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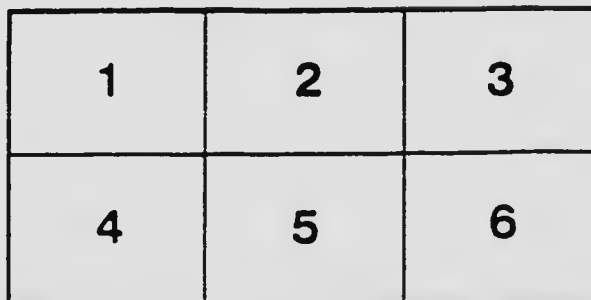
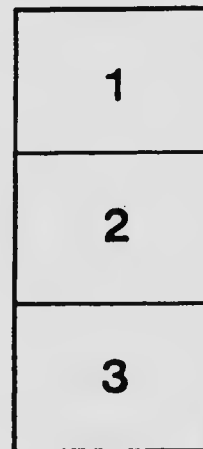
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SHARROW

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

—

“Kingsmead”

“The Lordship of Love”

“The Green Patch”

SHARROW

BY
BARONESS VON HUTTEN



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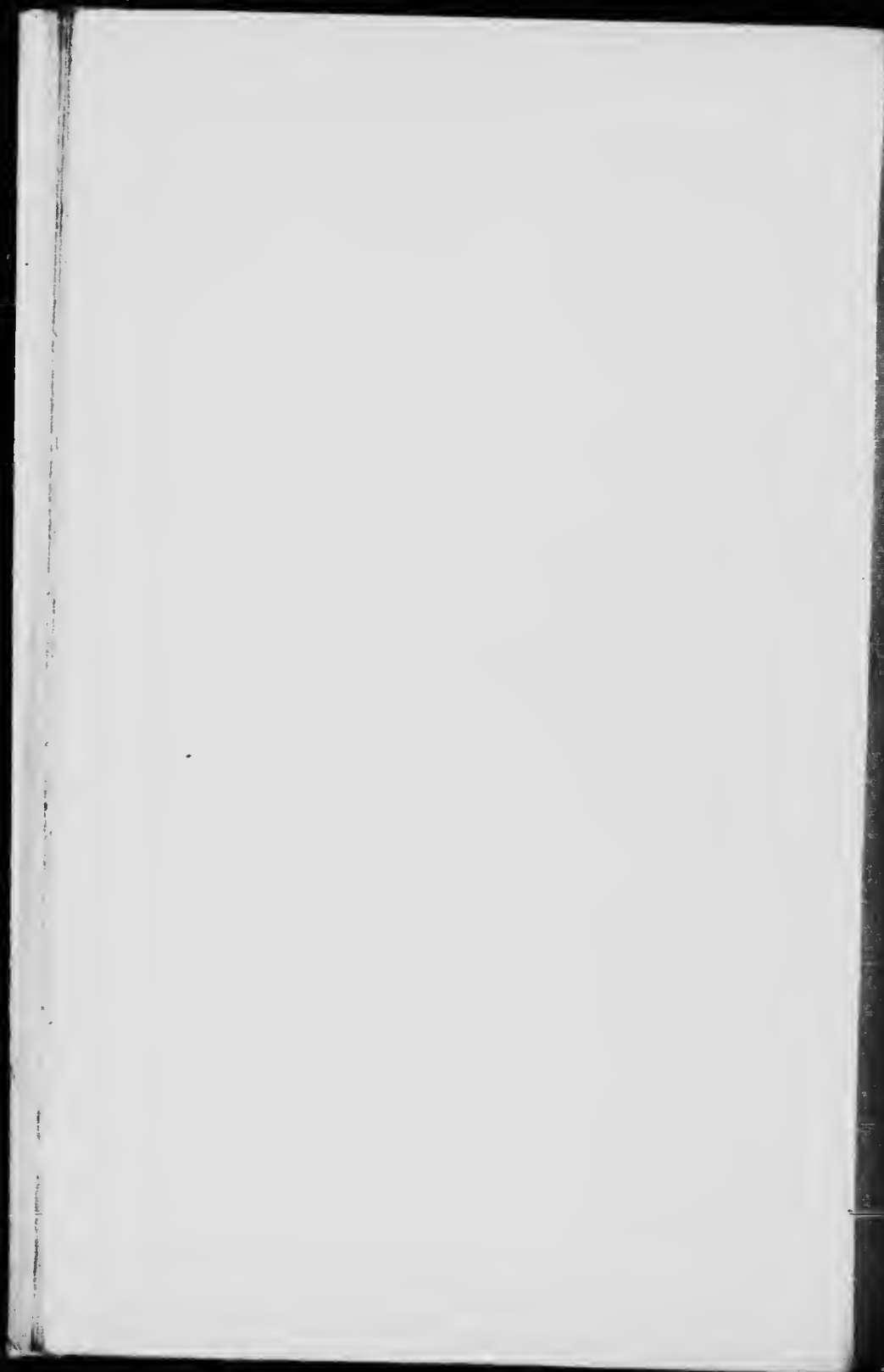
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TO MY FRIEND
ALEXANDER P. WATT, ESQ.
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK.
IN MEMORY OF MUCH KINDNESS.

Pollenza, Mallorca,

December, 1911.



SHARROW

PART I

CHAPTER I

OF course, the staircase, with its broad, polished balustrade, and the dizzy curves of its immense length, was a thing of mystery and glory to Sandy.

To climb up to the balustrade, at the very top of the house, just outside Cook's room (otherwise known as the Witch's Cave), adjust yourself nicely on your stomach, paw your person into at first slow, then ever-increasing motion, and, disregarding the pressure of buttons on sensitive parts, fly giddily down, flight after flight, breathless, terrified, full to the brim of thrill and splendour—this was life.

Otherwise, 27 Guelph Square was a dull house.

It was possessed, Sandy knew, of several noteworthy features, such as Adam's ceilings, and a niche painted by Angelica Kaufmann; but features never interest children: it is the expression, whether of people or of horses, that counts with them.

And the expression of Twenty-seven was one of resigned, middle-aged, fat dullness.

It was even conceivable to the red-headed little boy's imagination that in its youth the house had been slimmer and taller; that advancing age had spread it, as it had spread Aunt Martha Timlow.

It also had a strange smell that never changed. Grown people had been known, on discreet approach to the subject, to deny the smell; but grown people are proverbially short-nosed. Sandy, always given to mental classification, decided that Twenty-seven smelt of damp, and boiled vegetables, and three o'clock in the afternoon—the loneliest hour in the twenty-four.

SHARROW

The rooms were high and shabbily furnished; they were also untidy; and only comfortable rooms can live down untidiness.

There were tall wooden cabinets filled with china; there was a large china monster with a venomous-looking red tongue, and unnatural purple and red blotches all over him, to say nothing of his anatomy being perforated by gilt-edged holes.

This was, Sandy knew, A Treasure.

There were portraits on the wall, and it was depressing to realize that one might grow to resemble one of them. Most of the men had red hair; and no amount of imagination could delude the boy into believing that his own stiff locks were anything but of the reddest.

Of course, if one grew to look like the old horror over the drawing-room mantelpiece, suicide would be one's only resource. On the other hand, the one known as "your great Uncle Frederic" was not quite so bad.

Sandy was once disciplined with a hairbrush on a very sensitive place, for praying that if he must look like any of the Sharrows, God would be so polite as to choose Uncle Frederic as his prototype.

It was Bean who "disciplined" him.

Bean was his nurse, as she had been his father's, and, Sandy suspected, his grandfather's too. She was immortally old and as cross as *le diable*.

At Twenty-seven, it was not considered courteous to use bad language in English.

Cook, on the other hand, while *une grue*, was a kind soul, who made very small tarts in a heart-shaped tin, and smuggled them upstairs in her apron pocket; wherein also dwelt her keys, her handkerchief, some small change, and a leaky bottle of oil of eucalyptus. Sandy was not quite eight when he found that he had for some time recognized the fact that the two little boys in velveteen who frequently haunted the kitchen were, though bone of Cook's bone and flesh of her flesh, none the less non-existent in the eyes of the law.

He also knew, though the source and hour of his enlightenment he could never recall, that Lionel, the elder boy, was the son of a gentleman, (in the shop-walking line), and Milton the cheerful result of a fleeting fancy, on Cook's part, for a policeman.

It was, Sandy thought, extremely interesting and diver-

sifying for brothers to have different fathers, and never to have seen either of them.

Besides Bean and Cook, there lived at Twenty-seven Madame's maid-parlourmaid, who had no fixed personality because she departed every few weeks to be replaced by a new one, and Adolphe, *le valet de Monsieur*.

Monsieur et Madame themselves could hardly be called real inhabitants, for they were constantly away, either together, or, as happened once in a while, separately.

Sandy himself was, of course, the kernel of the universe, and he never went away.

He and Bean lived in a large room at the back of the house, a room whose windows overlooked the small backyard haunted by cats and sparrows.

Sandy's bed had eight legs—four short ones on which it stood, and four long, curly ones stretched ceilingwards. As if on the feet belonging to these latter legs, was spread a taut canopy of faded green damask.

This bed was A Treasure, and more than once the little boy had been roused from his sleep to behold *Monsieur et Madame* displaying his resting-place to a guest.

The buffet in the dining-room was, however, the greatest Treasure of all. It was early Georgian, and something in Sandy's soul ached at its aspect. It was to him painfully ugly. It reminded him of funerals and other heavy horrors.

Who can describe the current of a child's life ?

The days that seem hours, the hours that surely must be days ; the rain that is never going to cease ; the sunshine that has always been and shall always be.

Sandy loved the autumn and winter, because then the lamps were lit early, the fires kept him company, and Cook liked his presence in the kitchen.

Spring and summer, on the other hand, made him lonely. From two to four, any day in the year, was his worst time ; but on warm days it was a time of inexpressible depression. He always seemed to have a headache between these two hours, even when he knew he hadn't.

Cook understood this phenomenon better than anyone else, and comforted him with apples and stayed him with flagons of sweetest milk or lemonade, in the kindness of her disreputable heart.

Kittens multiplied amazingly at Twenty-seven. Sandy

disliked them with intensity, but Cook forced from him a certain grudging kindness.

"You 'adn't ought to pull their tails," she explained, her shiny red face, with its pretty dimples, serious with her educational purpose. "'o made 'em?"

"God," returned Sandy promptly, with an air of rendering unto Cæsar. "Of course he did."

"Well, then!"

This was Cook's expression of convinced triumph. She said "Well, then" to nearly everything. Cook knew she was *une grue*; Sandy told her so once when they quarrelled.

But either she didn't know what the word meant, or she didn't at all mind being one.

Adolphe despised Cook, and had no converse with her, so he certainly did not elucidate; but on future occasions Cook was known to apply the word—transmuted in the crucible of her accent into "groo"—to other people, notably to Monsieur, whom she hated.

"You mustn't say Monsieur is a grue," Sandy told her one day, as he sat by the stove eating some warmed-up veal gravy and a lump of bread. "He's my father."

And Cook, a prey to her own facile emotions, wept, and pressing his face to her ample bosom, impaled his nose on a pin.

Sandy knew that Cook was kept on in spite of her gruisms, because she was the one woman in Great Britain who could make good sauces.

And he knew that although 'E was a groo, and she another as bad, Cook stayed on for love of the poor child—the poor child being himself.

But he never mentioned Monsieur's opinion to Cook, nor Cook's to Monsieur.

The real peculiarity of the house was that while no two of its inhabitants liked each other, they stuck to each other for reasons of convenience. And this Sandy knew.

Even his father and mother quarrelled; his father and Cook quarrelled continually; Cook and Bean quarrelled; Bean and Adolphe quarrelled; and yet the maid-parlourmaid's was the only position occupied by a different individual every few weeks. The others stayed. And, of course, he—Sandy stayed.

How Aunt Martha Timlow came to be Sandy's aunt Sandy did not know. She was unmarried, so to be his aunt she should have been either a Sharrow or a Vautrec. And far from being a Vautrec, she was not even French.

Periodically she appeared and stayed for what might have been weeks, or months.

She filled all her time giving instructions to Sandy about God. Sandy heard about God at breakfast, (Monsieur and Madame apparently lived without breakfast, but Aunt Martha lined her great person every morning with layers and layers of buttered toast soaked in tea); all the morning he was instructed as to the nature of God's malice; the afternoons were given over to instances of God's fiendish ingenuity in the matter of vengeance; and at tea God's delight in the destruction of His creatures was depicted with all Aunt Martha's skill.

But by supper-time Sandy's incipient fears were extinguished by sheer boredom.

"You must love God," Aunt Martha once said, far back in the years; so far back that her disciple was eating bread and milk out of a bowl with a spoon.

Sandy looked at her, his small three-cornered eyes, with their thick, dusty-looking lashes, full of bored politeness.

"Why?" he asked.

Then when Aunt Martha went away, God, it seemed, went with her; for no one in the house ever mentioned Him, though Adolphe frequently referred to an apparently secondary Deity of cheerful habits, called *le bon Dieu*.

For years Sandy thought that God and *le bon Dieu* were quite different persons.

CHAPTER II

MADAME was standing before her cheval glass, and her blue satin frock was being laced up the back by the maid-parlourmaid.

Sandy sat on the floor, his legs crossed under him. It was the autumn of 1874, and he was thirteen years old.

He was a big-boned, ungainly child, as all the Sharrow children are, however far removed from the burly parent stem. His violently red hair was already beginning to tone down to that duller tawnniness characteristic of the family, and his strangely-set grey eyes, deep under the bumpy, hairless brows, were the noticeable feature of his white face.

"*Dieu, que tu es laid,*" Madame observed, glancing at him as she polished her nails on the palms of her hands.

Sandy grinned at her.

Not his the sensitiveness of many ugly children. Very logically he blamed those Old Horrors on the drawing-room walls for his lack of beauty.

"If you had been a girl," his mother went on, smiling at him, "I should have had to—overlay you. While you were very little, I mean. It matters less in a boy."

Sandy liked her frock with its soft full skirt, over which an absurd little transparent overskirt was draped. He liked the round tucker with its narrow black velvet draw-string.

She had the smoothest of ivory-coloured arms and neck, and her face, with its curious purple mark on one cheek, fascinated him, as it always did.

"Give me the rouge, Henderson?"

This, of course, he loved. The round box, the hare's-foot, the slow disappearance of the ugly mark under its application, the lovely pink glow on Madame's white skin!

She was quite justified in rouging, even her enemies admitted, poor soul! the birthmark was so very disfiguring. Once, on being asked what the birthmark was, his mother

had told her child that he, as a baby, had bitten her face. She had never thought of her little joke again, but he had never forgotten it. He was deeply sorry to have injured Madame.

"There—that's enough!"

"Yes, Madame," returned Henderson primly. She disapproved of rouge, and liked her mistress to know that she did.

"Is Monsieur ready?"

"I'll go and see," announced Sandy eagerly, scrambling to his feet.

Both his father and mother had been away for several weeks, and only just got back; it was delightful to have them again.

Monsieur, who had finished dressing, was sitting at the piano in his bedroom when Sandy entered. The situation of the piano was not stranger than many other things at Twenty-seven.

Monsieur played, Madame did not, and hated music; so what, to either of them, more natural than the presence of the little Broadwood opposite Monsieur's bed?

"'Allo, son!"

"*Bon soir, Monsieur,*" returned Sandy courteously. "Madame is ready—if you are?"

Sydney Sharrow, a red-headed man very like his son, smiled. He had a delightful smile that showed many white teeth. He loved his son in his own way, and the child's gift of unconsciously amusing him was very endearing.

"Are you always going to call us Monsieur and Madame?" he asked.

Sandy's eyes fixed themselves on his father's.

"Shall I—not?"

"Well, I don't know. It was charming when you were a little kid; but you are, let me see, eleven now, aren't you?"

"Thirteen."

"Bless my soul! so you are. And I told the old chief yesterday that you were eleven. Well—so much the better."

"How?" Sandy inquired.

"Oh, nothing. Or, yes, I might as well tell you; you are invited to Sharrow to visit your great-uncle and the rest of the tribe. You are to go next week."

Sandy did not answer. He had never been away from

home in his life, except for a fortnight at Eastbourne, where Bean had a sister, every August. He felt suddenly curiously rooted in Guelph Place; he felt as a mandrake might be supposed to feel before the approaching hand of the uprooter has as yet touched it.

"Well—aren't you glad?" asked his father, surprised by his silence.

"Yes—no—I don't know. Is it—a nice place?"

Sydney Sharrow laughed aloud.

"Is it a nice place? Sharrow? My dear son, surely you are the first creature with a drop of Sharrow blood to ask that question. It's—*it's Sharrow.*"

"Is it pretty?"

His father struck two chords on the piano, his bushy blonde brows drawn together. Then he rose.

"I have neglected my duty," he said, taking the boy by the shoulder. "This ought never to have happened. Come."

They went to the drawing-room, where Adolphe had already lit the big oil-lamps. In a corner behind the door hung a small water-colour drawing of a vast old house among trees.

"That's—it."

Sandy felt that he was, in the French sense, assisting at a scene; his father's voice was strange.

"Have you seen this picture before?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Then Sandy looked up at him. "I have often seen the picture," he said slowly; "but—I never thought it was a real place."

"Oh! What did you think it was?"

"I thought—it was—just a picture. An imaginary place."

Sydney Sharrow burst out into a rough laugh.

"And so it is—for me, and for you. As imaginary a place as if the painter had made it up out of his own head." He paused, his hand pressing heavily on the boy's shoulder.

"And all," he went on, "because of—"

"Because of what?"

"Never you mind, my dear. The place is nothing to us, but you'll have a good month there with your cousins. And the old chief shall see that what I told him is true

SHARROW

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"Ah! here's Antoinette——" He broke off and turned to the doorway, in which stood his beautiful wife wrapped in a delicate white crêpe shawl.

His manner towards her, when they were not quarrelling, was always admirable. And Sandy admired. When he had kissed his mother good-bye, he turned to his father; something had happened between them; he did not know what it was, but it bore fruit in his next words.

"Good-night—Father."

"*Tiens!*" cried his mother gaily; "how you are grown-up! Are we no longer to be *Monsieur et Madame?*"

"Hush, my love," her husband said, offering her his arm, "he is quite right. It is right that he should call me Father."

CHAPTER III

IT was raining hard as the carriage, drawn by immense bay horses, turned into the avenue.

Sandy leaned out of the open window and gazed into the vast darkness. It was not yet five o'clock, but the day was of the blackest and under the old trees it seemed like night.

The avenue was broad and very smooth, the carriage proceeded as noiselessly as carriages could before the days of rubber tyres.

Sandy's red head bobbed from window to window as he tried to see his surroundings.

Since the evening when he had been shown the picture his father had not mentioned Sharrow to him, yet somehow he seemed to have learnt in the interim much about it. A seed had apparently been sown in his brain, and in the silence it had grown.

He was coming not only to a house, to a place, but to a new mental life. He was walking into a new set of feelings, the feelings that made his jolly, careless father's voice so different when he talked of the place.

It was, as his father had said, Sharrow; and young as he was the boy was himself a Sharrow, and, therefore, though he did not know why, the name meant to him many things besides this beautiful old house, the windows of which were beginning to gleam at him through the naked trees.

The carriage skirted a long lake, its lamps giving glimpses of a sedge-grown shore, sped on for five minutes longer, and then stopped.

Not a door, but an ancient iron gate was opened, light streamed out, and Sandy was led by an old servant, under a low cupolaed tower, into the courtyard.

Now there is much charm in an old courtyard, and Sandy was one of those fortunate people whose feelers are always

out, like invisible tentacles, ready to close on things beautiful, and sad, and charming, and to make them part of their own lives.

In the dramatic red light of two torches stuck into iron rings on the walls, Sandy stood and looked round him. The courtyard of Sharrow was henceforth to be a part of his memory, hence of his mind, hence of himself.

The front of the house was said to have been restored after the wars, when Henry the Seventh was King, but the rest of the house, except for some additions invisible from the courtyard, was older, part of it presumably Saxon.

Archæologists differed, as archæologists will, about the different dates, but that did not matter.

