surrounded by a flock of ducks and chickens, stood Susie.

Her dimpled arms, bare to the elbow, were plunged in a bowl of oatmeal dough. She wore a crumpled, well-worn holland dress, and a sun-hat on her curly hair. A troop of boys of all ages, in holland blouses, were gathered about her. I was so bewildered and astonished that I forgot to note the beauty of the picture before me. Later the memory of it haunted me.

Susie looked up and saw me. How suddenly the red deepened in her face! How the dimple increased in her cheek! The next moment she had sprung towards me, the mealy arms were clasped round my neck—I had put on my black velvet coat—and Susie's shy eyes were hidden on my breast.

"Susie, what in the world are you doing here?" I stammered out, with a vague misgiving filling my heart.

"Here! Why, where else should I be, Julian? Oh, how glad I am to see you! But why did you not write? I would not have let you catch me in this costume—feeding chickens too!" said Susie, with a merry laugh. "But come in and see papa—I am sure you are tired. No, boys, I can't help you to fix the trout-lines now. Mix the rest of the meal for the little black ducks, and don't tease me, dears."

With this command, issued to the clamorous

wearers of the blouses, Susie led me from the poultry-yard, and through divers paths to the house door, where in the cool, paved porch stood an elderly man in a light gray suit. He was a gentleman every inch I confessed it later, but at that moment my thoughts were in such a chaos that I hardly knew what I did, I remember his fond look at Susie's blushing face as she presented me to her father.

He shook hands with me, and invited me indoors, leading the way to a large, low-ceiled room, bright with vases of fresh flowers, and made pleasant by a delicious outward prospect of clover fields and waving wheat, seen through a wide sunny window. A young girl was seated in the window, who Susie introduced to me as her sister Annis. Then luncheon was served by a rosy maid-servant, assisted by Susie. It consisted of fresh cheese and brown bread, yellow butter, cold bacon, home-brewed ale, and raspberry tart, with cream.

How I should have enjoyed that fresh Arcadian meal at any other time! As it was, I sat and partook of it as one in a dream. I think my manner must have been odd and restrained, for by degrees Susie's lively talk ceased, and a grave silence succeeded, while the gladness faded from her eyes and lips.

It was a relief when the meal was ended. Mr. Crallan made a slight excuse, and, taking his straw hat from a side-table, left us. Soon afterwards Susie followed him, and I was left with Annis. I cast a glance at the young lady's face—it was decidedly stormy. She kept her eyes upon a crochet, and to my general remarks she vouchsafed only monosyllables. The situation was most painful, and I was wretched. Out in the clover-field I could see those dreadful boys in holland blouses, chasing butterflies. Presently Susie came back. She had replaced the holland dress by a sober brown one with white ruffles. Susie in any dress was charming, but I missed the dainty muslins and laces I had so often seen her wear.

"Shall we stroll through the orchard, Julian?" she said, nervously.

Anything was better than this. I rose and accompanied her through a long cool passage terminating in a glass door. Through the door Susie led me, and we found ourselves in a fruit-garden. Susie had a basket in her hand, and she began to gather the raspberries that hung like rubies on the bushes. She offered me the raspberries and I hate them mechanically.

"Have you lived here long, Susie?" I asked, in a voice that I tried to make light.

Susie was stooping over a gooseberry-bush. She lifted her face, and, in a sad and nervous tone of voice, said:

"Since papa speculated and lost all his money six years ago. We were not poor till then. Papa had nothing left but this farm, so we came to live here soon after mamma died—that was when my youngest brother was born, and I have kept house for papa ever since."

The word "poor" was a nightmare upon me.

Susie then went on picking and scratching her fingers among the gooseberry bushes. Presently her dress caught in the thorns and got torn.

"Never mind," I said, for I felt I must say something; "it is not so pretty a dress as your pink-and-white cambric, Susie."

I had admired Susie in that dress one day at Brighton. Susie laughed faintly.

"That was one of Elgitha's, Julian," she said; "Elgitha lent me many of her pretty dresses while I was with them, for she knew I could not afford to buy such."

I felt a sudden shock. Slowly the conviction forced itself upon me that there was some hideous mistake. I think Susie saw something odd in my manner, for she filled her basket with nervous haste and we went indoors.

Two days passed in this way—two of the most miserable days I ever spent. My thoughts were in such a whirl that I could decide upon no definite plan of action. Not an hour went by that I did not ask myself what I ought to do, yet no answer could I find. In all honor I felt that I ought to marry Susie, though she was as poor as I, for I had wooed her and won her innocent heart, and it would be a coward's act to cast her off because I had made a mistake in supposing her rich. How could I say to Susie, "I wanted to marry you a week ago because I imagined you were an heiress; but, now I have found out that you are poor, I no longer wish you for my wife"? And on the other hand, if I fulfilled my engagement, how on earth could I maintain a wife on a pound a week? I had no hope of procuring a higher situation, for I was unaccustomed to work of any sort, and I knew the difficulty men of great experience and ability have in earning even moderate incomes. All this added to my miserable conflict of mind.