The quadrangle, very irregular in character, with windows round and windows square, roofs of various heights and chimneys of several distinct kinds, had yet grown with time, mellowed like a great fruit, into a most perfect whole. Mosses and lichens, soft as whispering voices, lent colour to its old stone; the sun and rain of centuries had blurred the dividing lines till all looked equally old, equally ripe. And opposite the gate where Sandy had come in was the door of the great hall.

The door-frame of mellow stone was immensely high, and rich with carving. In the centre, at the top, stood the Griffin holding the coat-of-arms.

By some freak of the newly-risen wind the light of the nearer torch suddenly flared upwards, drawing with it the eyes of the little boy. He knew the coat-of-arms, for it was on his father's watch, and on various others things; but here it was so large that for the moment it seemed to him the largest thing in the world. He perhaps could not see the words "*Ce que Charreau possède, Charreau garde,*" but he, of course, knew them to be there, and they flashed at him as the red light danced down, leaving them in darkness.

The exterior of the great hall was of small red bricks, faced with warm-coloured stone, and when the servant, who had a cold in his head, sneezed violently, and opened the great door with meaning, Sandy followed him meekly into a beautiful Jacobean hall.

It reached to the roof and was lighted by three large oil lamps. Opposite the door a fire glowed under an immense stone chimney-piece.

Sandy looked up and saw oak rafters and darkness. He looked to his right and his left and saw oak panelled walls empty of all pictures, but hung with curious old bits of armour; he saw four high windows with small panes.

He saw no carpet, but deer-skins; he saw a long black table and several uncomfortable-looking black chairs.

"Aren't there any pictures?" he asked the servant. It was the first word he had spoken.

"No, sir," the man answered; "the pictures are in the picture-gallery."

Then Sandy was led up an absurd little twisted stairway, down a long passage (everything made of wood, no wall-paper anywhere to be seen, and no carpets, which he thought very strange), and then the servant paused, blew his nose on a handkerchief that struck Sandy as extremely large, and knocked at a door.

The old lord sat by the fire in a room which was, unexpectedly, all white, with garlands of carved fruit on the walls and some dark pictures set into the panels.

When the door opened and his young guest came in unattended, as had been arranged, the old man looked at him steadily before he spoke.

Then he laughed. "Another red-head!" he said.

Sandy laughed too. "Yes, sir."

"Well, well, come in. Yes, your father was right. It's a strong type, a very strong type, as you will see when your cousins come in."

"How many are there?" asked Sandy.

"Three. And all of 'em healthy. Your father would have been too clever to ask that."

The old man's fat red face was full of malice. He looked very evil in the firelight. Then, having met Sandy's stare of blank non-comprehension for a full half minute, he smiled and looked like an old bald-headed cherub.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "Sit down."

Sandy obeyed. To him the gentleman opposite was only another Old Horror as ugly as *le diable*, a possible future resemblance to whom was a thing to be prayed against.

"Did your father tell you that when he came here the other day he came for the first time?" pursued the unconscious old horror.

"No."

"Aha! Close-mouthed! Well, we're all that. So I

gather you know nothing whatever about your great-grandfather?"

Sandy nodded. "Oh, yes, I do. We have a portrait of him; he's the ugliest of the lot——"

"I see."

Suddenly Lord Sharrow appeared to tire of the conversation, and rang the bell by the chimney-piece.

The door was immediately opened by a perfectly oiled automaton in the shape of a servant in plain clothes, who was sent for the young gentlemen.

There was a long unbroken silence, and then the young gentlemen came in.

Alexander, aged sixteen; Keith, aged fourteen; and Paul, their cousin as well as Sandy's, aged twelve. Sharrow's in their red-headed ugliness, all of them.

Sandy shook hands with them and answered one or two jerky questions.

Then the old man, whom the other boys addressed as Grandfather, rose.

"Sandy, you come with me," he began; and Sandy, darting forward, cannoned into his eldest cousin. "Ah! I forgot, you are, of course, Sandy too," commented Lord Sharrow.

"Is—is *he* Sandy?" our boy asked, rubbing his shoulder.

"He is my heir; we are all Sandys," was the dry answer. Then, nodding to the two boys to follow him, the old man left the room.

Down the oak-panelled passage they went, up a broad, shallow staircase whose every step was worn to a deep hollow, and into the largest room Sandy had ever seen. It was the picture gallery, and unlighted, but for one big lamp standing near the door and throwing across the floor a yellow arrow of light.

Lord Sharrow took the lamp and went slowly along to the left.

Presently he stopped and held up the lamp so that its light flooded one picture.

"*Quiche!*" ejaculated Sandy. The Old Horror in question was so very much uglier than any of the others. A big Old Horror this, in steel armour from top to toe, his red hair the only bit of warm colour in the picture.

"I suppose you don't know who this is?" Lord Sharrow's eyes were very keen as he put the question.

"It's—it's one of the family right enough——"

"It is the Marquis de Charreau. The first of the family to settle in England. And," continued the old man, "when you are his age you will be the living image of him."

It was rude of the other Sandy to administer at this juncture, a sharp kick to his cousin. Our Sandy, red with pain, made a face which his great uncle saw.

"You so dislike looking like him?" he asked.

Sandy laughed. "No, sir—but—well, he isn't pretty, is he?"

Lord Sharrow chuckled. "No. Not pretty. Now run away you two, and make friends—or enemies—of each other."

He himself did not appear at dinner, and on Sandy's asking where he was, Paul answered casually that most probably he was drunk.

CHAPTER IV

LORD SHARROW was a very rich man and he was a Sharrow to the innermost depths of his wicked old being. That means that he adored not only every stone and every inch of oak in his wonderful house, but also every earthworm on the estate. Was not the earthworm full of Sharrow soil?

Young Paul, the delicate cousin whose family characteristics seemed somehow faded (his hair, for example, was pink, instead of red; his eyes less three-cornered than those of the others, his ears less pointed), told Sandy all about the family.

Paul lisped, because his tongue seemed a little too big for his mouth. Sandy did not like him as much as he liked the brothers, but Paul liked him, so they were much together.

"The fearful old creature in armour, the one I am so like, he was the first, wasn't he?" Sandy asked others for information.

"Not he. Noah was the first. A French Noah, I suppose. Lor', but we're an old family! You see, de Charreau was the cadet of an old French tribe, and he ran away and married somebody. Then his governor disinherited him, and when King John took Angers, this chap was made a prisoner. Somehow or other he got round the King (a pretty rum pair they were, I gather)," added the learned Paul sagely; "birds of a feather—so as Charreau was disinherited, his wife came over to England and King John gave him a house and he stayed."

"Was this the house?"

"Yes. Only, of course, it was different then. Well, they say he murdered his wife; at all events she died, and he married someone the King told him to—she had money, and—here we are!"

"I wonder," Sandy said dreamily, "if he had red hair?"

"I suppose so. Oh, I know lots more about 'em. I'll tell you some day. He was a duke's son—in France—and in Henry the Fifth's time his descendant went to France with Henry and married one of Katherine's ladies-in-waiting."

The two boys were sitting in what was called the Small Hall—a wonderful oak room. The oak on the inner wall, in its austere linen-fold pattern, was bleached by centuries of sunlight to a pale straw colour; that opposite, between the window and around the big fire-place, was nearly black.

This peculiarity of colouring delighted Sandy, though he could not have told why, and the bare room was his favourite of all in the house.

To an unseen spectator—the putative fly on the wall—the scene presented much charm. A big fire burnt on the hearth, and through the small leaded panes of the three windows poured a pale December sun.

On the floor, at equal distances from the windows, lay blotches of purple and amber light—that which came through the jewelled glass at the tops of the windows. There were no rugs, but several well-worn old deer-skins lay on the floor.

There were no books, no flowers, no stuffs of any kind. It was not really a room, it was a hall; it was just what it had been for centuries.

And the two red-headed boys, eating nuts by the fire as they solemnly discussed their ancestry, fitted well into the scene.

"It was my great-grandfather, then, whom *your* grandfather says wasn't married?"

"Yes."

"But that's all rot," returned Sandy, inspired by remembrances of Cook and her offspring. "If he wasn't married then we shouldn't be Sharrows at all."

"Well, you aren't. I mean to say," rectified Paul, "we say you aren't."

"Oh. And we say he was,—married?"

"Exactly."

"And—if he was, then——"

"Oh, if he was, then your Governor would be Lord Sharrow, you see, and you, my lovely cousin, his heir. Throw me a nut, will you?"

"Well, if our name isn't Sharrow, what is it?"

Paul paused, and then he said effectively, "Burton."

"Oh, get along! My name *isn't* Burton. Of course it isn't. That's absurd."

"I don't see why."

"Well, it is. I mean to say—one's name *couldn't* be Burton."

Burton seemed to him a monstrously ugly word.

"That's what your grandfather said. He sued—us."

"My grandfather," repeated Sandy slowly, "sued—your grandfather—*this* man."

"Yes. And lost his case, of course. Oh, it's no good, my dear fellow, you are *not* the long-lost heir!" Paul laughed. He had more of the malice of the family than any of the boys.

And then, neither of them ever quite remembered how, the two were at each other's throats. Hammer and tongs they fought, and in the quiet room was heard only the dull flump of fist on flesh and hard breathing.

They were fairly well matched, though Paul was the slighter, for he was uncommonly agile and to a certain extent a born boxer.

On and on they fought, Paul very red, Sandy very white, until a spurt of blood from the latter's nose splashed everything with crimson.

Then Sandy spoke, with a kind of snort between his words. "Damn you—that—isn't—Burton blood——" he said.

And then, just as these things always happen in books and sometimes in real life, the old lord opened the door.

He did not interrupt them. On the contrary, he stood quite still, watching with keen pleasure in his red-edged old eyes.

When at length Paul, by a well-placed blow, knocked Sandy down, the old man spoke.

"There, that will do," he said. "Get up, Sandy."

Sandy got up.

"I gathered, from an impious remark I heard as I opened the door, that you were fighting for—your name. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Sandy sullenly, fingering his swelling nose.

"Well"—the old man turned and again opened the door

—"you were quite right. That is *not* Burton blood that is messing up my floor. The law proved that your grandfather was not the heir of the title, but it gave him the right to bear—our name. Now shake hands."

The two boys shook hands, and the old man went out, leaving them together

CHAPTER V

LORD SHARROW had been amused and more than half pleased by the Sharrow-Burton fight.

As a young man he had been brutal in his tastes, and tastes rarely change with age ; the possibility for enjoyment of them may fail, as fails the capacity for indulging them, but fundamentally they survive.

And the drunken old peer, who among other things fully realized his own quality as a curiosity in these abstemious days, knew that he had enjoyed the battle just as much for the primary reason that it was a fight, as for the reason of its being.

The Other Sandy, as our boy called, *in petto*, the heir, was a fine manly lad, and the old man was duly proud of him. Our Sandy, it was clear, was a quarrelsome young beast, and that endeared him to his venerable relation.

A few days after the bloody event that pleased him, the old man sent a servant to tell Mr. Alexander to come to him.

The heir being, as all the Sharrows had always been, Mr. Sandy, our boy was Mr. Alexander, which he detested.

Presently the servant came back.

"Mr. Alexander must have gone out, my lord," he said ; "we can't find 'im."

"Where are the other young gentlemen ?"

"Mr. Sandy and Mr. Keith are gone to White Shirley, my lord ; Mr. Paul is in the library."

"Send Mr. Paul to me."

Paul came in, sucking his third finger to get off a large ink-spot.

"Where's Alexander ?" snapped his grandfather. It is a rule of Life that unoffending people should be far more frequently snapped at than the actively troublesome.

Paul's tongue seemed to swell as he answered. It always seemed to swell when he was agitated.

"He's on the roof, sir."

"On the roof?"

"Yeth, thir."

Paul stood limply before him, wondering why his grandfather always jumped on him. He did not know that one kind of personality invariably rouses in stronger breasts a wild yearning for jumping.

It appeared that Alexander liked roofs. He had found a book about "The House," and there was a chapter about nothing but roofs and chimneys. So he had gone to investigate.

"I told him you wouldn't like it, sir," added Paul eagerly.

"Oh, you did! Well, as it happens I do," the old man answered fiercely. "You may go."

Ten minutes later Lord Sharrow, purple in the face and puffing very hard indeed, reached the top of one of the myriad flights of stairs that burrowed through the old house.

With a huge and rusty key he opened a door, across which many industrious spiders had spun a thick fabric that time had strengthened with dust, and went into a small octagonal room.

There were four windows, set in six-foot-thick walls, a much hacked round table, and two leather-seated Cromwellian chairs. Nothing else.

The old man sat down and looked round. He had not been in the room for fifty years. The last time was when, as a very young man, he had brought Cyrilla Dallaford up to see where, as a boy, he had once been incarcerated for a week, for some crime or other, and whence he had every night escaped at risk of life and limb, over the roofs, to play on his father and neighbours a series of mad tricks of which, owing to the apparently safe nature of his prison, he had never been suspected.

He had been fourteen or fifteen then; now he was seventy-three. He chuckled aloud as he recalled his father's speech, on the occasion of his reinstatement at the family board, after his week's seclusion: "If you hadn't been locked safely away, my son, I should have thrashed you on the mere suspicion of having painted the rector's pony blue. It smacks strongly of your kind of humour, but, short of flying, you can't have got out of the tower, and I see no wings yet."

And the culprit laughed aloud again, after all these years, to think how well he had done his job. The rector's pony had been so *very* blue, and it had been such a long time before the colour finally faded away that the children in the village came to regard the odd-looking animal with the dull, cold, eye of total indifference.

And now here was Sydney Sharrow's boy on the roofs! So far as the old man knew, the only one beside himself to indulge in that very perilous exploration.

The iron hasp which loosened the pivot-hung little window was stiff with rust. Lord Sharrow swore vividly as he worked at it.

Presently it groaned, and ceded, and he put his head forth into the pale sunlight.

"By Jove!"

He had forgotten how beautiful the roofs of his house were—flat, gabled, roofs of stone, roofs of tiles, roofs of silvery, moss-covered slate. From some four feet underneath the window where he stood a very narrow ledge led to where, about six feet to the right, a bit of flat stone coping gave better foothold and safer communication with the bulk of the building.

That was where he, the Sandy Sharrow of so long ago, had crept, night after night, to play his pranks. It made his head swim now to look at it.

He had come hither because from this tower one was supposed to have a better view of the roofs than from any other point. He had often heard his father speak of the view. He himself had never come back since that spring day in 1822. Cyrilla Dallaford had jilted him, and he had hated her until she died, twenty-five years later; but for the sake of the memory of that day when she had let him hold her little cool fingers in his, there, just where he stood, he had never returned to the tower-room.

Suddenly the old man shivered and glanced nervously round him. There was a ghost near him, and he knew it.

He had not been a passive enemy; he was resentful and unforgetting; more than once he had been able to do Mrs. Wymondham a bad turn, and—he had done it.

Once, even, in a time of great trouble she had turned to him for help, and he had refused it brutally, almost with insult.

And now she was dead, and he a very old man, and yet

here he stood, a boy just over twenty, holding ten cool little eighteen-year-old fingers in his hands.

With an ugly oath Lord Sharrow left the window where he was standing, and with much difficulty opened the next one, which had practically the same view.

The beautiful, diversified, romantic roofs were, so far as he could see, empty of life. Not even cats really cared for the roofs of Sharrow.

"Young fool, where can he be? If I were not so con-foundedly stiff he'd have a caning for this!"

And then he saw Sandy—a small dark-blue blob, lying on the extreme edge on an isolated scrap of reddish-gold Elizabethan roof.

It was too large for a cat, and it was not made of tiles or slate, so it followed that it must be Sandy. But what in God's name was he doing?

The old man's eyes were not very good, but he knew that if the boy slipped so much as six inches he would be over the edge and down into the courtyard, hundreds of feet below.

The blue blob lay quite motionless; what if—— It was many years since old Sharrow had had such a fright. He felt vaguely sick and his knees shook. Even he had never dared to do that, and he had dared most things.

He sat down. He would not have dared to call, even if his old voice could have carried so far. He must just wait.

And there in the little eight-sided room so full of ghosts, he waited for a full half-hour, his hands like ice, a strange and horrid sensation at the pit of his stomach.

Finally the blue blob moved. To be exact, it squirmed, wriggled, and then resolved itself, even to old eyes, into a boy on very cautious all-fours.

Lord Sharrow, who had not been inside a church for forty years, and who hated a parson as some very delicate females say they hate cats, said: "Thank God!"

When the all-fours boy became a biped, and turned his footsteps towards the tower, his great-uncle wiped his brow and rose.

Sandy sauntered round a safe-looking flat place, examined a chimney with his hands as well as his eyes, and then, sitting down, slid to a lower level much nearer the tower.

The old man leaned out. "Sandy," he said. He clean forgot that this Sandy was Alexander. The boy looked up.

" Yes, sir! I—I'm just having a look at the roofs——"

" So I see. What do you think of 'em? "

He could see the smile that was his real answer, but Sandy said the 1874 word for ripping.

" How did you get out? "

" From my window. I hope you don't mind, sir? "

" Oh no, not in the least. It has given me the most vivid satisfaction to see you risking your life in this—this damnable way," exploded the old man. Then he swore hard for quite a minute. When he finished, Sandy was laughing.

" I am sorry, sir, but—my word! what perfectly glorious language! "

It was hardly in Lord Sharrow to be ashamed of himself, but he was certainly ashamed of having been heard. " Come up here; I want to talk to you. You can get down over the Peacock Room and up over——"

But Sandy was already walking along the coping that led to that awful ledge. Lord Sharrow shut his eyes.

" It's old age that makes a fool of me," he muttered under his breath. And when Sandy was safely across and climbing easily up the lightning-rod to the window, he told himself fiercely that every man ought to be put painlessly to death at sixty, and every woman at forty-five.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Sandy had scrambled up over the window-sill and stood rubbing the loose dust off his extremely dirty hands, Lord Sharrow pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said.

Sandy obeyed in silence.

It was getting on towards four o'clock, and he, having been roof-climbing since two, was tired.

"Well?" asked the old man.

The boy looked his inquiry, in turn.

"You like my roofs—eh?"

"Yes."

"You like my house, I daresay?"

"I think it is——" he stopped short. For some reason he was suddenly shy as a young man might be in mentioning an undeclared love.

"Well—go on—what do you think it is?"

"The most beautiful house in the whole world."

This was enough praise even for a Sharrow of Sharrow, but it was not their way to acknowledge the receipt of that enchanting conversational commodity.

"And how many houses have you seen?" The old man's tone was sardonic, but Sandy did not wince. Things close to him were so close as to be protected against sneers, and later in life this fact deluded many people into thinking him slow-witted.

"I've only seen three—inside, but that doesn't matter. It is the most beautiful house in the world."

"Sandy never says that."

"I don't care." Our Sandy's ugly little face was dogged. It was perfectly true that he did not care what the other Sandy, or anyone else, thought about Sharrow.

The paling sunlight fell full on him as he spoke, and the old man drew his rough brows sharply together. Sydney

had been right, this descendant of an illegal marriage was more than a Sharrow than any of them.

"Don't you wish you were Sandy?" he asked abruptly.

"I am."

"You are Alexander." Old Sharrow was teasing now, with the malice characteristic of the family.

"I am Sandy. It doesn't matter," the boy declared with finality, "how many other Sandys there are, I am Sandy, too."

There was a pause, and the queer grin, with the forward thrust of the jaw, died away from the old man's face.

Presently he said: "You are right. I had no right to change your name. We will henceforth call you Sandy."

"Thank you, sir."

Of course, they both were thinking that two Sandys in one house would cause much confusion, but neither of them considered that worth mentioning. There was always a certain directness about them; they saw their wish clearly, and did not see intervening obstacles.

"Well, don't you wish you were the other Sandy?"

Our boy laughed. His white front teeth overlapped a little from left to right. His grandfather's false ones did the same. "No. I'd like to be your heir, but——"

"But you'd rather be yourself than Sandy. I see. I also think," he added slowly, "that you are right. How much do you know about the family history?"

Sandy leaned his red head against the leather-backed chair he sat in.

"A lot. I know all about the first man—King John's one, who was with the king at Runnymede. And I know about the one who refused to go to the war in France, and said when the king said: 'By God! Sir Knight, you shall go,' 'By God! Sir King, I will not.' And he didn't go either. None of 'em—of us—ever did fight France, sir, did they?"

"No—and rightly. The kings had no right to ask it of men who were French noblemen, before they became English."

Sandy nodded.

"And I read about the one, Simon, who went to Florence and made rhymes at the Court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and married a Tornabuoni. How beautiful she must have been—if the picture in the book is like her!"

"Go on. You seem to have been studying the family chronicle."

"I have. Paul showed me one or two books, and I found the rest myself. Well, there was the one who went to Rouen to see Joan of Arc. He was a painter, wasn't he?"

"Yes, a very bad painter. He painted as they set fire to the girl."

It greatly impressed Sandy to hear his great-uncle refer to Joan of Arc as "the girl." It sounded, somehow, so splendidly familiar with the great ones of the earth.

For half an hour he talked on, while the light faded, and the old man listened. The boy was too young to see the ugly, ruthless side of the lives of his ancestors; too young to realize that their constant loyalty to the Crown, regardless of right or wrong, or pity for the oppressed, was a selfish quality. To him their great characteristic, bravery in battle, covered everything else. And brave they were. Never from the day the wild young Frenchman had decided to stay on in the country whither he had been brought a prisoner-of-war, had there been a war in which England was involved (always excepting those with France, in which, to a man, they stubbornly refrained from taking a hand) without one or more Sharrows playing in it a gallant, reckless, bloodthirsty part.

The old Barony dated from a battlefield. And yet, as a kind of undercurrent in their natures, ran the love of the beautiful that sent Sir Simon, in 1480, to see Florence, to Lorenzo's Court, and led the "wicked" Mary Sharrow to kill herself for love of one Edmund Spenser, who called her "a short, dark mayde," and left her letters unanswered.

But of all the Sharrows, Richard, a younger son, who went to the Spanish Main with that great gentleman, Sir Walter Raleigh, and later lost his head at the Tower (less loyal than the rest it seems, and possibly more lovable) was the boy's favourite. Of him he talked so long that quite suddenly night was on them, and the old man was fain to lean on his arm as they went down the dark stairs.

"I will show you some day," Lord Sharrow said, as he dismissed the story-teller, "some letter of Charles I. to the Sharrow of that day."

"Oh, sir, please show them to me now—I mean tomorrow."

In the faint firelight coming through an open door Sandy's face was almost luminous with earnestness.

"No. They are—you are too young. But they were

found in George III.'s time by a housemaid rummaging in the attic. They were all crushed, as if someone had crumpled them up to throw them away—and then forgot." The old man's voice died down. His pride in his family had been a fierce-burning, never-abating fire, but he was old, and time had banked it with ashes. Now Sandy poked it, and for the moment it flared up as strongly as Sandy's own.

"There is a ring of Richard Sharrow's," he went on, warmed by the fire to unwonted generosity. "I will give it to you."

And that evening after dinner he called Sandy to go with him to the library.

The library, as well as being a library, was a museum. Breast high, under the ceiling-reaching shelves, was a row of glass cases with shutters that closed, and were locked at night.

And in the cases were the most wonderful things: jewelled swords, medals, manuscript letters from great people, some of whom had been dust for centuries; orders of all kinds, miniatures (one of Queen Elizabeth set in pearls, a gift from that virgin queen to the Sharrow who made verses about her and was supposed by the evil-minded courtiers to be the object of one of her virginal loves); snuff-boxes, lace and ruffles, rings, shoe-buckles (one pair a gift from the fair Castlemaine); a tiny pair of red-heeled satin shoes out of which a king had drunk a toast.

On Saturdays, the first in each month, Sandy had beheld parties of tourists led through this room by the stern Mrs. Puddifant, the housekeeper, whose original slight knowledge of the things she exhibited had long since been overgrown by the moss of invention.

Paul had told him what some of the things were and some few were labelled. The room was never used. The books never opened.

The real books, as Sandy called them, lived in a smaller, more human room, near the big dining-room.

But this splendid apartment added to the house by Christopher Wren and very gorgeous as to ceiling, was one of those most interesting to the tourist, and it amused Sandy to hide behind the purple velvet curtains and listen to the good Puddifont's variations from month to month.

"You have seen the collection?" Lord Sharrow asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well"—taking a small key from his watch-chain and fitting it into a lock—"here is Richard's ring. He's the one you told me about."

"Yes, yes, I know. Oh!"

The ring in his palm, Sandy stared at it. It was of a pale gold, and bore in a claw a small, faulty emerald on which was engraved an almost indecipherable coat-of-arms.

"There. It is yours. I bought it some years ago at Christie's, so I am not breaking the law in giving it to you. Don't lose it."

Sandy did not speak, and the old man went on, "*Ce que Charreau possède, Charreau garde, you know.*"

Then Sandy looked up, and the old man was as much shocked at the sight of tears in the little ugly eyes as if the boy had been a man.

"There, there," he said hastily. "Put it on your finger. I am glad you should have it. I almost wish——"

Turning abruptly he left the room, and not until half an hour later Sandy came and brought him the key, did he realize that for the first time in his life he had left one of the cabinets open.

CHAPTER VII

OUR Sandy's education had, up to the time of his visit to his great-uncle, been conducted along what is best expressible by that now fashionable phrase, the lines of least resistance.

He had had several daily governesses, all of whom had possessed noses of the easily-leadable kind. Blind to the charms of the multiplication-table, deaf to the voice of Lindley Murray, stonily indifferent to spelling, he was yet so good-tempered (except when what is called *in* a temper), so ugly, so red-headed, so solemn and so merry, all in the delightful mix-up that composes childhood, that Miss Oldboy, Miss Fitzhardinge and Miss Lute, all almost loved him.

Miss Lute, a small, faded lady who carried biscuits in a black satin bag and ate them between meals, Sandy loved, in his turn. He called her, not without reason, Crummy. She *was* crummy. He also partook of her biscuits and found them delicious.

But when she tried to beguile him into the horrors of seven times six and so on, she failed.

Now the Other Sandy and Keith had been much better brought up. (Paul's father being a parson, it follows, as day follows night, that he should be possessed of a disgusting amount of knowledge.)

One night, some thirteen years before our Sandy's visit to the house of his fathers, Lord Sharrow, who for many years had been a widower, was sitting over his fire more than half drunk, when the door opened and his son, who had married against his wishes and not been at home since, came in.

Holding one of his hands walked a small, red-haired boy of three; in his arm was a baby of about a month old.

"Here they are, father," Sandy Sharrow said. "She is dead."

He was a wild, half-mad man, the kind of son who breaks the hearts of conventional parents; but his father was not conventional and had himself been far wilder. Besides, it was now not Sandy who mattered. It was the little boy at his side.

The old man, half-sobered by the surprise, collected his powers with a violent effort and spoke:

"Is that," he asked, pointing to the sleeping baby, "a girl?"

His son laughed. "Should I have brought you a girl?" he retorted.

He had gone the next day and his father never saw him again. He had loved his wife, who had not been a lady, with all the violence of his rough nature, which seemed to be a throw back to some half-civilized ancestor.

He would have been an excellent pirate; as a nineteenth century gentleman he was a failure.

And his wife's death severed the last link that bound him to decent living

It is to be hoped that the dogs liked him.

Meantime, old Sharrow, caring very little about his son, since his son had proved to be living a life that must cut itself short, set himself to the task of bringing up the boys.

He engaged the most expensive nurses for them, and when the time came, a governess so expensive that it seemed that she must prove wonderful.

She did, but she was wonderful in the wrong way. One day, when she had been at Sharrow about a year, her employer sent for her.

"Miss Ewing," he said, looking up at her—(she was a handsome, dark creature, and wore welded round her neck a silver snake of Eastern make)—"I have asked you to come to me this morning to tell you that from the beginning of next month you may consider yourself disengaged."

"Dis-engaged—you mean to say——"

"Precisely." He bowed his wicked old silver head.

"I may at least ask the reason why?" she asked with hauteur.

"It is an indiscreet question."

"Nevertheless, I ask it."

"It is, then, because ever since you have been here you have been trying to marry me."

At this point she lost her head and accused him of insulting her.

"No," he answered, rising and opening the door with the most infuriating courtesy, "you have insulted me—by believing me to be in my dotage. Good-morning."

Miss Ewing was succeeded by Mrs. Reed.

Mrs. Reed possessed three excellent qualities: age, ugliness and a full consciousness of both.

But she was quite uneducated in the ways of educating others and her tenure was short.

Miss Gort (excellent in grammar, but what Sandy called short in everything else) stayed six months. Fräulein Wassermesser four; (her letters to Germany would be good reading for those who regard that country as Scythia and England the only abode of light), and Mademoiselle Rouget, always called, through an unexpected bit of knowledge on Sandy's part, Miss Mullet, nearly a year.

Then came Mr. Finucane, and he stayed until Keith joined his brother at a prep. school for Eton.

Mr. Finucane was a remarkably nice youth, and he made real boys of his charges, teaching them the joys of rats and ferrets, the superiority of horses to mere ponies, the very, very little difference wind and rain matter to fellows who *are* fellows, and other things of the kind.

And Sandy, now, at sixteen, and Keith at fourteen, were very good sorts of fellows indeed.

Sandy was not clever and Keith, who might have been a musician in the right hands, hid his love of melody as if it had been a dire disease until it died.

They bade fair, at that time, to be exactly what they eventually became: wholesome, honest Englishmen, clean mentally and physically, unimaginative, brave, truth-telling and dull.

There are many such, and they are by no means the worst.

An epidemic of measles at Eton had sent them home that November, and the Christmas holidays coming just as the school bill of health became clean, they were at Sharrow with Paul and our Sandy for over six weeks.

It was a mild, open winter, so the brothers had a glorious time, hunting most days, walking and riding other days,

eating huge meals and digesting them magnificently, avoiding their grandfather as much as they could, and being, in a casual, off-hand way, very kind to Paul and the new chap, neither of whom counted in the least in their scheme of life.

And on their side Paul and the new chap paid little heed to them.

They were on one side because the intimacy and the self-centredness of the brothers forced them to that position, but there was no real bond between them. Old Lord Sharrow's inviting them at all was only a proof of the strong family feeling that has kept the Sharrows so intensely Sharrow-like through all the centuries. His son had been allowed to go his way without a word, once he had provided an heir, but the son had been an exceptionally hopeless case. This, of course, was his mother's fault.

The strength of the family type was always a wonder to strangers, but it was perfectly clear to understand once one was told.

The great, raw-boned, red-headed Sharrow men were not primarily women's men. They were not indifferent to the charms of sex—no long-enduring family can be—but women, as wives at least, were quite secondary matters to them.

They married for the most part with the care that most men use only in their kennels and stables. They chose, not companions for themselves, but mothers for their future sons; they married healthy, well-built, clean-blooded women and they never married relations.

The few among them who ignored this family law had been punished in a way that added greatly to the belief of the rest in the strength of it.

In Charles II.'s reign Lord Sharrow married a delicate, pretty black-eyed child, maid-of-honour to Braganza's Katherine. Their only son, whether by the direct judgment of God or by chance, was a hunchback, and to the present day his physical defect was regarded by his descendants as a disgrace.

He redeemed his father's fault, poor man, by taking to wife the ugly, healthy, big-boned daughter of a Scotch peer, and producing by her three physically faultless sons.

It was George Selwyn who said one day to the Regent that as far as the Sharrows were concerned it was a matter

of regret that men are obliged to wear clothes. If they were not, he added, they would be the handsomest men in the Kingdom.

Sandy, wandering as he often wandered, through the picture gallery, made for himself the great discovery. And his great-uncle discovered him making it, which, of course, was delightful for the old man.

"Well?" the old man asked, blinking down at the boy with very red eyes.

"I was just wondering," Sandy replied with the simplicity that at that time distinguished him, "why they all married such *awful* ugly women."

"That is a very sensible question, and I will tell you the answer to it. When a man is one of a very old, very illustrious family, my boy, he is not just a man; he is—a link in a chain. Do you see that?"

"No."

"Well, a man who is a nobody, is more or less at liberty to do with his life what he likes. He may marry, for all the harm he will do the world, a cook-maid."

Sandy watched him unblinkingly.

"And his children, being presumably the cook-maid's as well, may turn out what they like. It doesn't matter, and *they* don't matter. You follow me?"

"Yes."

"But a man belonging to one of our great families, the Howards, the Pembrokes, the Hertfords, or us—we are obliged by our position to think not only of the pretty face that charms us for the moment, but of—the future."

Sandy watched the old man with the deepest attention. Psychologically, although he had never heard the word, the old man interested him.

He had seen his great-uncle a little drunk, drunk, and very drunk, and the well-informed Paul had told him facts concerning certain sons and daughters of the old man whose names, if they had any, were certainly not Sharrow, so that the boy had a fairly good idea of the old man's moral status.

Yet here was Sharrow, still shaky and red-eyed from the effects of last night's port, the same old man he had heard violently cursing his valet two hours before; the same old man at whom, a few days before, an unwashed scoundrel had thrown bricks, calling him Father before the whole

village as he drove out in his barouche—here was Baron Sharrow of Sharrow, obviously a dissipated, violent, evil-living old man, inculcating into him, Sandy, a principle of the utmost self-denial in the matter the most vital, even the child knew, of all matters in the world—Love.

“Do you see what I mean?”

“Yes.”

Lord Sharrow, unsuspecting the scrutiny to which the small green eyes were subjecting him, went on, warming to his subject, in which he was absolutely sincere.

“Your great-uncle, that one there, in the blue coat—do you see his back?”

Sandy nodded. The painter had chosen for his subject a pose that cruelly exposed the crookedness of his shoulders. Or had the man with the hump, in his bitterness of soul, so placed himself, victim of his father's disregard of the family law?

“His father married for love. Well—what do you want to say?”

“Only that—all people who marry for love don't have crooked children. Do they?”

“No; of course they don't. And some attractive women are healthy. Good God! yes. But—well—I have answered your question. Have you any others?”

“No, sir, thank you. Except—I wish you'd tell me about my great-grandfather.”

“My Uncle Sandy? I will. He was married abroad, in Bavaria. You would not understand the technicalities—I don't myself. But a new law had been passed, and he, not knowing of it, did not conform to it. If he had been married three weeks sooner, your father would be Lord Sharrow to-day. That is all.”

“And my grandfather went to law?”

“He did. He sued me. You see, your great-grandfather married twice. Your grandfather was the first wife's son, my father the second wife's. Is it clear?”

Sandy nodded slowly. “Yes, thanks. How did they find out? I mean about the dates?”

Lord Sharrow scowled suddenly, and to the boy looked more of an Old Horror than any of those on the walls.

“Are you going to claim the tit?” he jeered, his jaw, in which the yellow lower teeth loo. I like old fangs, stuck out hideously. “I advise you not to. Then he went away,

walking even now, in his gouty old age, with the brave swing that marked the carriage of all the men of the family.

Sandy flushed. He was angry.

He had meant nothing of the kind, and the old man should have known it.

Sandy's jaw, though unfurnished with fangs, could stick out as well as his great-uncle's.

And it stuck out now.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the day before that appointed for our Sandy's return home, he was sent for by his great-uncle, and found the old gentleman where he had never before seen him—in his study, at the large, business-like-looking writing-table, whence he had dismissed the aspiring Miss Ewing.

Sandy did not know it, but Lord Sharrow, for all his handicaps of drinking, age and gout, was a very shrewd landlord, and still directed the management of the vast estate.

Mr. Dingle, the steward, was, his lordship was wont to say, not one of the new-fangled sort who consider themselves gentlemen, and theorize about agriculture; but an old-fashioned upper-servant kind of man, who asked for orders, obeyed those given to him, and saw that those given to others were carried out.

Mr. Dingle, a pot-bellied man with an anxious eye in a kindly, rubicund face, was in as great fear of his employer as if that old gentleman had been the other Old Gentleman to whom one pays the compliment of capital letters. Beyond his qualities of fear and obedience, he possessed that of silence. His worldly goods included, besides a charming Georgian house in the village next to the bank, an as charming daughter.

His life was not altogether an easy one, but he never complained. Sometimes he would tell his troubles to his foster-sister, Mrs. Babbage, the inn-keeper's wife, and Ellen Babbage, a wise woman in that she very rarely spoke, sympathized.

The inn parlour was a pleasant room, looking out over a lawn as delicate and smooth as any his lordship could boast; the chintz was of that delightful kind that looks as if it had grown in the room, and yet never intended to be either

dingy or shabby. There was a corner cupboard full of china, which every traveller coming that way tried to buy for a song (intending to sell it for a small fortune), only to find that in the serene-faced Ellen he had met a woman very wise in Chelsea, Spode, and Lowestoft, and appallingly well versed in the current price of these enchanting products.

"Oh, no, sir," she would say gently, holding the cup or teapot in question in her snowy apron. "I think you must be mistaken. This is real old Lowestoft—there's the mark. A month or so ago one sold at Carrington's for six guineas."

And the gentleman having jovially offered ten shillings for the little thing to which he had "just taken one of his fancies," usually felt the immediate need of solitude in the garden and a whisky-and-soda.

On that particular day Sandy, when Dingle had gone, was told several things by his great-uncle. He was told that he was to be educated, at which he showed no enthusiasm whatever. He had hitherto never connected books with education—that is to say, what he called *real* books, in contradistinction to those unreal ones out of which he had been expected to gather wisdom under Miss Oldboy and Miss Lute.

"Are you not glad?" the old man asked sharply.

He did not believe in gratitude, but he expected expressions of it.

"Y-yes. Am I to go to school?"

"You are. You are going to a preparatory school first, and then to Marlborough."

"Oh! Th-thank you, sir."

"Well, well, out with it—what's the matter? I suppose you expected Eton?"

He flushed a deep red and his tusks showed.

Sandy flushed too, and the old man and the boy looked very much alike for a moment as they glared at each other across the paper-strewn table.

At last Sandy spoke.

"I didn't *expect* anything," he said slowly, a nasty look about his mouth, "and I didn't ask for anything. What's more, I don't know that I can accept anything—from you."

It is said that gentlemen, even wicked ones, no longer swear. But this was in '74, and Lord Sharrow was a survival even then. What he said startled Sandy, so that the boy stood as he did, stock still, only with a tremendous effort.

Lord Sharrow's last words were quotable.

"Oh, you don't, don't you? Kindly tell me why?"

"Because you—you seem to take for granted that I—want things. This is the second time you have done it. And I don't like it."

There was a long pause, broken first by the whirring and striking of the bronze clock on the mantelpiece. It was four o'clock. Both of the people in the room always remembered that trifling fact.

When the echo of the final stroke had died into the soft silence that seems to wrap rich men's houses, Lord Sharrow spoke.

His face was still patched with colour, but his jaw retreated into the proper perspective, and the gleam had gone from his eyes.

"You are quite right," he said, "and I—was wrong. I beg your pardon."

Sandy, with a singularly unboyish air of dignity, bowed without speaking, and the old man went on:

"I think you will like Marlborough. It is a fine school. And—if you conduct yourself there in such a way as to make you a credit to the name, I will send you to Cambridge."

Sandy was not a forgiving person, and he was still very angry. Indeed, it took him several years to forgive his great-uncle's remark.

But he was a gentleman. He expressed his thanks in correct, though rather halting terms, and the interview was at an end.

When he had left the room, Lord Sharrow sat for some time without moving, a brooding bend on his brows. He liked Sandy—better far than he liked his heir. He would have loved to see our boy in his cousin's place. And yet, though he was a very unscrupulous old man indeed, and as strong-willed as only selfish people allow themselves to be, it remains a fact that if he could in some way have broken a law without fear of detection, and made our Sandy his heir, he would not have done it.

And this, not because of any inherent respect for the law, either of God or of Man, but because the one thing on the face of the earth that he did respect and hold dear was his family. And the other Sandy was the one intended by the family to continue it, to create future Sharrowes for the old house.

Meantime Sandy was having another quarrel, this time with Paul. He had gone straight to the Small Hall, where their first battle had taken place, intending to prowl up and down until his temper had, what he called, sunk. (It was to him, in its rising, so like a tangible thing creeping up his body till it reached his throat to choke his words, then on to his eyes, to make whatever he looked at appear distorted, that its subsequent dying down seemed literally a sinking.)