Susie's brothers were a great affliction to me: they almost goaded me to madness by pressing requests for me to join in their revels. They soiled my hitherto spotless garments with their sticky fingers; they were insanely fond of the seals on my watchguard—in fact I trembled for the fate of those seals. Then they insisted upon my devouring large quantities of sorrel and other uncooked vegetable fibre, and upon my accompanying him them through bush and bramble in search of bird's nests, though I was sorry company for the blithe, happy young lads. Added to this, Susie's cheeks had grown pale, and her dimples were never visible now, for the smile came so seldom to her lips. Mr. Crallan's cordial manner had changed to one of distant politeness, while Annis looked stormy whenever I appeared. I grew weary trying to dis-

cover a means of escape from this wretched state, when something happened that put an end to it all.

I was seated by the open window of the pretty chamber I occupied. I felt too wretched even to smoke. Presently I heard Annis's voice speaking sharply to some one; she was in the garden, just below my window, which was well hidden by creeping rose-bushes. I could hear her say distinctly, in an angry tone:

"You ought to have told him everything."
The answer was in Susie's voice, but so low that I could not catch it. Annis went on in the same cross tone:

"Why did you bring your fine-gentleman lover to despise us all? I have no doubt he thought you were a grand lady, or something more than a farmer's daughter. He does despise us, I know; but he's not half good enough for you, for all his fine ways, and he shall never take you away from us if I can prevent it. Papa and I and the boys love you too well, darling. Oh, do send him away and let us be happy as we were before he came! I hate him cordially."

I thought I heard a sob just then, but I made no movement. My brow was burning; I knew that Annis spoke the truth, and I hated myself as she hated me—cordially.

That evening Susie came into the pleasant parlor where I sat alone. Her manner was no longer childlike or shy, but grave and self-possessed, as if her seventeen years had been seven-and-twenty.

"Julian," she said, gravely, "I think perhaps our engagement was a little mistake, and—I want you to give me back my freedom."

I was silent; my heart was full of misery. Susie went on, her face getting whiter.

"I am not blaming you, dear, but I think you made a little mistake in fancying you loved me. Perhaps there is some one else"—Susie spoke lower. "I have thought things over, and I know papa could ill spare me till Annis gets a year or two older, so—so, Julian—" She finished her sentence by laying on the table near me the little ring I had given her.

"But your father?" I began.

"Oh," she said, speaking with great difficulty, "I will explain to papa after—after you are gone—I will tell him I have changed my mind. Meanwhile things can be all the same, and we are still friends, are we not, Julian?"

Still friends! Was I mad that I sat still and did not take her in my arms and tell her that I loved her as never woman was loved before—that she, only she, was queen of my heart—that, if she counted me worthy of her priceless love I was willing to fight against the world and poverty and want for her sake as long as I had life? I did not say it. I let her go—I let her go, though I knew her tender heart was breaking for love of me! Blind fool that I was, to have such a jewel laid at my worthless feet—a prize that should have been gathered and treasured in the inmost chambers of my heart—and yet risk the loss of it for ever!

I packed my portmanteau that night, and, as I did it, I thanked Heaven over and over that Susie did not suspect the real reason of my cowardly act in swerving from my allegiance to her. For I was a coward—I blushed for my own base conduct—I hated myself fiercely, bitterly.

The next morning I made some trifling excuse to Mr. Crallan about business requiring my immediate attention in town. I felt the conscious blood dye my despicable brow as I spoke. Susie offered to drive me to the station—I think she did it to deceive the rest concerning the real state of affairs—and soon we started in a shabby chaise drawn by a shaggy old white pony. Susie talked, but it was with a painful effort. I could not help observing how respectfully all the poor people we passed on the road saluted Susie—Carson the miller especially, who bared his floury head in quite a courtly manner to us both.

The train was due when we arrived at the station, so there was no time for more than a brief hand-shake. As I reached the platform I turned suddenly and looked back. Susie was still sitting in the old chaise, the pony standing still. Old as the vehicle was, she sat as a queen might have sat on a throne. There was such unconscious dignity in the slight figure, clothed in a lilac calico dress and cape; there was such a charm of purity on the fair brow, the fairness of which contrasted so forcibly with the black velvet brim of her hat; but there was such agony in the dark eyes that were watching me depart that their glance stabbed me to the heart.