But the little hall was not empty.

Paul sat reading under a big lamp, that threw a circle of orange-coloured light over him and the edge of the table.

Paul looked up. "Well?" he asked.

Paul was a boy of small vices. He was peevish and given to white lies, (the other boys said he had not the courage necessary for big ones), and, above all, he was curious.

"Well what?" Sandy's voice conveyed a warning, but Paul did not notice it. His brain was far from his eyes and his ears.

"What did he want you for?" The boys had been together when the message came.

"He wanted me," Sandy growled, "to tell me that Queen Anne was dead, and Queen Victoria come to the throne."

"But, Sandy—Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837!"

Sandy crossed the room with the perfectly laudable purpose of seeking solitude somewhere upstairs. As he reached the door, Paul went on, lisping more than usual: "I thay Thandy, do tell me——"

Sandy, crimson with unjustifiable rage of the last-straw order, turned, and seemed for several minutes to be listening to someone uttering the most horrible and blood-curdling oaths. It was himself.

Paul put down his book and rose.

"Thandy Tharrow," he gasped, blinking like a weasel as he stared across the strong lamplight, "you ought to be athamed of yourthelf. I *ought* to go and tell my great-uncle at onth——"

He did not say he meant to tell; he did not mean to tell. It was the only retort discourteous he could think of, but it was fatal.

With a kind of roaring noise in his throat Sandy was on him, both hands clenched.

For several seconds there was, as on that other occasion,

no sound in the room but that of the battering of fists. Then there was a loud noise and a cracking sound, as Paul spun across the floor, knocking a chair over, and then going bang on his skull in a corner.

He lay quite still.

Sandy, his anger now quite gone, not from remorse, but from the relief of the violent exercise, stood looking at him.

"Get up, Paul," he growled; "someone will be coming."

Paul did not move.

Sandy, taking the great lamp, carried it with some difficulty to the corner where his vanquished adversary lay. He set the lamp down on the window-sill nearest at hand, and, kneeling, looked closely at Paul.

His breathing was heavy, but no more irregular than Sandy's own. Sandy went upstairs.

Paul came to dinner as usual, and no reference was made to the fight, until the two boys were on their way upstairs to bed.

Then on the landing Paul paused.

"I say, Sandy," he said, "*where* did you hear those things you said?"

"What things?"

"When you—when you swore so. Like a pirate in a book it was, only—better. Did you make it up?"

Sandy laughed. He was still angry, of course, with his great-uncle, but he would not on that account give the old man away.

"Cut along to bed, youngster," he answered good-temperedly.

He felt suddenly extremely grown-up.

CHAPTER IX

AN accident on the line between White Shirley and London prevented the early afternoon departure of Sandy and Paul, who was to be met at Euston by his father, and it was nine o'clock before the boys left the house for the station.

Sandy had a solitary day, but not a lonely one.

To understand him at this time it must be remembered that he had never before been away from London, and what his life there, through the genial neglect of his parents, had been.

He knew less of his father than he had learnt of his great-uncle in the six weeks he had been at Sharrow, for his father had never talked to him, or tried in any way to see into the mind of the human being for whose life he was responsible. To him, Sandy was "the child," as for a very long time he had been "the baby," and Sydney Sharrow, though fond of him in a way, had, in ignoring his possession of such a thing, unconsciously kept from his son any knowledge of his own personality. They were to each other simply the father and the child, and they were utter strangers.

Sandy's mother was different. She had all the keen quickness of insight of Frenchwomen, and she knew that her boy was a person and an intelligence; but she was so impreguably selfish that she did not care in the least what he or anyone else might be thinking about; so, as one's thoughts in childhood form the alembic in which is distilled the ultimate essence of one's character, she, too, was an utter stranger to the little boy whose lack of beauty offended her.

So Sandy had built for himself a small house of ideas and dreams, incorrect for the most part, and absurd, but still his mental home; and therein he had dwelt, ignorant, vaguely lonely, convinced without bitterness of his own

lack of consequence, years younger, in spite of the gravity and courtesy of his manner, than most boys of his age.

Then he had come to Sharrow, one of the most beautiful houses in England, full to the brim of historical interest; and, most wonderful of all, he found that he was expected by that strange old man, its present owner, to love the place and to take pride in it, because he bore its name.

In the six weeks of his stay he had changed very much. In the first place, he had been furiously angry three times, and he had never before known any emotion stronger than childish temper that could be easily dealt with by Bean and her ever-ready slipper. This new, governing anger had surprised and a little frightened him, but he was, at the same time, proud of it.

Then the passion of admiration that had sprung in his heart for the old house at the very first moment of his beholding it was a feeling so strong as to make him think of it as a kind of power he had.

It was not, and never would be, his; yet because he was a Sharrow there was in him this deep, reverent love for it that made him perfectly happy just to stand on the wet lawn in a cold wind and look at it.

He had never loved anything before, and he knew it. Monsieur et Madame were his parents, and he loved them in a way because they were good to look at and kind to him, and, though this he did not understand, their quarrels, sandwiched between long seasons of Victorian courtesy and amused discourse, were picturesque and entertaining.

Bean was—just Bean. She had washed his ears—an unthankful task—ever since he could remember—and had a way of dragging him nearer the washhand-stand, or the light, as suited her, by the ear under immediate operation, in a way that was painful, but that seemed to Sandy like a small hitch in the scheme of things.

On the other hand she knew all the fairy-tales in the world, and in certain moods told them to him with the charm of the born storyteller.

He never analysed her character or his own subjection to her. She was—just Bean.

Cook he was really fond of, and it was not altogether cupboard love, for Cook possessed real charm. Still—she was Cook.

Whereas Sharrow—the House Sharrow, not the old lord—was a thing beautiful, interesting, engrossing, and, somehow, good. Surely it was good, the feeling it gave one as one learned to know it.

Old Sharrow was not a man to be loved by a strange little boy. No one loved him, as a matter of fact, and Sandy, in spite of his great-grandfather's little blunder in the matter of a date, had all the family shrewdness. He saw quite plainly that the old man was vicious, uncontrolled, violent and selfish. He did not love his great-uncle, but somehow the talk in the Tower room had given him a certain respect for his relative. He had, of course, been affected by his glimpse at the one great quality of Lord Sharrow's nature: his respect for, and love of, his family; but Sandy did not explain this to himself.

As the train sped through the wet night and Paul slept on the opposite seat, his mouth open with the vacant expression of those afflicted with adenoids, Sandy unconsciously summed up the old man in one word. "Of course he's an old beast," he thought, "and he drinks; but——"

That "but" was the defence old Alexander Sharrow's guardian angel was cherishing for him against the Day of Judgment.

Sandy had said good-bye to the house. For hours that day he had wandered about its narrow, intricate corridors, losing himself several times, going up and down the staircases with which the old place was honeycombed. He had gone into bedrooms and stared solemnly at the old carved bedsteads, touching with gentle, curious fingers the stiff, moth-eaten brocades of the curtains.

He had crept up the chimney where a priest had lived hidden for a week in Bloody Mary's time; the little box-like room was, although very stuffy, full of what an artist would have told him was atmosphere, and a yellow crucifix still hung on the wall; he had beguiled Mrs. Puddifant into showing him the still-room, where bunches of herbs hung drying, and where *pot pourri*, lavender, and violet balls, quaint essences with delightful old-world names, and other wonders, were still made. (The Babbage women had been housekeepers at Sharrow in almost unbroken descent from mother to daughter since James I.'s time, and Mrs. Puddifant was a Babbage.)

"This," she told him with a pride he vaguely felt to be

every bit as respectable as his own feeling for the old house she ruled, "is the Babbage nose."

He had spent hours looking at the pictures in the gallery, dwelling with a somewhat gloomy satisfaction on the truth to type that distinguished his forebears. They were still Old Horrors, but there was distinction in being, in the nineteenth century, horrible in the same way that had afflicted the Sharrows of the fourteenth.

He had even gazed with pity at the few portraits of the ladies who had had the honour of being selected by the Sharrow men to provide the world with successors to the name. They were very plain, these healthy ladies of good pedigree. The pretty Portuguese maid-of-honour whose son had been a cripple because she *was* pretty was in eternal disgrace, so her fair face did not adorn the walls.

M. Forauvent, the chef, whom his employer always called Volauvent, was rather a friend of Sandy's, and an hour had been spent that afternoon in his fascinating vaulted kingdom.

The pestle and mortar of solid brass with the coat-of-arms raised on its side, in which had been crushed pounds of roseleaves to make certain small wafers to delight the palate of Charles II., was produced, and Sandy had studied it in enchanted silence.

The great people who had come to Sharrow and left memories of themselves within its walls were not all kings and queens, in spite of the wise loyalty that had always distinguished its possessors. The Sharrows had loved, not learning, perhaps, but the distinction conferred on it by its owners, and hence they had known many famous students and poets.

Erasmus, in his poor Oxford days, had been brought home by Eric Sharrow one summer; and on one of the diamond panes in the room where he had slept was still to be seen a swallow in flight that he had scratched there, initialling it, with the date, with a diamond ring belonging to his host.

Sir Philip Sydney and the Sharrow poet (a very inferior one among the Elizabethans, but still the Family Poet), quarrelled over a speech made by the latter regarding a lady of the Court, so Sydney had never seen the House. This was, of course, regarded by all the Sharrows as more his loss than theirs, but the fact remains, as facts will.

On the other hand, Lyly was a friend of our poet's and a frequent guest.

Then there were Voltaire, who had a broken but long correspondence with Maud Sharrow, the one who married the Duke of Cressy and presented him with the indistinguishable twins whose subsequent intrigues and impersonation of each other caused the world so much amusement and trouble. To go back, Spenser told the story of his cruel Rosalind to Hector Sharrow one summer's evening under the old elms at the foot of the south terrace. Sir Walter Raleigh once slept in the room with what for some reason was called the Chinese bed. Probably no house in England is richer than Sharrow in memories such as these.

But our Sandy bore in him the seed of that love of Royalty which had always been so profitable to the family. He, too, would have gone to Holland and returned to Scotland with his King. He, too, would have fought and lost an eye at Dunbar. And he, too, would, above all, have refused the earldom offered after Charles landed at Dover.

"Sire," the story puts into his mouth, "I thank you, but I will remain Baron Sharrow."

And Charles, grateful, no doubt, in his way, to the man who had shared his exile and fought with him, smiled. One can see it. The hasty offer, as the two stood a minute apart, waiting for the completion of the plans for the march to London, the older man's bent head but firm words, the victorious King's charming smile. It is said Charles laid his hand on his friend's arm. "*Ce que Charreau possède,*"—he quoted, and let the matter drop.

This filled Sandy with pride, and for some reason his queer lips quivered with tears, as he thought of it—and Paul snored.

Yet Sandy was only an outsider, owing to that little mistake in Bavaria so many years ago.

The final stopping of the train at Euston woke him from a broken, happy sleep; and his father stood at the window with a worried-looking man in a shovel hat.

"Well," Sydney Sharrow asked, when the parson and his boy left them, "how did you like it?"

Sandy blinked in the strong light.

"Very much," he said laconically.

CHAPTER X

IN thinking, later, of his own life, Sandy Sharrow always felt that Fate had divided it into four parts. And the first part ended one night a little less than a year after his first visit to Sharrow.

It was a particularly cold December night, and he had just reached Victoria Station on his way home for the Christmas holidays.

With a handshake he parted on the platform with Ben Frith, his friend, whose father had come to meet him; and then, his bag in his hand, left the station intending to take a cab.

His father had written that he could not meet the train, and Sandy was glad.

Ben Frith was a London lover of the deepest dye, and as no London lover is ever content to love in silence, Ben had been proselytizing, and Sandy was an ardent convert.

Before going to school London had, to Sandy, meant Guelph Square with its dull "gardens" wherein snobbish children gave in little the social comedy of their elders, an occasional walk with Bean, who had a niece married to a pawnbroker in a neighbouring thoroughfare; a vague memory of the river glinting in the summer sun; and one fleeting, fascinating, dream-pregnant hour at Madame Tussaud's.

But Ben's father was a curator at the Museum—a dreamy, vague man, like Charles Lamb, only without his powers of expression; and Ben being a silent child who never interrupted, Frith had for years taken him for what they called Evening Walks.

Thus Ben had seen much of this dear town, and Sandy was fired to do likewise.

He had told Ben about Sharrow—about the concrete Sharrow, not about the Feeling. That could not be talked

about, even if it were explainable ; but Ben rather scorned a mere house.

"Wait till you see London," was his invariable reply.

And now Sandy stood at the corner of Vauxhall Bridge Road, alone. It was half-past seven. He knew from Ben about the marvellous streams that every night but Sunday flow theatrewards. He knew of those most romantic things—the queues awaiting the opening of the pit and gallery doors ; he knew about the carriages, miles and miles of carriages, creeping in orderly sequence to the great doors of the theatres.

Something of the magic feeling inspired by Sharrow came over him as he stood there under a street lamp. It *was* going to be wonderful. Ben was right.

A tall gentleman in clergyman's dress with a little girl in either hand crossed the street to where he stood, and for a moment the lamplight fell on them all. The three looked at Sandy and he looked at them. They saw an ugly, red-headed schoolboy in clothes that were not shabby but were yet too small for him ; a schoolboy with a firm-pressed mouth as though he were thinking, and eyes that, until he turned to look at them, were full of dreams.

He saw a handsome man with a large, benevolent nose and the flexible lips of an orator, and two girls, the elder about his own age, the younger perhaps about ten. They wore ugly blue and white checked frocks, white stockings, "pork-pie" hats trimmed with bunches of red ribbons, and strange little cloaks. Sandy remembered these details all his life as he remembered their faces.

The elder girl had a dark, vivid face, with heavy eyebrows.

The little one was as pretty that night, in her hideous brown hat and cloak, as she was ten years later in the flower of her glorious youth. Sandy realized that he had never before seen blue eyes that were dark.

A great van lumbered by and, blocked for a moment, barred the way of the three people.

Sandy was staring at the little girl with such an expression of admiration that the gentleman laughed.

"What is your name, my boy?" he asked good-humouredly, but in a way that made Sandy know something of interest was coming.

"Sharrow, sir."

The gentleman nodded his head with satisfaction. "Of course it is—I knew it! And what are you—or were you—looking so hard at my little girl for?"

The little girl smiled and was lovelier than ever; but Sandy, overtaken by a fit of shyness, bolted away without an answer, his usual courtesies flown to the winds.

He walked down Victoria Street, into Queen Anne's Gate and crossed the Park. He was ashamed of his rudeness, but he could not help doing what he had done.

It was just as Frith had said. Frith had said: "You can't go out to post a letter in London without having an adventure."

And surely this was an adventure! Even now he could see the lovely faces of the two little girls and the smile of their father who had recognized Sandy for what he was.

But when he had reached the far side of the Park and turned down Pall Mall he forgot the adventure. It was the first time he had ever been alone in London and it was night, and— Yes, old Frith *had* been right. Hundreds of faces passed him, happy, miserable, sordid; well-dressed people, beggars—everyone knows what the boy saw that night, and many people can imagine what he felt.

In carriages lovely ladies (all ladies are lovely in carriages at night when one is Sandy's age), walking, girls just as pretty but—different, somehow. A drunken woman was hurried along by a majestic policeman. Her language reminded Sandy of old Sharrow.

Before the Haymarket Theatre he paused.

"It really was marvellous last night," a beautiful lady with voluminous pink skirts held well up round what she believed to be her ankles said to the man with her as they hurried from their carriage. "Mrs. Bancroft is the *most* enchanting little thing—"

Sandy decided to see Mrs. Bancroft.

At Piccadilly Circus he took the wrong turning, although the London-wise Frith had given him careful instructions—and turned up Glasshouse Street. Discovering his mistake, he retraced his steps and asked another big policeman to set him right.

The next thing of interest was a sign, "A. Milliken's, Silversmiths and Pawnbrokers." This place of business

was still open, and A. Milliken obviously doing what is known as a roaring trade.

For no particular reason, except that he would have liked to shake hands with the whole world that night, Sandy went in.

But A. Milliken, though glad to see him, would not let him stay.

"You'd better cut along 'ome, Mr. Sandy," that gentleman said coaxingly, "this is no place for a young gentleman, and Julia Bean would give it me 'ot if I let you stay. Clara would be delighted, though, if you'd go down the alley and into the 'ouse——"

But Sandy would not stop.

Sending his compliments to Mrs. Milliken with the dignity and grace that, inherited, no doubt, from his French mother as well as from those great courtiers, his ancestors, distinguished him except in his occasional shy fits, he went his way.

Guelph Square was very dark and very gloomy after the brightly-lighted streets he had left.

And it was cold. There was no wind, and the bare street stood motionless as if frozen. Outside Twenty-seven Sandy stopped.

His feeling about the divisions of his life into distinct parts was not wholly retrospective. He had a kind of vague feeling that night that it was an epoch-making one. Something had happened or was going to.

Upstairs in his mother's room there was a light; a shadow flitted across the blind; the drawing-room, too, was lighted. Inside there was warmth, and food, and Monsieur and Madame—as in his thoughts he still called them.

Outside it was cold and he was alone, but—it was London: Ben's London.

On the doorstep he paused again, his hand on the bell. No, not Ben's London; his—Sandy's. He had won it for himself that night. . . .

His father, his red hair ruffled as if he had been running a nervous hand through it, met him at the drawing-room door.

"How are you?" he said. "A happy birthday to you."

Sandy stared. Never before had his father remembered his birthday.

"How did you know?"

Sydney Sharrow laughed nervously. "Your mother told me. It is a curious, a most curious coincidence——"

"Where is she—mother, I mean?"

"Upstairs. She—she is not well——"

Sandy looked round the unhomelike room. The very tall red curtains were drawn, under their gilt cornices, the medallioned carpet looked more worn than he had remembered it. The chairs looked as stiff and as slippery as ever, and the lamp smelt, just as it had always smelt.

"Not well?" Sandy was not alarmed. Alarm was not the feeling in the air.

"No. You may come up and see——" Sydney Sharrow coughed—"them."

"Them?"

"Yes. You—you have a brother. Born this morning."

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTMAS is always a magic time to an imaginative little boy, and that particular Christmas was the most wonderful of all our Sandy's little-boyhood.

To begin with, Sydney Sharrow had apparently found in this, his second fatherhood, that which had escaped him in his first. Sandy never again wished, even subconsciously, to call him Monsieur; out of Monsieur, the little mulberry-coloured creature upstairs had created Sandy's Father.

Even Bean and Cook noticed the difference.

"A different gentleman entirely," Bean declared with satisfaction, and Cook nodded genially. She disliked her master, but she was a good soul and rejoiced in the bits of good luck that came to others.

"About time," she qualified her approval with. "It's Sandy as 'll see the change."

Sandy did.

His mother, too, prettier than ever in her new pallor and slenderness, adorned with lace and ribbons, and as pleased with her baby as if it had been a toy, and she a child, seemed to love Sandy more than before. He was still a trifle distant in his manner towards her—as her former ways had taught him to be; but his politeness gradually thawed in the warm, steamy, scented atmosphere of the nursery at bath-time.

Little Syd, handsome as he was to become later, was in the days of his extreme newness as ugly as most other small infants.

He was indefinite as to feature, deplorably hairless, and of a strange over-ripe hue. As a generic specimen he needs no description. But to Sandy he was George MacDonald's "Baby Dear" just dropped from the skies, whence, as the Scottish poet declares, he had got his eyes of blue.

His eyes were to be a melting hazel, splashed with dark

grey ; but that Christmas they were of the milky purple common to his age. He was a tiresome baby and frequently yelled ; to Sandy there was music in his wildest and most sustained shrieks.

Bony Sandy, with a pillow on his uncushioned knees, was sometimes allowed to hold the angel, and his ecstasy was strange to see. The arrival of Syd had been a complete surprise to him, and he was even now not quite certain whence the child had come. He had outgrown the belief common to children on this nice point, but he had as yet acquired no other to supersede it. The subject had never interested him.

But one evening, when his mother had gone to sleep, and he and his father in their new companionship sat together by the library fire, Sandy approached it.

"Father," he asked point-blank, "how *do* little babies come?"

Sydney Sharrow started. He was an easy-going man, who explained his mental laziness by saying that he took things as they came. He had never given a thought to this side of his son's development, and for a moment was disconcerted.

Then he said simply : "Oh, you want to know about that? Then I'll tell you."

And Sandy listened gravely, while his father did what the Germans call sexually enlighten him.

Sharrow did his part well. He was graphic, clear, clean. And Sandy accepted his new knowledge in the same way.

After a *very* short version of the usual lecture had been added to the facts, the father said : "So there you are, my boy!"

And Sandy, staring into the fire, repeated slowly : "So there I am."

He never forgot the scene, though at the time it did not, thanks to his father's instinctive skill, either particularly impress or particularly interest him.

He never forgot his father's grave, polite manner ; the crackle of the wood fire through the words ; the shadows on the ugly steel-grey walls against which the books made a not very imposing array.

A picture of Queen Victoria holding the infant Prince of Wales in her arms hung by the mantelpiece, and somehow the good lady's pretty, proud smile, as she bent over her

baby, seemed to give a kind of benediction to Sharrow's words.

In future years Queen Victoria and the little Prince always seemed to have assisted at an important scene in Sandy's life; and perhaps this fact added in some obscure way to the intense loyalty that was born in him.

"A queer kid, Sandy is," Sydney Sharrow told his wife that night, as he sat with her during young Sydney's late supper. When he had told her in what way he considered their elder a queer offshoot she smiled, her sudden brilliant smile that charmed him as much as it had the day he married her.

"I wonder whether he'll be like you," she explained, "or like—the ozzers?"

She had long since mastered the difficult Britannic "th," but, like a wise woman, still used the pretty soft substitute for it of her early married life. Her husband liked her to say "ozzers," so she said it. Wherein lieth wisdom of an order not mean.

"Like—the Old Chief? My dear Antoinette, my father was dominated by his wife, as you know; and in me, my mother dominates. I am a mistake, as a Sharrow. I have none of their faults and none of their virtues. Sandy is different. He is a throw-back. He is a triple essence of Sharrow. Be quite sure of that. If only——" he broke off and gazed absently at the mossy head of his younger son as it nestled on his wife's breast.

She understood. "I know. If only they would *all* die, the old gentleman, the *curé* and the boys. But they will not. Except in books, people don't."

"I don't want them to die," he retorted, a little shocked, as he often was, by the nakedness of her opinions; "but I wish—I wish that old fool of a grandfather of mine had had the wits to get married properly."

She was silent for a minute, and then she said: "Sydney, my dear, I am so glad that you are *not* triple essence de Sharrow."

"Are you, my dear?"

Very Victorian, the little scene, the stiffly furnished bedroom, with its satin-striped wallpaper, its ugly engravings, its wool-work fire-screen, whereon disported a Chinese lady with most un-Chinese red cheeks and modestly un-Chinese petticoats.

Between the windows, with their closely-drawn red stuff curtains, stood a broad muslin-hung dressing-table, like a strayed, shapeless ballet-girl. In the next room the baby's nurse, nearly as shapeless, but not in the least resembling a ballet-girl, coughed dismally from time to time. Mrs. Humple disliked husbands who interrupted *her* baby's meals, and had often warned her baby's mother that if she talked or laughed during these functions the baby would subsequently have pain and roar in the night.

Sydney Sharrow liked his wife to be glad he was not all Sharrow.

"Why, dear?" he asked presently, as Mrs. Humple lumbered in, as if the soles of her feet were round, and took the baby away.

"Because for a mere frivolous Frenchwoman they would be—very unsatisfactory, my dear. They are so bony and rough—mentally—and they only think of their land. *Mon Dieu! rien que de leurs terres ils pensent, ces gens-là!*" she broke out, and he knew that she meant what she said. Only at moments of deep sincerity did she speak French.

He remembered her meeting with old Sharrow at the Royal Academy one day many years before, and how the old man had terrified and infuriated her by his gruff acknowledgment of her existence. He had no right to be gruff, for Sydney was not his heir, even remotely, and, therefore, could marry to suit himself alone; but the old man was cross that day, and he hated Frenchwomen (after, it was hinted, a fairly exhaustive study of them).

So he had been as nearly rude as possible, and Antoinette had felt her beauty and youth insulted, and never forgave him.

"I hope Sandy—the other one—will marry a—a—something quite awful," she went on vindictively, as Sydney rose; and I hope he will be very fast and very troublesome, and lead the old bear—a—a bear's dance!"

"Hardly likely, you little fiend. Or, at least, he will sow his wild oats *before* he marries, and then marry well. They all do. My God! if you could see the portraits of the wives!" He laughed.

"Excellent brood-mares, without a doubt," she answered which was desperately coarse in '75.

CHAPTER XII

"MY DEAR MOTHER,
"Won't you please write and tell me how Syd is? It is nearly two months since I heard from you or father, and I can't help worrying about him (about the baby). I had such awful dreams about him last night. Ben Frith says it is because I eat too much goes of cheese at supper. But I don't like it's light. Is he all right? Do please write at once. Do you all go to Paris, or didn't you? Is father all right again? I was rotten in Latin, but did awfully well in Greek. That's because Greek is so pretty and Latin so ugly.

I got here yesterday, and Sandy and Keith were both already here. Paul has the measles and couldn't come. He is going to be a parson Keith says. Glad I'm not. Grandfather has been having a bout, and it's cross as seven sticks; but he seems glad to see me. He says I grow more like him every day, but I think he says it only to be nasty.

Sharrow is looking glorious. I do love Easter, anyhow, it's such a nice new season. Everything is as green as it can be, and there are lots of crocuses in the park, and tulips and things in the gardens. I do wish little Syd could see

I told Grandfather all about him, but he didn't seem interested. Syd will be playing in the old bowling-alley; won't that hurt him to fall down. I suppose he is learning to walk, or is eight months too young? And has he any teeth yet? A fellow here says he ought to have at least four by this time. His little sister did. But Ben says he's only teasing me.

"I had a grand gallop this morning on my new horse. His name is Roderick Dhu, and he's a beauty. Wasn't Grandfather splendid to give him to me?

Give my love to Father. I wish Syd was old enough for me to write to him. How is his hair coming on? Do write soon

"Your affectionate son,

"SANDY SHARROW."

By which it will be seen that Sydney Sharrow and his wife Antoinette had not written to their big son for weeks.

As a matter of fact, Sydney was in Paris, amusing himself after a row with his wife, and she had gone to Brighton with the Baby, and quite forgotten the boy at Marlborough.

She could not help this. It was her nature to care for but one person or one thing at a time, and for the present her baby engrossed her utterly.

She loved her husband, but they had always quarrelled every now and then, and when they did so, they always separated for a time.

As to him, he loved her, but was gaily, irresponsibly unfaithful to her; in a way as common, though less frankly so, in '76 as it is to-day.

In this he was emphatically not a Sharrow—nor in his comparative untruthfulness. Being a gentleman, he considered himself truthful; but being other things as well, his instinct was always to avoid trouble, and that instinct has made more liars than the busy devil himself.

So there they were, the Sydney Sharrows, at Easter-time, in 1884, the father in Paris, doing those things which he ought not to have done; the mother in Brighton, leaving undone those things (with regard to her elder boy) which she ought to have done; and Sandy himself at Sharrow, both doing and leaving undone with the innocence of fourteen.

And the old house laid on him, for the second time, the spell of its age, its beauty, its mystery.

Lord Snarrow, who of late had been drinking far too much, was, as the boy wrote, very cross and very violent. No one pleased him, not even his faithful valet, Waters.

Sandy the Heir bored him, not altogether unnaturally, for Sandy the Heir was a conventional-minded youth, busy at that time in moulding himself after the ideal Etonian. Keith was afraid of his grandfather, and showed it, and so he was nearly hated by the old man.

Our Sandy came nearer than anyone else to amusing his unreverend relation.

"You are least ugly enough to deserve my consideration," he told the boy, the evening after Sandy had written to his mother. "No fine-lady face about you!"

Sandy grinned. "No, I suppose not. I shall look just like you, Grandfather, when I am as old and my face is as red. Particularly the nose," he added meditatively.

Lord Sharrow swore. Then he laughed.

"What makes my nose red, do you think?" he asked maliciously, sure that this question would floor his opponent.

"Brandy," said Sandy, with serenity.

The day was his.

Old Sharrow was a tyrant, but he was not a bully, and he had a sense of humour that belonged rather to our generation than to his. Humour was not rife in the great Queen's reign, though wit was more often met with than it is nowadays. So this time he laughed long and loud, and gave Sandy a sovereign, which Sandy would not take, saying that no boy ought to be tipped for cheeking his grandfather.

They parted better friends than ever, and the lonely old man sat for a long time staring into the fire, wondering not altogether unblasphemously why the gentlemanly Sandy was his heir instead of Sandy the Bold and Bad.

The next morning at five our Sanct and Keith crept downstairs, boots in hand, and paid a stealthy visit to the larder preparatory to a long tramp. There was a glorious feeling of adventure in the air as they stole past Lord Sharrow's door. It almost seemed that if he awoke he would instantly slay them, and that, of course, was a sensation to be cherished. A board creaked, and they both turned cold and slightly damp with terror.

"Husssh!" hissed Keith, who was the more articulate of the two. Sandy frowned hideously, and for a long moment they stood as if transfixed. Then, nothing happening, they went on their way.

Cold sausage, bread and butter, milk, and quite half of a large lemon cheese-cake having somewhat assuaged their appetites, the two pirates put on their boots and went out by the kitchen door into the morning.

They were going to see a forbidden person living about five miles away: half a gipsy, wholly a poacher, was Jasper Glidden; a man of low and mysterious associates; a man versed in the ways of ferrets, and rats, and prize-fighters. A man, in short, who had been warned off Sharrow lands, and to speak to whom the boys were strictly forbidden.

But Glidden was, amongst other things, a breeder of dogs, and according to the valuable information of a stable-boy (secretly related to him), he had at present a litter of invaluable animals, one of which Jim knew he'd just give away to the young gentlemen.

And to secure this animal the contraband expedition was planned.

The morning was a beautiful late April one, the trees misty with lace-like leaves, the grass glistening with dew ; and in the distance someone with a real gift was whistling a queer little fluty tune that Sandy had never before heard.

It was a pretty, simple melody, redeemed from entire commonplaceness by a little twist at the end, and as the boys crossed the park, Sandy screwed up his thin lips and began whistling it too.

"Pretty tune," remarked Keith, stopping to re-tie his bootlace. Sandy walked on, whistling under his breath.

The melody seemed to him a part of the morning, an expression of the feeling of beautiful adventure that was abroad in the green, clean world.

Now it so happened that the invisible whistler was an early ploughboy leaving his recent job for one on a distant farm. He passed on out of earshot, after walking outside the far-off wall parallel with our adventurers for some three minutes. He never came back, they never knew who he was, they had not even seen him.

So Sandy never knew what the tune was ; he never heard anyone else whistle it except years later, a servant of his own, who had, as he expressed it, picked it up, like, from his master.

"Never whistle it again, Anderson," Sandy said. "I—never whistle it again, please."

And Anderson never did.

The boys went out by the river meadow, wetting their feet in crossing the stream, and then tramped along the high road for a mile or two, when, on crossing a big bit of common land, they achieved the presence of Mr. Glidden. The dog which was, in another way, as "igstraordinary an animal" as his present owner declared it to be, changed hands after half an hour's thrilling parley, and trammelled by a bit of rope was led by its new masters homewards.

"Fine dog," commented Sandy gravely, as they reached the stream. "I like the strain of bull in him—eh, Keith?"

The dog, whose hindquarters sloped in a way suggestive of the swift greyhound, looked up at the speaker and put out its tongue. He had only one eye, owing to an accident

occurring shortly after birth ; but Mr. Glidden had pointed out the luminosity and beauty of the remaining one.

" I say, Sandy, he almost winked at you ! "

Sandy and the beast looked at each other, and then Sandy said : " You've named him, Keith. A winker he is, and Winker he shall be ! "

CHAPTER XIII

IT was still early. The clock was striking seven as the travellers reached the path leading to the little Norman church. Early service was well regarded in '76.

Several people were turning in at the open gate, and looking up the path, Sandy stood still.

"There goes Mrs. Burbage. I say! what a bonnet! And old Tinker. Oh, and Sally Dingle. Jolly girl, Sally Dingle."

Then, across the road from the Vicarage, even now nearly hidden among the trees, came a tall, thin gentleman.

"Is that the parson, Keith?"

"Yes. Mr. Wymondham. He's been away all winter. One of his children is delicate," announced Keith, as though he himself had long since left childhood and its frailties behind him.

Winker, it was plain, did not like clergymen. As the Vicar drew nearer, the bull in the dog for the moment predominated, and he assumed a fierce attitude, strained at his rope and growled.

The Vicar, his thoughts obviously on higher things, did not notice, and then something awful happened. Winker jumped, his full weight on the rope. He jumped, he growled; he was a beast of much menace. Sandy, holding to the rope with all his strength, endeavoured to quiet him, yet swelled with pride. No nice boy wants his dog to devour a clergyman, but there is no doubt about Sandy's satisfaction in his dog's ferocity.

Mr. Wymondham glanced kindly at the two boys as he passed, and was about to make some remark, when the rope broke off short, and the man-eating Winker, propelled by his own weight, rolled down the slope and was stopped by the clergyman's thin black legs.

Sandy gave a cry of alarm and dashed to the rescue, but

Winker, lying flat on his back, looked up at Mr. Wymondham with a craven smile, dangling his paws idiotically.

"Oh—I'm so sorry," said Keith.

"Not at all, Keith. He—he seems an amiable dog."

And Sandy and Keith were left alone, the sprawling boaster between them.

After a minute shame gave way to mirth, and they were laughing helplessly, when someone else came down the path from the Vicarage—two people, to be exact.

One, a tall, very thin lady in brown; the other, a little girl in a pink frock and a mushroom hat, round which lay a wreath of roses.

Sandy stood quite still, the broken rope dangling from his hand.

She was the most beautiful little girl he had ever seen.

And—vaguely—she seemed familiar to him. Had he seen her before?"

"Good-morning, Viola," Keith was saying.

"Good-morning, Keith."

The little girl had a prayer-book in her hands; she was going to church.

Nodding to Keith, she passed on, followed by her governess, who presently turned.

"Oh, Keith, when Mary comes, will you tell her to hurry, please? She'll be late otherwise."

Winker arose, arranged himself truculently in a sitting posture and looked up, as much as to say: "I am a dog to beware of."

The bell gave a final tinkle, the church path was empty.

"Come along, Sandy; Winker 'll be hungry," said Keith.

Sandy glanced at Winker.

"Who was that girl?"

"Viola Wymondham, of course. Isn't she pretty? Mary's better fun, though. Come along."

They went home, and after a hasty breakfast Sandy broke tacit faith with Keith and went out again alone.

He went back to the church and during a prayer peeped in. She was there, the pink girl, her face hidden in her hands. He had no idea how long matins could last, and presently wandered down the slope at the back of the church, and amused himself with a brook that ran there, until the sound of voices should tell him that Viola Wymondham had come into the every-day world again.

At the foot of the slope he stood still.

A pink-frocked, flower-hatted girl stood in the brook nearly up to her middle, her skirts high-tucked. She was poking in the bed of the stream with a long stick.

Sandy stared, thinking for a minute that it must be Viola. Then he remembered Mary, mentioned by the governess.

"Hallo!"

The pink girl turned. "Hallo yourself!"

"If you are Mary Wymondham you're going to catch it from your governess," he said with a chuckle. "For not going to church, I mean."

She did not answer him, but stood with her dark brows drawn together.

"Who are you?" she said at length; adding before he had time to speak: "Oh, I know. You're a Sharrow. We saw you at Christmas-time on an island——"

"I wasn't on an island at Christmas-time. I was in London——"

"Idiot! I mean an island in the street. It was outside Victoria Station. And Father asked you if you weren't a Sharrow."

Sandy remembered. He did not remember this long-legged, ugly child, but he had not forgotten her beautiful sister.

She explained that having run down to see if the lilies-of-the-valley were *ever* going to come up, she had dropped her prayer-book into the brook, and was fishing for it.

Two minutes later Sandy was in the water, and she on the bank, drying her legs with tufts of damp grass.

And when church was over, and he just coming out of the brook, down the slope walked Viola.

"Oh, Mary!" she cried, pink with haste, "Miss Carbunkell is so angry with you!"

Sandy stood with wet legs, looking at her, and as he looked he found himself singing under his breath the plough-boy's melody.

CHAPTER XIV

SANDY was not a romantic boy, except in the matter of Sharrow. He did not, as boys of fourteen sometimes do, fall in love with Viola Wymondham at that most untender age.

He did not write poetry to her, or pluck garlands to deck her brow. But they became the greatest of friends, and there was in his manner, even when he teased her, a something of gentleness that Mary never experienced.

Mary, of the high cheek-bones and rather Mongolian black eyes, was to him nearly the same as another boy; Viola was, if not The Girl, at least, Girl.

She was a good child, obedient and quiet-tempered, and, as such, harvested much love from everyone around her. Mary, rather bold, and unbeautifully brave, joined with the others in adoring her sister.

Day after day, during the Easter vacation, the four children played together in the budding summer weather.

Keith and Mary were usually partners, while Sandy taught Viola various things she had never dreamed of. As a parson's child she objected to birds'-nesting, but she loved to draw the leaves aside and look at the timid, nesting mother. All her life she loved birds.

They had games of cricket, too, but Viola's little right thumb got hurt one morning; so that in the future Sandy always trembled for her, and preferred her to look on.

She it was who told him the names of all the different flowers as they came up, and in her little garden the boy worked manfully, digging, planting and weeding, while she squatted idly by his side, looking on.

She was, as Keith had said, delicate, and her delicacy looked like laziness when one did not know.

Sandy learned to recognize it in a very uncomfortable way.

They were coming home to the Vicarage for lunch one warm morning, and he challenged her to race up the slope.

"Miss Carbunkell doesn't like me to run," she said hesitatingly.

"Nonsense, Vi; don't be a laze. Come along!"

So on they flew, Sandy gallantly remaining a little behind her. Just as they reached the top of the slope the little girl paused, held out one hand as in warning, and dropped as if she had been shot.

When Sandy reached her and took her up, her head fell back on his arm, and the dreadful limpness of her neck nearly turned him sick.

He gave a loud cry, half a call, half a shriek. And at the sound the Vicar came hurrying out of one of the French windows of his study.

He was a kind, just man, but at the sight of his daughter lying apparently lifeless in Sandy's arms, he gave vent in his fright to a few sharp words of reproof to the boy.

"You young idiot! You've been letting her run; she may be dead."

He carried Viola into the house, and Sandy stood alone in the sunshine, the very trees crumbling round him.

In the cool study, cold water and a few drops of *sal volatile* brought Viola to herself in a very short time; and she was soon sitting very comfortably enthroned in all the glories of her father's leather arm-chair. She and the Vicar adored each other, whereas Mary, who greatly resembled his late wife, the good man treated with an uneasy politeness rather amusing to those who remembered his treatment of Mrs. Wymondham. Viola, who was quite unlike her mother, the Vicar, nearly an old man although his children were so young, understood and idolized.

In one of his writing-table drawers dwelt a blue china box, always full of sweets, and now the invalid partook of them recklessly. The Vicar said little to her of her fainting fit; it was considered wiser to ignore these occurrences as much as possible.

They talked desultorily of pleasant things, the little girl, of course, enjoying herself with great thoroughness.

The Empire clock struck one and Viola gave a little jump.

"But where's Sandy, Daddy?" she said. "He'll want to wash his hands before lunch."

Poor Mr. Wymondham felt a pang of remorse ; he had clean forgotten the boy.

" I will go and find him, my love," he answered, and went out by the window.

To his horror Sandy was still standing in the middle of the lawn where he had left him, his eyes fixed with a strange glassy stare on the window through which the Vicar had come.

" Sandy ! "

Sandy did not move for what seemed a very long time. Then he frowned, cleared his throat, and speculation came back to his blank eyes.

" Is—is she dead ? " he asked.