Then suddenly she shook the reins and drove away.

CHAPTER V.

Stenie was sitting at the table of our apartment eating his solitary supper when I opened the door. He started up, and we two stood face to face.

"You are come back!" he said, earnestly, almost fiercely.

"Stenie," I whispered, hoarsely, "it was a mistake."

"Yes," he agreed; "I found that out yesterday. What have you done?"

There was still that eagerness in his eyes and voice.

"Nothing. She has released me," I faltered. "But does she love you?" he questioned, laying his hand on my arm.

I saw that his lips and cheeks were white.

"Yes, yes, she loves me," I whispered.

"And you?" panted Stenie. I made no answer. The grasp of the hand on my arm grew tighter as he waited for my words.

"No, no," cried Stenie, passionately, "you do not—you cannot love her, or you never could have left her thus! If you loved her as I love her, you would marry her if you had to beg bread for her!"

He ceased suddenly, crossed his arms on the table, and buried his face in them, while a deep moan escaped from his lips.

I stood lost in amazement. For the moment I forgot all else at the sight of Stenie's grief.

A few minutes passed, and Stenie rose to his feet—himself again.

"Forgive me, Julian—forgive what I have said," he pleaded, sadly.

I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"My poor Stenie!"

"Don't do that, old fellow. I'm not a girl that I can't bear a little pain. I shall be all right after a time."

He spoke bravely. Oh, my friend, how brave a heart was yours—how strong, how true, how loyal you ever were!

I went to uncle Bubb. I told him I would accept his kind offer of a seat in his office with a salary of a pound a week. Thus I began to earn my daily bread.

I had learned by degrees, from Stenie, that Phinny Kelly had paid him a visit the day before my return from Risdale. In the course of conversation Stenie had become aware of the fact that it was Susie's cousin Elgitha who was an heiress on her mother's side. Stenie had seen our mistake directly—a mistake that would never have occurred had Kelly not been called away during the first hour of our arrival in Brighton. But it was too late now to mend the matter, especially as news soon after reached us of Phinny's engagement to the real heiress.

Stenie and I had taken a cheap lodging in the city; for it was principally my means which had sustained the expense of the grander ones. Stenie was poor. But we made up our minds to be together still.

A month passed away, and I was getting used to the bitterness of my lot. All that month, as I bent over my desk in that dingy, hot office, or walked through the streets of the city at morning or evening, or sat with Stenie in our shabby parlor after my day's labor was over, I carried in my aching heart the memory of the last mournful glance I had seen in Susie's dark eyes, and the memory filled all my heart and all my life with such anguish that I should have gladly died.

August began. One morning uncle Bubb met as I entered the office and shook me cordially by the hand.

"Good morning, Julian," he said—"glad to see you looking so strong and well."

Well! Was uncle Bubb mad, or did he mean to insult me? Did not my looking-glass daily admonish me that my eyes were more sunken, that my complexion was more hideously sallow?

"Yes," continued uncle Bubb, blithely; "work has made a man of you, and taken all the tomfoolery out of you, my boy. You're a far better specimen of mankind than the young dandy who came to ask for a situation at my office two months ago. But, to proceed to business, I intend after next week to treble your salary. No thanks; you're industrious and persevering—two qualities I admire and respect in a young fellow. Good morning. Warm day, isn't it?"

My uncle was some distance down the street before I could say a word. I was heartily glad of the increase of salary. In the evening I told Stenie; he too was quietly glad for my sake. Stenie's joy, I noticed, was never noisy now.

As we sat together in the twilight I fell into a train of thought. Out of my thoughts I presently spoke.

"It's a bad thing to play with edged tools, isn't it, Stenie?"

"Yes," said Stenie, turning his face to me with a grave smile. "Were you wounded too, old fellow?"

I made no answer. Stenie rose and stood behind my chair, laying a hand on each of my shoulders.

"If it is so," said Stenie, slowly and gravely, "don't be afraid of hurting me by confessing it; for, Julian, of all things you could tell me, that most would make me glad."

Oh, my friend, my noble friend, how brave, how true you were!

"I did not know it then," I answered, slowly, "but, Stenie, to be frank with you, it is so."

"Then," said Stenie, still standing at the back of my chair, "go and tell her so—tell her the truth and ask her to forgive you; let there be no mistakes or misunderstandings to make your lives bitter. And from my heart, Julian, I wish you God-speed."

CHAPTER VI, AND LAST.

How shall I tell of the meeting when I stood once more with Susie among the wheat—not now green and waving, but lying in golden sheaves in the fields? How shall I write the words with which she answered me when I told her the story of my folly and my cowardice, of my bitter pain and deep regret since, of the love stronger than death, and the passionate longing that had filled my heart and my life.