" Nonsense ! of course she's not dead ! " The Vicar was frightened again and again cross. " Come on in to lunch. But, mind, you must *never* let her run again."

" I didn't let her, sir. I *made* her," the boy retorted quickly. " She said Miss Carbunkell didn't like her to run, and I laughed at her ; so she did. It would have been my fault," he went on doggedly, his mouth in its grimness so like his grandfather's, that even absent-minded Mr. Wymondham noticed it, " if she *was* dead."

" Never mind that. Come in to lunch. Only, remember, *never* let her run again."

They went into the big, dark dining-room, with its huge buffet like a catafalque, its ugly old portraits, its massive silver, and had a very good lunch of the old-fashioned kind. Sandy took a big slab of roast mutton on his plate, but found, to his horror, that he simply could not eat it. He had no appetite for the first time in his life.

He never forgot that meal, to the horror of which Mary added by giving him a tremendous wiggling about his crime in allowing Viola to run. And Viola, who, in spite of all the spoiling was not a bit spoiled, ate much milk-pudding and smiled at everybody.

It was the last day but one before the return to school, and the next day it rained so that Sandy, who was afflicted with a slight sore throat, was forbidden to go to the Vicarage. To console himself he repaired to the vast attic with Keith, and they had a fine game of hide-and-seek among the myriad heterogeneous objects stored there.

Any garret is interesting, but this huge old place at Sharrow was really full of fascination ; it had been a store-house for so many years.

There were trunks full of ancient finery, brocades and velvets; broken chairs and sofas, a spinet, boxes full of papers that looked very dull and piles of dusty books banished from the library as it was improved. There were old curtains packed in camphor; there was a four-poster bed without a mattress; there was a sedan chair and the bath-chair in which grandmother Sharrow had been drawn through the park by a donkey.

The boys, of course, loved the place.

"I say, Keith, let's play 'I choose,' shall we?"

Keith agreed, and at a signal both boys darted about, peering behind and under things, opening boxes, drawing aside screens and chairs, seeking the thing they should "choose" for their own.

Sandy had just chosen an embroidery frame in which still flaunted a pernicious bit of wool-work of the sixties, when the other Sandy called his brother from the foot of the stairs.

"Keith—come along and explain to Barker about the packing, will you?"

Keith departed glumly, and Sandy sat down in a corner under a very cobwebby beam and looked at his treasure. After all, it wasn't pretty. He would choose something else.

"Hallo! What's that?"

It was a neatly-made chest about a foot long and a little less in width, with a rounded cover and an ivory keyhole. The wood was very light with a narrow border of some darker kind.

The box was locked, but it was old; and as the boy worked at it the hinge gave way and he could open it.

It was a medicine chest!

"I choose this," said Sandy aloud, delighted beyond words. There were four squat bottles with glass stoppers and engraved flowers on their sides. There were four little glass boxes, a long, rat-tailed silver spoon and a thing like a very flexible, narrow paper-knife—a powder-mixer, though Sandy did not know this.

And in one of the boxes there still remained a few grains of some coarse powder.

A most enchanting find.

Sandy sat there touching the things lovingly, sniffing at the bottles, his mind back in Charles the Second's time. As

a matter of fact the chest was Georgian, but that did not spoil the boy's dream.

He imagined a doctor jogging along dark lanes on his way to some sick person with the chest strapped to his saddle. Possibly it had even been taken to the succour of the poor king himself, who might have been taken ill while indulging in his favourite game of hiding in some luckless gentleman's chimney—

"I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't hear," Sandy stammered fearfully; for it was almost a shocking thing, so surprising was it, to find Lord Sharrow standing before him in that dusky, dusty place.

"I told Keith not to come just yet—I wanted to see how you amused yourself. So this is it. What have you found there?"

The old man fumbled at the hasp of the nearest window and as the dusty glass swung inwards a small square of watery sunlight showed on the floor.

"It's a—a medicine chest."

"Oh! And you were dreaming over it?"

Sandy blushed. It is a horrid word to a boy, dreaming.

"No, sir; I was just—imagining things—"

Lord Sharrow, who looked very old and very frail as he sat on a banished wood-box, took the chest and looked at it.

"Very pretty. Someone's travelling medicine cupboard."

"Oh, I thought it must have belonged to a doctor."

The old man glanced sharply at him.

"Have you ever heard of a Sharrow being a doctor?" he inquired.

He, too, opened the old box and sniffed at its contents; he, too, opened the bottles; and he declared he could smell spirits in one. They both laughed at the joke.

From the floor below a big clock boomed out five strokes.

"Tea-time," said Lord Sharrow. It seemed that there was a certain wistfulness in his voice and in his eyes.

"I—I wanted to tell you, my boy," he began, as he rose, "but—there's not much use." Then he burst out: "It's a damnable shame, that's what it is!"

Sandy stared. "What is, Grandfather?"

In the quick-gathering twilight the old man laid his hand heavily on the boy's shoulder.

"That you are not my heir."

"Oh!"

"Yes. You ought to be. You are a real Sharrow; you are as ugly, as red-headed and—and pig-headed as the rest of us. And you have got the love of it all—the old name, the old place. You—*feel* it. That young prig, the other Sandy, would as soon own—Blenheim Palace as Sharrow!"

Sandy did not speak, but he understood. Sharrow was in his very bones that afternoon.

"Where's that ring I gave you?" went on his grandfather suddenly.

"On my watch-chain. Mother said——"

"Never mind what your mother said. You are to wear it on your finger. From this day on. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well—don't forget. And—when I die, you are to have five hundred a year of your own. It's all I can leave away from my heir, and you shall have every penny of it."

Sandy stammered something incoherent. Five hundred a year of his own at his grandfather's death meant nothing to him. He was embarrassed and miserable in the presence of an emotion he hardly understood, and though grateful in a vague way he wanted to run downstairs and get out of doors.

The old man suddenly understood and released him.

"There—you may go on ahead. Take the medicine chest to my room and I'll have it cleaned and put in order and you may have it. It's of no intrinsic value, but—you like it. *Don't* you?" he added again with the sad wistfulness of the old trying to get into touch with the young.

"Oh, yes, sir," Sandy answered readily, for this gift meant more to him than that future one of five hundred a year.

"Thank you so much."

But he did not go on ahead.

He went slowly downstairs with the old man and presently left him by the fire in his study, the yellow box shining in the firelight beside him.

PART II

AT THREE-AND-TWENTY

CHAPTER XV

ON the evening of the 21st December, 1883, Sandy Sharrow and Ben Frith his friend turned out of Piccadilly Circus at about seven o'clock and went along Shaftesbury Avenue.

It was a wild night the air was heavy and nearly greasy with the on-coming of a fog, the streets coated with a shiny, slippery mud.

"A real London night," Ben Frith said, waggling his head with satisfaction in a little way peculiar to him. "Makes one think of Dickens, doesn't it?"

Sandy looked down at him. "Makes *me* think of little Syd," he answered, his ugly face tender. "I wonder if he'll like his watch?"

"Like it? A gold watch at eight! I should rather think he would. I know someone who won't care for the crest being on it, however," he added a minute later, dodging two stout women who seemed bent on reducing his little body to powder between them as they struggled to pass each other.

"You mean my great-uncle. No, *he* won't like it, and I don't care whether he does or not."

Sandy's face was grim now and Ben was silent. They afforded a great study in contrast, these two young men.

Sandy was over six foot tall and singularly well-proportioned. Even women realized that his grace of bearing must mean strength; but men who knew the significance of proportion looked long at him.

To crown his beautiful body, however, remained the old ugly Sharrow face, intensified by manhood. His white brows still beetled over small, three-cornered grey eyes; his nose was large and bony; his mouth long and thin-lipped. And under his immaculate silk hat, which was slightly on one side, one caught a glimpse of very red hair, now well-brushed and glossy, for Sandy was a dandy.

Ben Frith was so small that he might almost have gone into one of the pockets of the light coat his friend wore. His face was paper-white; his brow too broad, too high, too bumpy. And his one good feature—beautiful, happy, brown eyes—were hidden from the casual observer by thick-glassed spectacles, behind which they seemed to bulge like those of certain ants.

The friendship of the two young men had lasted without a break ever since they had met on Sandy's first appearance at Winchester, and it was one of those beautiful friendships that boys sometimes keep to the ends of very long lives. I say boys keep, because however old the two men may live to be, in the friendship itself they remain boys to the last.

Presently they crossed to the other side of the busy street.

Ben spoke again. "How long is it since you saw him?"

"Just two years. Let's not talk about him. It always makes me angry."

Sandy's frown drew his brows down in the old, hideous way and under his young moustache, which was the pride of his heart and as fluffy as a small bird's breast feathers, his mouth was stern, the lower lip jutting out.

Ben, however, persisted mildly as was his way. "But, Sandy—it *would* be nice to have five hundred a year, now wouldn't it? Think of all we could do with it."

Neither of them noticed the "we."

"I know. I'd love it! And God knows I need it. Syd has got to go to a good school—I wonder how on earth——" He broke off abruptly.

"He's awfully old, Sandy." Ben took his friend's arm as he spoke. "Why don't you make up with him?"

"Because he's old? Or because I want the money? Shame on you, Ben!"

They had nearly reached the far end of the crowded street

and stood waiting for a break in the traffic. On the near side, outside a small public-house, stood a cart drawn by a miserable, heart-broken-looking white horse. It was a horse whose mere aspect sufficed to make one sorry for it, but as the two young men watched it, something happened.

Its owner, a short, burly Italian, came out of the public-house and, climbing into the cart, struck his poor beast with his whip.

Perhaps he was not a bad man; perhaps he had children and was good to them; perhaps some woman loved him. (Ben's remarks later.)

But he was tired and cross, and the brick-hauling business had been bad that day. Also, the emollient wines of his own land being inaccessible to him, he had been partaking of cheap British gin.

So when his horse stumbled and fell in an irritating, fumbling, unnecessary sort of way, the man climbed down, swearing violently, and began beating it with the wrong end of his whip.

"Sandy—I say—stop him!" Ben's face had a sort of white tremor that Sandy knew meant a deep craving for blood.

Sandy stepped forward. "I say, stop that," he said to the Italian. "Stop it."

"Damn—a you, mind your own b-beeziness," was the answer, and the force of the blows was redoubled.

It was a disgusting exhibition of sheer cruelty. Anyone would have been justified in stopping it. But when the whip struck the miserable animal in the eye and blood gushed down its poor white face, Sandy lost his head. He wrenched the whip out of the man's hand and threw it down; then he picked the man up and in a moment had bent him double and sent him spinning after the whip.

It all happened in the drawing of a breath. The usual mushroom-grown crowd had hardly had time to spring up from under the paving stones; Ben's expression had hardly had time to change from the blood-thirsty to the terrified, before Sandy, his own face as white as a sunburned, healthy face ever can be, found himself under arrest.

The policeman, who happened to love animals, was sorry to have to perform this particular duty, but his duty it was, and the two young men speedily found themselves, together with the Italian (very sick and very much frightened,

and much more uncertain on his legs than was strictly necessary), on their way to the nearest police-station.

Sandy walked in silence, the peculiar grace of his carriage, the famous Sharrow walk, accentuated by his angry embarrassment. Ben trotted beside him, casting an occasional anxious glance at his face.

"Shall I go on and explain?" he asked presently.

"No."

"But Syd——"

Sandy shook his head. "No. Perhaps someone will bail me out. I say," he interrupted himself sharply and stood still. "I say—Milliken!"

They were passing a small pawnbroker's shop, in the door of which, agog with the pleasant excitement of seeing a gentleman under arrest, stood a small fat man. On hearing his name he came forward, pushing his way through Sandy's now stationary bodyguard of loafers and small boys.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he cried, "if it ain't Mr. Sandy!"

Milliken was dirty, he was not shaven; the large diamond in his checked red-and-white shirt-front was offensively false, but he was a friend in need.

Was he not Bean's own brother-in-law? And had he not known Sandy since that gentleman was a very small one indeed in embroidered muslin?

Sandy explained, and Milliken, thrilled to his more or less disreputable bones, accompanied the party to its destination.

"Still got the red 'air, I see, sir," he ventured, "although you're so grown. My word, but you're a fine big gentleman. Bigger than ever your poor father was, sir."

"Yes."

"Julia Bean was in to see the wife the other day," continued Milliken, hopping over something he had only just perceived to be a component part of the group, a strangely built white dog, "and she told us the news. To think of Master Syd being twelve years old." Then, because he was a sentimental pawnbroker, he added: "'Ow time do fly, to be sure, sir."

Sandy shut him up and explained briefly why he had called him. Milliken was delighted; Milliken was easy to delight.

Half-an-hour later the friendly policeman having dwelt on the horrid nature of Sandy's provocation, Sandy was set

free on bail provided by the pawnbroker, and the three men, followed by the strange-looking dog, went back to Shaftesbury Avenue.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Milliken," Sandy said as they reached the little man's door. "I should have hated to spend to-night in quod—it's—it's my brother's birthday."

"Is it now? Bless my soul, so it is, so it is! Why, I remember the day he was born. Clara was not well 'erself—it was only a few days before our twins was born. If we might take the liberty, sir, of sending the young gent a small token—it would give the wife and me great pleasure——"

The little man darted into his shop, and in a moment reappeared with a small silver-topped riding-crop in his hand. This he insisted on Sancy's accepting, and after renewed civilities and thanks, our two young men finally went on their way.

"The trouble is," Ben was saying as they came to the Square, "that some day you *will* kill somebody. You must learn to realize how strong you are, dear old chap."

Sandy nodded without pride, and without any particular interest.

"I know. It's my temper that does it. Once I'm thoroughly angry I forget, you see. I say, Ben—there's the house. Lights all over it. I suppose the poor little chap has been waiting. Let's hurry."

Ben smiled. He was of those who give everything they have to everyone. His knowledge, which was rather unusual for so young a man, his simple art of living, his very scant money—these things were at the disposition of anyone. Only one thing he kept for himself. The meaning of a little, queer, tender smile that sometimes came to his face. And this was the smile with which he glanced up at his big friend as the big friend said: "I suppose the poor little chap has been waiting."

There was wistfulness in the smile, and deep love, and something like mother-pity.

It was quiet in Guelph Square. The bare trees stood motionless in the heavy atmosphere. The threatened fog was beginning to creep along, rounding the angles of the houses, blurring the lights, deadening the sounds of traffic. The two young men's footfalls seemed loud in the comparative silence. They walked briskly on until they reached

Twenty-seven, whose number was painted in white on the ruby-coloured fanlight over the door.

Sandy stood still, looking up.

And then there came to them, from a half-open window on the drawing-room floor, that most beautiful and thrilling of all sounds—a boy's voice, singing :

“ Good King Wenceslaus looked out
On the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay all about
Crisp and cold and even.”

If Ben Frith had had no idea who the singer was, he would, after one look at Sandy, have known. Only one person on the wide earth could bring just that look to Sandy's face.

As the song went on, the young voice, as pure and true as an angel's must be, Sandy, without looking round, laid his hand on Ben's shoulder, and the two stood thus linked while in the drawing-room little Syd sang on.

CHAPTER XVI

OPENING the door with his latchkey, Sandy led the way into the house, and having taken off their coats and hats, the two went quietly upstairs.

The singing had ceased, but someone was playing, and playing very well, a berceuse of Gottschalk's.

"Who is it?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. Probably the new governess."

Then they went in.

The room was little changed since that night nine years ago, when Sandy had learned that Sharrow was a real place, and not just a picture.

There was chintz now on the sofa and chairs, and flowers in vases and bowls, but the tall windows wore the same ugly red curtains, and the wall-paper was the old one.

By the small basket grate, which glowed cosily, sat Mrs. Sharrow, dressed in flowing periwinkle-coloured silk; near her, on a hassock, his long hands held up to the fire, Syd.

As the door opened he jumped up, and, rushing at his brother, was folded in great arms that presently lifted him off the medallioned carpet and carried him back to the fire, where Ben was shyly shaking hands with his hostess.

Sandy kissed his mother, and they told each other, with proper gravity, about their health-conditions.

Then Sandy sat down and inspected his brother. He studied him lengthwise and breadthwise; felt his arms and bare calves, which under baggy black velvet knee-breeches looked over thin and pale; he pulled down his lower eyelids and declared him to be anæmic; he peered into his mouth, and was satisfied with the small white teeth.

"You'll do, youngster," he declared finally; "you'll do."

The music, which had gone on softly during these pro-

ceedings, now ceased, and the player approached the group by the fire.

"Oh—Sandy, this is Miss Penrose. My son and Mr. Frith."

Miss Penrose sat down by a small shiny work-table and busied herself with some lace which she was mending. It was a broad scarf of delicate tissue, on which were embroidered flowers. And her small hands, as they plied the healing needle, were nearly as white as the lace.

Sandy did not notice the new governess after his first bow, but Ben, the all-seeing, did.

And he saw a very charming person indeed, sitting there in the lamp and firelight.

Miss Penrose was about seven-and-twenty. She had quantities of soft, dark hair, which she wore in a kind of coronet. She had an oval face of a smooth ivory texture, and a beautiful little red mouth, a trifle too full, but very pretty. And her eyes, which, as she worked, Ben could not see, were edged with very long, up-curved dark lashes.

She wore a russet-brown silk dress adorned with miles and miles of narrow velvet ribbon of the same colour; but round her neck there was something white and soft and transparent, and her under-sleeves were the same.

It was a very old dress, for she was poor, and she herself hated it with a bitterness that sometimes urged her to tear it to bits. But it was her only one, and she had recently refreshed it, as the French say, so to Ben's ignorant eyes it was not only lovely, but quite new.

Presently, as she paused in her work, she looked up, and lo! her eyes were as blue as Mrs. Sharrow's dress! Ben rubbed his thin hands together; she interested him.

It was a cosy scene, and Ben enjoyed it. Antoinette Sharrow had always been a pleasing study to him, even when he was very nearly a child. He had first seen her young, pretty, interesting, foreign and unlike Englishwomen, with the baby Syd in her breast. The observant, silent little boy had loved to watch her with her baby, which was at once her idol and her plaything. He did not understand in what she differed from his own mother and the mothers of his various acquaintances, but he knew that she *did* differ, and the difference had for him great charm.

And, indeed, for the lover of miniatures, she would have been interesting to anyone. It was a miniature nature,

but as a small lake can have angry storms and comparatively great depths as well as the ocean itself, so in Antoinette Sharrow dwelt all the passions of larger natures.

She possessed a violent temper, an astonishing lack of conscience, a jealous love of her husband, a mad impatience of all trammels, and, after Syd's birth, as mad a mother-love—all on the smallest possible scale.

And on her husband's death, when her baby was four years old, a tiny revolution took place in her, and small walls burst, small dams gave way; all her emotions flowed into one channel, and the Frenchwoman at thirty-seven became the French mother.

The change had not occurred unmarked by young Frith, though he never mentioned it to Sandy.

And Sandy never noticed it at all. His mother had always been a stranger to him. It was the older boy who observed the sudden coming to the surface of those of the French *bourgeois* virtues, the presence of which in his pretty, flighty wife Sydney Sharrow had never suspected; it was Ben who watched the rapid growth of middle-age in the still pretty woman, who at forty dressed as do others at fifty-five.

And it was Ben who, when Sandy groaned over her lack of common sense, her extravagance (all for Syd), her disregard of discipline, her exaggerated, passionate love for the child, who knew that although in some ways a bad mother and in no way a successful one, yet Antoinette was thoroughly, and to the exclusion of everything else, a mother.

She never guessed that the quiet, unobtrusive youth with the ugly glasses and the shy ways understood her as thoroughly as one human being can understand another; nor that—as time went on, and Sandy once or twice came, in his care for his brother, into direct opposition with her—Ben, cut of the depths of his comprehension, argued the case from her point of view, and secured for her at least a mitigation of the guardian-brother's displeasure.

For Sandy himself stood well outside the sphere of her motherhood; probably she often forgot to remember that the immovable young man, whose will always broke hers, was other than a to her rather unsympathetic guardian of her son.

This Sandy did not mind in the least. His father and he had been friends for the last four years of his father's life,

and of him Sandy had many warm memories. Sydney Sharrow was a man full of faults, but they were manly faults, and he was of great use to his son at the time his son most needed him.

Ben Frith, that night of Sandy's twenty-third birthday, was thinking of these things as he sat hunched in a low chair by the fire, watching the little group, in whose midst his place was so unexplained, yet so secure.

Sandy's ugly face was soft with happiness in the firelight; little Syd, a very handsome boy, with rings of silky black hair on his forehead and most un-Sharrow-like golden-brown eyes, was happy too; Antoinette, her graceful head bent over some needlework, was happy. He, Ben Frith, was happy, as he always was when with Sandy.

And Miss Penrose, was she, too, happy? Ben wondered. Then suddenly Mrs. Sharrow rose.

"Ah, *voilà!* it is nine. Come, let us look at the presents," she said.

Everyone got up, and there was a moment of ceremonious hesitation.

Mrs. Sharrow then drew aside a tall black screen that stood behind her chair, and a laden table was revealed in the light of a tall lamp standing on it.

At Twenty-seven, Syd's birthday was a far greater *festa* than Christmas. Preparations for it went on for weeks beforehand, and even now, everybody knew, a very excellent supper was being prepared in the kitchen.

Everyone stood in front of the table in silence for a moment, and then burst into a chatter of excitement.

In the middle of the table stood a large pink cake, with Syd's initials and two dates on it in silver and white *dragées*. From under the cake flowed, like a stream after a period of retirement underground, a pair of embroidered braces.

On the right of the cake, occupying quite three-fourths of the table, were Syd's gifts. There were a dozen of the finest cambric handkerchiefs embroidered by his mother; three books, one of which, Ben perceived, was Froissart, in French; a handsome weather-glass; a box of sweets; a pair of gold sleeve-links; an elaborately-framed, rather bad copy of one of Murillo's Madonnas; a tennis-racquet; a pair of silver-backed hair-brushes, and various other smaller objects, presents from the servants.

Syd's joy was delightful to behold. He had a charming

way of expressing himself, and his eyes literally danced in his head as he inspected his new possessions.

But when, finally, Sandy produced his gift, a very beautiful little gold watch, the boy fairly threw himself into his brother's arms in his ecstasy.

Ben watched from the fire-place, whither he had withdrawn.

It was a pretty scene.

Presently, as Syd sat down with his mother on a distant sofa to show her all the beauties of his treasures, Sandy turned rather awkwardly to his own gifts.

He thanked his mother for some silk socks and a box of cigars, shook hands with Ben on discovering a pipe in a leather case, went into ecstasies over the small cuckoo-clock which was Syd's gift—there were, Ben saw, real tears in his eyes over this last monstrosity—and, finally, with a rather red face, picked up a tomato-shaped pin-cushion, of scarlet silk, which was thickly studded with pins of all sizes and kinds.

Ben cast a glance at the governess, who had gone back to the piano and was softly playing.

"I say, mother—this—this pincushion is awfully jolly," Sandy began, holding it out towards her.

Mrs. Sharrow looked up vaguely. "Oh, yes—that was Miss Penrose's idea—she made those beautiful braces for Syd, and then said she'd like to make you some little thing."

Miss Penrose smiled as Sandy went to the piano and held out his hand. Her smile was delightful, because it displayed a dimple that at other times was hidden, in her right cheek.

"You don't mind?" she asked, her eyes, so blue, looking into Sandy's.

"Mind? It was *most* kind," he returned. "And—a pincushion is such a useful thing, you know."

But he saw, Ben knew, neither the dimple nor the blueness; and, Ben also knew, she saw that he saw neither.

And this—the pretty mother and her beautiful younger son, on the sofa, their heads close bent over the gold watch; the prettier governess smiling at the ugly Sandy; and little Ben Frith, his secret smile stirring his lips as he watched his friend—these things, in the tall, ugly room, with its red curtains, its fire and lamplight, its deeply-shadowed corners, its worn, cabbage-rose-bestrewn carpet, its good portraits of ugly, long-since-dead Sharrows—this was the scene that a moment later greeted the eyes, as he opened the door, of old Lord Sharrow.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR a long moment no one but Ben saw the newcomer, and Ben made no move. Winker gave a low growl, but it was unheeded.

The old man—and a very old man he looked to the boy, whose eyes were full of the youth of Sandy and Syd—stood leaning heavily on his stick, his brows bent.

He was unbeautiful and savage-looking; his face bore marks of dissipation; its lines were those cut by self-will, selfishness, unscrupulousness. Ben, who had never seen him before, shuddered.

Old age, whatever sentimentalists may say, is, being after all only a form of decay, never beautiful in itself. Some old people are beautiful because their lives have been fine and brave and kind; but even they are beautiful in spite of their age, not because of it.

And Lord Sharrow had not made for himself an old age, either pleasant or good to see. He looked a very satyr of an old man, but he was so old that Ben hoped violently that Sandy would not be too hard on him.

Presently, as if by instinct, everyone in the room turned towards the door.

Mrs. Sharrow gave a little cry, Syd glanced inquiringly at his brother; Miss Penrose, always correct, rose from the piano and disappeared into the dusk of the far end of the long room.

"Well, Sandy?" The old man's voice had an acrimonious snap in it, but there was an undertone of anxiety as well.

"Well, sir?" Sandy looked very big and very commanding as he stood silhouetted against the yellow lamplight. His face was invisible.

Civility demanded that he should ask the aged head of

his house to sit down, but the Sharrows never cared a button for civility.

There was a short pause, and then Lord Sharrow said slowly: "I have not seen you for two years; you have sent back the allowance I made you; you have refused to come to my house."

"Yes."

"So—as I am very old and have no time to waste, I have come to yours." There was another silence, and then the old man added suddenly: "I have come to ask your pardon."

Sandy came towards him, his hand outstretched.

"Thank you, sir," he answered, in a voice not quite free from the lurking grudge. "I—of course, I accept your apology."

There was a little bustle and many broken phrases of greeting, and when the moment had passed, Lord Sharrow sat by the fire, his hostess and Sandy near, young Syd in front of him.

"So this is the bone of contention," Lord Sharrow said, inspecting the boy with a grin. "*Tant d'œufs pour une omelette!*"

Ben, who knew that Sandy would not like to hear his beloved brother called either a "bone" or an "omelette," withdrew, unseen, from the group by the fire and joined the governess, who had gone into the recess formed by the curtains and was looking out into the dreary night.

"The famous great-uncle," she said, giving the words the inflection of a statement.

"Yes. He looks very old, doesn't he?"

"He is very old and very wicked, and very disagreeable and, oh, very, very rich! I know all about him." Her voice, which was a little veiled, was musical and low.

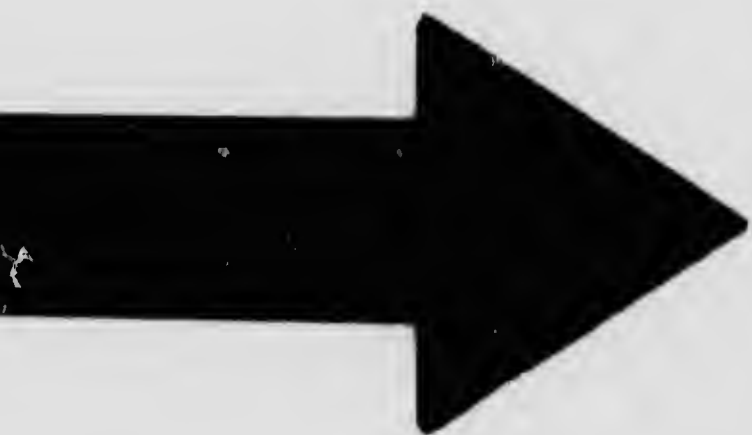
"Who told you?" Ben asked.

"Mrs. Sharrow, of course. She will be delighted that he has come. Sandy seems to have been very silly about him."

"Sandy," Ben retorted, accenting the name a little dryly, "loves Syd, and——"

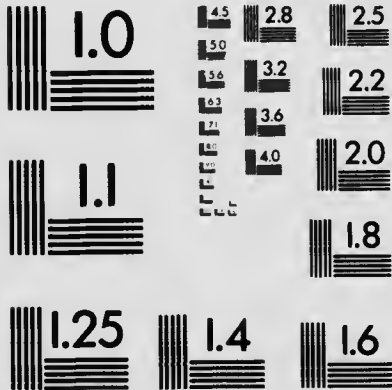
"And Silenus didn't. Oh, I know," she repeated, with a little toss of her head, whose prettiness was plainly visible in the light from a street lamp. "And when the old man told Sandy to invite whom he liked to Sharrow for Christmas,





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and Sandy said, 'Of course, I will begin with my mother and my brother,' the old man said, 'I'll be damned if——'

She broke off, giggling, and as only a very attractive woman can giggle inoffensively, this proved her charm, for the critical Ben looked at her not only without disgust, but with real pleasure.

"Hush, they might hear you," he said, peering through the curtains. But the talk by the fire had grown louder, and as he spoke Lord Sharrow's voice reached them.

"—though I was, of course, perfectly justified in refusing to invite to my house someone I didn't want."

"Of course you were, sir. And so was I perfectly justified in refusing to go to a house where I didn't want to go."

"You were a pig-headed young ass," snarled the old man.

"Then I was a natural-historical-zoological freak and ought to be at the Zoo!"

"Bravo, Sandy," murmured Ben, who had for a moment feared a row.

"However, being now a very old man, and a very lonely one, and being bored to tears by my excellent heir (who, by the way, is spending Christmas with the excellent and dull family of his excellent and dull *fiancée*), I decided to comfort my declining years not with apples and flagons, but with the society of one of the few people"—his voice wavered a little—"one of the *very* few people on earth whom—I like. So, Sandy, will you and your brother and *Madame ta mère naturellement*, honour me by spending Christmas with me at Sharrow?"

Sandy, who was now standing, hesitated, frowning a little. Ben clutched the stiff stuff of the curtains. *Was* Sandy going to refuse?

Then Syd, who had the knack of the graceful thing, piped up, "Oh, yes, Great-uncle, we will; won't we, Sandy? It will be great fun. Sandy has told me all about it—how jolly it is——"

"Good. Then that is settled. And now, Madame," the old man went on a little hurriedly, "will you give me something to eat? I am very hungry."

Mrs. Sharrow started. She had hitherto occupied the position of interested onlooker, but now she stepped as hostess into her own place.

"We are going to have supper," she answered prettily

in French, "the birthday supper, and I will have it sent up at once. There is one bottle of poor Sydney's Château Yquem left—we will drink your health in it, Lord Sharrow."

Lord Sharrow watched her as she left the room.

Then he took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Sandy.

"Don't open it now," he said. "If you had been nasty you would never have seen it, but you have been remarkably civil, Sandy, for a Sharrow accepting an apology. That's one of our worst moments, one of our many worst moments."

Sandy held the envelope in an obviously unwelcoming hand. Ben could see his profile now, and the jaw was protruding a little.

He was about to speak when the old man held up a warning finger. "Say nothing now, my boy," he said, "and when you do open it, remember what it will mean for the—B. of C."

"The 'B. of C.'?"

Syd was staring with all his eyes, and his great-uncle laid one hand gently on his arm, looking, unseen by the boy himself, at him.

Sandy gave a short laugh, was silent for a second, and then with a low "Thank you, sir," put the envelope in his pocket.

"'B. of C.,'" repeated Miss Penrose curiously. "What can he mean?"

Ben was silent. She was curious in a frank, inoffensive way, but he was not going to tell her that the old man had meant Syd, under the pseudonym of the Bone of Contention.

"I say, Ben"—Sandy was facing them now, and it was plain that he sought to relieve himself of the embarrassment of further confidential talk with his great-uncle.

Ben and the governess came forward.

"Let me introduce my friend, Ben Frith, sir——"

Old Sharrow smiled cordially, his tusks gleaming in the firelight.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "Sandy used to talk about you—in the old days before the war."

Before Sandy had time to introduce Miss Penrose, his great-uncle went on: "And you? You are——"

He held out his hand and she took it. "I am Maggie Penrose—nobody at all—and Sydney's governess." For a moment her blue eyes gazed straight into Lord Sharrow's,

and Ben, as he watched the little scene which seemed strangely and disproportionately full of intensity, noticed in the ugly old face and the lovely young one a subtle resemblance.

"Maggie Penrose," the old man said slowly; "a pretty name, and a pretty young lady."

Then as Mrs. Sharrow came back into the room and told them that the feast was ready, he added to the girl, rising: "And you, too, will honour me by coming for Christmas to Sharrow?"

CHAPTER XVIII

SANDY, his dog at his heels, was out of doors before eight o'clock on the morning of Christmas Eve.

They had arrived—his mother, Syd, Miss Penrose and he—late the night before, and he was impatient to see the old place again.

The queer feeling he always had there, a feeling of pride and love and a longing to be of it and to do for it, that it had always given him, was on him doubly strong, he found.

During the eight years intervening between his first visit and his famous Christmas-holiday quarrel with his great-uncle he had been down many times, and had grown to love the place as few children love anything.

Perhaps, had he had a motherly mother and a real home, his feelings would have been less strong; but as it was they grew into a real, deep-rooted, silent passion before he was of age.

He read every book he could lay his hands on, in which any reference to the family or the house was made; when he had learnt enough Latin he got his great-uncle's permission to go through the old papers, deeds of all kinds, Papal Bulls, and dull things of that sort that were kept in iron-bound chests in the great library; the lonely boy, in a word, put all the ardour of his nature into this love for the house whence he had sprung.

And old Sharrow, of course, gave him every opportunity of acquiring more of the knowledge he sought, and encouraged his passion in every way.

The other Sandy cared not at all for such puerilities. For him the glories of cricket and boating, the satisfaction of possessing first the perfect Eton, then the perfect Oxford manner. He was an excellent, brave young man; he rode straight, played straight, lived straight. He told the truth and feared no man. But he had, for all these good qualities,

one terrible defect. He was dull. He bored his grandfather.

And, furthermore, though he honestly did his best to hide the fact, his grandfather disgusted him.

Old Sharrow, while he respected the boy's attempts at concealment, was far too shrewd not to see the effect some of his habits had on his heir; and notwithstanding the fact that he was glad his heir had not these habits himself, the knowledge irritated him.

Now our Sandy, with his violent temper that more than once as the years went by got him into trouble both at school and at Sharrow, was not subject to small disgusts.

He was in some ways a throw back; the old man's occasional fits of malice made him angry, and he hated Paul, because Paul was a liar.

But seeing his great-uncle drunk did not cause him any acute discomfort. Drinking he regarded carelessly, as did his ancestors in the reigns of the Georges. Swearing and bad language had no distressing effect upon him; and indeed, as he grew older, his own tongue was by no means dainty. And these things which he carelessly accepted in his great-uncle, his great-uncle observed with joy in him.

"You're fierce, you don't mince your words, you like wine—later you will like it too well, I daresay, and you will like women too well. But at least you will be a man," old Sharrow once told him.

And as Sandy grew taller and stronger, and the rough vein in him became more prominent, the old man openly rejoiced, and as openly lamented that the other Sandy, and not this one, was to be his successor in the old house they both so loved.

Once the old man took his favourite abroad.

They went to Italy; Sandy was shown great statues and great pictures, which he loathed, and some of the world's great scenery, which he as strongly loved.

They stopped in Paris coming home, and here the boy fell in love with the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Now if I could marry *her*," he declared, as they stood looking up at her; "she's big and healthy enough for anybody, but—she's not a frump!"

"No. I should imagine," the old man chuckled, "that no one ever called her a frump."

And the Venus of Milo did not even smile.

Sandy was seventeen at this time, and he had an adventure.

He was walking in the Luxembourg Gardens one morning when, as he afterwards told his great-uncle, a lady came up and spoke to him.

She wasn't very pretty, and she looked rather as if she had just emerged from a flour-barrel, her face was so covered with powder.

But she asked him the time, and the way to a certain street of which, strangely enough, he had never heard. His excellent French surprised her, and he explained that his mother belonged to that most delightful of nations.

The lady then invited him to invite her to lunch, which he promptly did.

"You went to Foyot's," Lord Sharrow declared when the story was told to him later in the day.

"We did, and we had a delicious luncheon, and coffee, and wine and liqueurs. It was topping."

The old man looked at the young one.

"And then she asked you to go and look at her family photographs——"

"She did."

"My poor Sandy! And you went."

"Oh, no, my poor great-uncle, I *didn't*. I said to her: '*Je vous remercie infiniment, ma petite demoiselle, mais—je n'en prends pas.*'"

All boys have adventures of different kinds and Sandy, of course, had his; but he told no one of them after this, and, whatever they may have been, it is certain that they did him no harm.

He was a little rough, a little unlicked, but he was an honest, decent-minded man, who enjoyed life without getting into any very bad scrapes.

One lady, serving, owing to a temporary eclipse of her family fortunes, in a bar at Cambridge, did her best to marry him; but although he presumably succumbed to her ruddy charms for a time, the succumbing proved to be even more temporary than the downfall of her family greatness, and he presently was able to assure the anxious Ben that Gwennie had really behaved very well.

These unimproving reminiscences are necessary, because they explain, more or less, what kind of a young man, and how far experienced, Sandy Sharrow was that December

morning in '85 as he walked round the old house he loved and watched the sun settle on it for a fine winter's day.

So far in his life he had never had a grudging, envious feeling against his cousin Sandy, and he had none then; but his love for the old place was nearly a pain to him.

"By Jove! I wish I didn't feel quite—quite like this," he thought inarticulately. "When the old Chief has gone, I shan't be over welcome here, and,——"

The heir and he had never quarrelled, and were perfectly good friends, but there was no real bond between them, and Sandy resented the other's indifference towards his future possession as a passionate mother might resent indifference towards her child.

On several occasions during their boyhood Sandy had tried to convey to his cousin something of his own feeling for the place, but the elder boy did not understand.

"Of course," he said wonderingly, his honest grey eyes looking into the other's sparkling little ones, "it's a jolly old place, and I'm jolly lucky to be going to have it, but——"

And when Sandy groaned, his senior told him to chuck that rot and come for a ride.

As he grew older, Sandy, of course, became shy about his love and only to his great-uncle did he talk of it.

Often the two sat over the fire in the evenings, or walked slowly through the rooms by day, and discoursed on the feeling that bound them together; and gradually Sandy's feeling changed, and he found that it was not the house, wonderful though it was, nor even the vast estate that held him in thrall.

It was Sharrow itself; the intangible thing that through the slow centuries had grown and ripened, and became a kind of magic atmosphere to be breathed only by those in whose veins ran the blood of those men who had had their being there.

"Even old Dingle seems to *be part of it*," the boy declared once, "and the Babbages, and Linter—I can't explain, Great-uncle."

"You needn't—to me. I understand, my boy. And it is because Dingle's people have lived here and served us for upwards of two hundred years, while the 'Sheepshearers' was built in Henry VIII.'s time; and we still have the book with the rents paid in Queen Elizabeth's reign, and onwards,

nearly always by a Babbage, or a Babbage girl's husband. As to Linter—Charles II.'s barber was a Linter; and up at the farm they still have a glove brought back by this fellow after the king's death, and said by him—he probably lied, but still, it's the story—to have been worn by the king. And so it goes, Sandy. They have intermarried, these people; they are all cousins, or nearly all of them, and thus Sharrow is a kind of vast web, well-knit, strong."

"And in the centre sits the old spider—you!" ended the boy, with a laugh, in which the old spider joined.

He was thinking of these things as he left the garden and struck out across the wet grass towards the south terrace, where the elm avenue was.

He would go to the village and see some old friends before he went in to breakfast.

The Feeling was very, very strong to-day as he walked down the avenue of elms under which that hussy, Mary Sharrow, had walked one never, by her, to-be-forgotten evening with Edmund Spenser.

Even Edmund Spenser seemed somehow, in the general magic, to be a part of Sandy.

Rooks cawed hideously above him, whirling against the pale winter sky, and rooks, too, belonged.

"Every blessed thing does belong, old Winker," he said aloud.

He was glad—ah, how glad he was—to be back.

He had—since the day when his great-uncle, jealous of his favourite's love for his little brother, refused to have the little brother come to Sharrow for a time—never referred to the matter to anyone but Ben. Even to Ben his references had been few and brief. But though his anger towards his great-uncle had never for an instant wavered, the separation from the old place had been to him a grief deeper than the griefs that most young men know.

It had had one good effect, it had driven him to shun dreams, and to work hard at Cambridge; but always in his heart there had been a dull ache which he was literally afraid to investigate. He felt as though he had lost more than he quite dared know. And now he was back, and his great-uncle had been very generous, and openly begged his pardon, thus assuaging his pride; and Syd was here too, and he had two thousand pounds at his bank, and Syd was to go to Eton!

The thing that finally broke down his pride had been the fact of his great-uncle's having, unknown to him, put Syd up for Eton years ago, because Sandy had once confided to him his resolution that his little brother *must* go there. When Lord Sharrow told him this, Sandy melted quite suddenly, and peace reigned absolute.

To-day he would show Syd everything—everything but the roofs, that is. Their beauties were too fraught with danger to be displayed to the precious youngster.

A couple of deer stood and watched the young man as he crossed the glade where they were breakfasting. They, too, were part, he thought, of it.

And then he heard something and turned.

Standing in an open place where the sun fell full on her was Miss Penrose, wearing an absurd, delightful, little Red Riding Hood cape, the hood drawn close round her face

"Oh, Mr. Sharrow," she cried, "how wonderful it all is! May I come with you, and will you tell me about it?"

CHAPTER XIX

IT is well-known that in chemistry certain similar particles invariably attract each other and form themselves into one mass. And everyone has noticed how, in places where many people do together congregate, after the first confusion of acquaintance-making is over, the process known as the flocking together of birds of similar feather invariably takes place.

And so it was in the small party at Sharrow.

Ben, an amusing remark of whose had decided the old gentleman to invite him, and who had promptly accepted, noticed this flocking, and some of it was enlightening to him.

He had expected Mrs. Sharrow to flock by herself, so to speak, and he knew, of course, that Sandy and Syd would never be far apart. But the sympathy between Lord Sharrow and the little governess was at first a surprise to him.

The old man's pleasure in the girl's prettiness was not remarkable, but what at first puzzled the onlooker was her evident liking for him.

And liking, he soon found, was not quite the word. It was more than a superficial enjoyment of each other's society that drew these two, outwardly so almost absurdly dissimilar, people together; it was a kind of natural turning towards each other of two people of one nationality in a strange land.

"They seem to *know* each other—to understand," Ben decided presently. "They must be alike underneath."

So the strange friendship, which was more like a mutually advantageous alliance, went on, and several days passed.

One day at luncheon it was seriously endangered.

Miss Penrose, who had been for a walk, announced casually

that she had met near the church the most lovely girl she had ever seen.

"She was quite beautiful, Lord Sharrow," she went on in perfect innocence of Sandy's warning frown or the old man's lowering face. "Who can she have been?"

"I don't know," answered Lord Sharrow shortly.

"Have some ragoût, Miss Penrose," Sandy put in, "or shall I get you some ham?"

"Neither, thanks. But you must know, Lord Sharrow! She was beautifully dressed, too, all in white, which looked so quaint in winter; and—oh, I really never saw anyone quite so beautiful nor"—her voice softened, and a pretty note of real enthusiasm came into it—"anyone who looks so good. She really was like an angel."

Old Sharrow pushed away his plate, his jaw working nervously. "That—lady, is a lady whose name is never mentioned in my house," he said, evidently trying to control very strong anger. "You, of course, could not know this, Miss Penrose, but now I have told you."

There was a short silence, after which someone cast an inane remark on the troubled waters, and everyone snapping conversationally at it, order was restored.

After lunch Sandy buttonholed Miss Penrose.

"I say, you *did* put your foot in it," he cried boyishly. "It must have been Viola Wymondham, the Vicar's daughter, you saw—very fair, was she?"

"Yes. But what has the Vicar's daughter done that her name is taboo?"

"Nothing, of course. But her grandmother jilted my great-uncle when he was young and——"

The governess stared. "Great heavens! you don't mean to say that he visits the sins of the grandmother——"

"Yes, he does. So please never mention her again. But I know you won't."

"No—I won't. Will you give me another billiard lesson this afternoon, Mr. Sharrow? I have been practising."

"Have you? Good. But—I can't now. I must be off, I am rather in a hurry."

She glanced at him. "Oh well, I am sorry the old gentleman is so odd about her. I should have loved to meet her."

Sandy burst out laughing. "How artful you are, Miss Penrose! You are perfectly right, I *am* going to the Vicar—

age. I have known the Wymondham girls ever since I was so high, and I shouldn't have known they were back but for you."

There was malice in his eyes as he laughed and left her. He was no coxcomb, but he was no fool; and he knew perfectly well that the pretty governess was what *in petto* he called "after him."

And she saw that he knew it, and did not greatly care.

After nine years of good luck bad had come. She had fallen in love with the ugly big brother of her young charge.

She did not mind Sandy thinking that she wanted to flirt with him, which she saw, was all that he had as yet perceived; but she bitterly resented the silent little Ben's keener insight, and presently sought him out for the purpose of lying him out of his belief.

"How delightful Mr. Sharrow is!" she began, carelessly glancing at a picture in the *Illustrated London News* as she spoke.

Ben grunted: "Yes. A good chap."

"He—I like him so much."

"So I have thought."

"Ah, you noticed? Well, you are a silent person, Mr. Frith; one can trust you."

Ben rose. "Don't. I advise you not to. I am liable to attacks of the most terrific indiscretion. The things I tell then—oh, *Lord!*"

But she only laughed, and she was so pretty when she laughed that he stood looking at her.

"Did you ever meet a man at Cambridge—an Oriel man—named Butler? Rather clever, I believe."

"Butler? Stewart Butler? They called him The Maggot. Of course, I know old Maggot—"

"No, no," she interrupted, "'my man's' name is Cuthbert—Cuthbert Charlton Butler."

Ben reflected. "No—I don't think I knew him. I came down this term, you know. But why do you ask?"

"Oh, I wondered. He—Mr. Sharrow—looks so awfully like him; that's all. It's quite uncanny. Red hair, even. Well, good-bye; I must get my things, we are going to walk to White Shirley, Syd and I."

She left the hall where they had been sitting, and for a few minutes Ben stood reflecting.

"So *that's* it, is it? A resemblance. I wonder? Mr.

Cuthbert Charlton Butler. I believe she made it all up, the little minx."

But he did not believe this, and it was the exact truth.

The little minx, who *had* made it all up, went her way rejoicing.

* * * * *

It was a dull day, and a little later, through the dullness, Sandy came home. The Misses Wymondham, but that morning returned from the South of France, were both out with their father.

He was sorry, for Viola had been his only girl friend, and he had not seen her for nearly five years

When he was sixteen, a bad attack of typhoid fever had made a temporary invalid of the little girl, and an aunt, who lived near Cannes, had fetched her and her sister for a prolonged visit.

After this, the southern climate proving suitable, the two children had been kept there, off and on, for the next few years, and their visits to Sharrow not coinciding with Sandy's, they had not met.

The very evening of the day of his famous quarrel with his great-uncle they had arrived at the Vicarage; but he, in his rage, had gone without remembering their existence, and thus, from his seventeenth to his twenty-fourth year, Sandy had not seen them.

However, he decided he would call again the next day, for see them he must. Viola must be beautiful now, judging from Miss Penrose's description.

He chuckled at the thought of Miss Penrose. She amused him, but he liked her, for she seemed really devoted to Syd.

Also, she was very pretty.

He was met in the hall by a servant, who told him that Lord Sharrow wished to see him.

He found the old man limping uneasily up and down his little white-panelled sitting-room, a frown on his face.

"Where have you been?" the old man asked.

Sandy, scenting battle, hesitated for a moment. Then he said quietly: "To call at the Vicarage."

"I knew it! I knew it—and I won't have it."

The room was nearly dark, for rain was coming on, and only the firelight lightened the room.

"You won't have me call at the Vicarage, sir?"

"No, I won't have it."

Sandy frowned. He didn't wish to be angry with this poor old man who was kind to him, but the poor old man was singularly irritating at times.

"I am sorry, sir. I like the Wymondhams."

His gentleness surprised Lord Sharrow.

"Look here, Sandy. I don't usually explain things, but—those people did me the greatest injury anyone ever did me in all my life. They are my enemies. You—you are my guest, and—and——"

"Mr. Wymondham never injured you, sir. As to the girls, they're almost children."

Lord Sharrow sat down. "Wymondham's mother made me—what you see. I was not a bad young man, Sandy; I was something like you—a little wild, rough, impatient—but—I was not bad. And," he paused, his face, in a sudden leap of the firelight, rather piteous in his pity for his own youth, "Cyrilla Dallaford—well, I suppose she broke my heart. She hurt me so that I did not care what became of me, or what I did; it was then that I began to drink. Out of a well-meaning, gentlemanly boy, she made a desperate adventurer, a man who spent the best years of his life in trying to fight and—in failing. Cyrilla Dallaford was my ruin, Sandy."

"Cyrilla Dallaford has been in her grave many years, great-uncle. Can't you forgive her?"

"No," shouted the old man fiercely. "Never. I never forgive. We Sharrows don't. You will not, when your time comes. I hate them all, Dallafords and Wymondhams. And that is why I ask you—my guest——"

Sandy bent to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Very well, great-uncle. I will respect your wish. I will not call at the Vicarage again," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XX

BEN, when told of the interview and Sandy's promise, of course, approved his friend's course.

"You couldn't very well do anything else, Sandy ; but—I confess I am surprised, all the same."

"Why?"

"Because it would have been far more like you to insist on going to the Vicarage, to throw the cheque into the old man's face, and to rage out of the house for a few years."

Sandy laughed. "I jolly nearly did," he confessed ; "he has no business to impose his sixty-year-old feud on me. But—well, of course, I *am* his guest, and he is very old."

Ben looked up from the briarwood pipe whose brown sides he was caressing with the palm of his hand. "Bosh!" he said. "If it wasn't for the kid, you'd have had a row and cleared out."

Sandy did not answer.

The two young men were sitting together in Sandy's own den, which was none other than the octagonal room in the Tower, whence Lord Sharrow had long ago watched him explore the roofs. The room had been "his" for many years, and was still full of his boyish treasures.

It was a pleasant place, though small ; the views from its windows were varied and beautiful, one of them giving on the park, towards the church, the short, grey spire of which could be seen amongst the trees.

Even now, at night, with its seven curtains close-drawn and a fire burning on the small stone hearth, it had a great charm of its own. The curtains, found years ago by Sandy in a trunk in the attic, were delightful, though more fitted to a boudoir than to a room made, all but the floor, com-

pletely of dark grey stone. They were of deep red silk, rather faded and even a little tattered now, since Mrs. Puddifant's needle had for ten years forgotten to attend to them, and on them was a raised pattern of bunches of grapes in the same colour.

Sandy loved his curtains.

The friends had retired early to this eyrie, the evening of the interview, for it was, presumably, the last one on which they would be free to do exactly as they liked.

The next morning Sandy, the heir, Keith, and Paul, were coming for New Year's Day, and they would have to be polite.

The wind had risen, and howled round the tower in a way that enhanced their shut-in cosiness as they sat smoking.

The clock struck ten.

"So you won't see the Wymondham girls at all this time?" Ben observed, after a long silence.

"Oh, shan't I? Of course I shall. I only promised not to call at the Vicarage, not to see them. I shall write to the Vicar and explain—he has always been awfully kind to me—and then I shall look out for the girls from here, and—meet them in the road."

"From here?"

Sandy rose and drew back the curtains from one of the windows.

"Yes. See that bit of white there in the moonlight to the left of those cedars? That's the road outside the Vicarage gate. They can't get out of their garden without passing over that very place. So all I have to do is to watch from here, see which direction they take, and hare after them."

"Sister Ann, Sister Ann! But you can't sit here all day watching for them——"

Sandy laughed. "Every morning of their lives, unless it is pouring with rain, the girls go for a walk as soon as breakfast is over. And breakfast's at nine. So—you see!"

They stood for a moment looking out at the moon-white world. The tower was so high that the country spread under them almost like a map. Far off to the left they saw White Shirley, with its sleeping factories lying in a long fold of the river; to the right, Brocket Wood, the boundary of the estate on that side, lay, a great black blot against the sky,

some three miles away ; and in the sky the moon sailed along, apparently blown by the wind, through great flakes of black-edged white cloud.

It was cold, for Sandy had opened the window wide, but the two young men stood disregarding the wind, gazing at the lovely country.

"I say, Sandy, what is that big house over there by Brocket?" Ben asked, leaning out and pointing.

"Bargrave Abbey. Belonged to the Pierrpoints till last year. When they went broke they sold it—to an American, I think."

"Looks a big place."

"It is. I went once with the Chief to call when I was a youngster. It's moated, and has a ghost, and all that sort of thing. It was the ghost, I believe, that did for the American." He closed the window, and Ben remarked largely:

"I don't like Americans, they are so un-English, and the more they try to be English the more American they become!"

"Well, I don't know many. This chap's son is a good sort—he's at Oxford—I believe he's a blue. I met him once at some fellow's rooms, and he's very decent-looking. Give me the baccy, there's a dear fellow."

When the incursion of young men took place the next morning, Ben watched the governess with some interest. For a poor girl, pretty, but in a dependent position—which was for the present, by her host's express wish, suspended—there must be, he knew, some excitement in being the only young woman in the house with five young men.

"She'll make a dead-set for the heir," Ben decided, "and she'll fail, and then she'll fall back on Keith or Sandy. Paul is too young. She wouldn't be a human girl if she didn't try to marry some one of them."

But he was wrong. Miss Penrose made no dead set at anyone.

Sandy, the heir, and his brother, after a few civil words, seemed to forget her existence ; and young Paul, now a slight youth with a moist red mouth, stared at her in vain, for she hardly noticed him. She was very charming these holiday days, for she was not only delightful to behold, but tactful, pleasant, and, in an inconspicuous way, useful to everybody. And, as has been said, she seemed quite un-

elated by the amount of young masculinity that surrounded her.

Ben watched closely, but even he could observe nothing of the man-hunter in her, so he became a little ashamed of himself and tried by a new friendliness in his manner to make up to her for his unjust suspicions.

And when she told him one day when he found her standing by a window with tears in her eyes that she was lonely, he melted altogether.

"I know—so am I, a bit. I miss my old father very much—he's in Germany looking up some things for the B.M.—the British Museum, you know—that's why I'm here. I say, Miss Penrose, suppose we have a game of billiard?"

Sandy and Syd, those first days, were together nearly all the time. There were so many things Sandy wished to show his brother, things that had thrilled him to the marrow when he was Syd's age.

So, his arm laid across the youngster's shoulders, he led him all over the great house—upstairs and down, into room after room—showing him its wonders, explaining to him its treasures, telling him in simple language incidents in its history that had years ago so enthralled him himself.

And Syd, wide-eyed, sweet-tempered and perfectly docile, allowed him to show, to explain, to expound.

But that was all.

Syd possessed within him none of that thing which drew his brother and the old lord so closely together. His beautiful young face never flushed at the stories his brother told him, his heart never changed its pleasant, languid beat for a quicker one.

Even the suits of armour in the great hall failed to rouse him, and finally Sandy grew impatient of his acquiescent "How jolly," uttered at polite and dutiful intervals.

"Good gracious, Syd," Sandy burst out, as they stood before the figure of a man in full armour mounted on a completely caparisoned horse, "don't you *feel* it?"

Syd looked up, his delicate mouth just stirred by a smile. "Don't feel *what*, Sandy, dear?"

Ben, who had just come in, listened attentively, his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"Why—the—the wonder of it all—the beauty—hang it, I can't explain it to you, if you don't feel it for yourself!"

Sandy's voice was still impatient, but there was in it an under-current of something deeper than impatience.

Syd smiled at him. "I do feel it, Sandear," he answered, using his baby corruption for "Sandy dear," "I think it is all awfully jolly. But I think I like the yellow drawing-room best, the little gilt chairs are so pretty——"

CHAPTER XXI

ON the afternoon of the last day but one of the old year, Sandy and Miss Penrose sat together over the fire in the small hall.

Syd had gone for a ride with Keith, who had taken a fancy to the boy; the old lord was shut in his room with a cold, Ben was writing letters, and Mrs. Sharrow presumably taking a nap.

So it had naturally followed that the two young people, who had nothing in particular to do, should find themselves together.

Sandy was smoking cigarettes and lay back very comfortably in his chair, which, stern and straight-backed in itself, was made habitable by the presence of a deer-skin pillow—Mrs. Sharrow's Christmas gift to her host.

It was pleasant to be there in the firelight smoking and watching a woman who, he had just begun to realize, was exceptionally pretty and attractive.

Miss Penrose wore that day a charming blue frock with little frills of lace at the throat and wrists, and in her soft, dark hair she had woven a blue ribbon.

The feeling of being well-dressed as well as beautiful gave the girl a new confidence, although she was never afflicted by a lack of that useful quality.

She felt, as Sandy's eyes rested peacefully on her face, that there was, after all, no reason on earth why she might not succeed in marrying him. He was not the heir; he was of no paramount importance in the world; he was not rich. And she, penniless though she was, was of gentle birth and had undoubted beauty.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked idly.

"About you," with placidity.

"You flatter me."

"Oh, no—I was only thinking how extraordinarily like

you are to the family portraits. The man in the chain-armour in the gallery—he might be you.”

Sandy burst out laughing and lit a fresh cigarette.

“No, you are right. Your thoughts certainly were not flattering me! Isn't he the most misbegotten old brute you ever saw in your life?”

She shook her head. “His face is not handsome, certainly, but—he is a fine, big creature.”

“Thanks!”

They were flirting now, idly and innocently, as everybody in the world but the born idiots or disgustingly malformed has flirted at some time or other.

And for a rainy winter afternoon in a beautiful room lighted only by a dying fire it may be doubted whether a better sport can be found.

“That ribbon in your hair is jolly,” Sandy remarked, presently, “it makes you look like a picture——”

“Ah! but *what* picture? Not one of the Sharrow dames, I trust?”

They laughed again, and Sandy rang for tea.

“We might as well have it, though it's very—the others won't be in for a long time; and if we wait for half an hour that young worm Paul will be joining us.”

“Yes. You don't like Paul, then?”

“No. Neither do you. He's—oh, tea, please, John—he gets on my nerves somehow, and his lisp makes me want to be sick.”

They drank their tea, had the tray taken away, and then Sandy persuaded the girl to smoke a cigarette. “You can throw it into the fire if anyone comes,” he said.

Cigarette smoking was nearly a crime for a woman in '85.

And she had, in spite of her varied experiences, never before tried smoking, so it was rather thrilling, particularly when Sandy's hand, in lighting her cigarette, chanced to touch her chin and lingered there a second.

In the faint light he saw her flush.

A few moments later they busied themselves with the now dying fire, and this time, as she reached for the poker, her hand touched his.

“I beg your pardon,” said Sandy hastily.

She turned and smiled at him, drawing a trifle nearer.

Sandy kissed her.

She was a pleasant person to kiss, not only because her

skin was smooth and cool, but because she very obviously liked it. Something in the way she pressed her cheek to his stirred him, and he caught her round the shoulders, turned her head with his right hand and kissed her mouth.

Five minutes later he received a summons to go to his great-uncle.

He found the old man wrapped in a grey plaid, bending over his fire.

"What have you been doing, Sandy?" he asked, without looking up.

"Sitting in the small hall, sir."

"Alone?"

"No."

"With whom, then?"

A little surprised, the young man answered: "With Miss Penrose. The others are all out—or busy. Frith is writing letters."

"I see. So you"—Lord Sharrow rubbed his hands gently together and they shone nearly transparent against the red flames—"so you have been amusing yourself by making love to the governess!"

Sandy was silent for a second. "I don't see why you should assume that, sir, because we had tea together."

"Tea and toast and—kisses."

Sandy started, and his hand flew to his hair. Was it untidy? No, to his relief it was perfectly smooth. There was a pause, and then Lord Sharrow went on, the gibing note still in his voice.

"She's a pretty girl—I should have kissed her myself—a few years ago."

"I don't think, great-uncle, that you have any right to assume,"—Sandy began hotly, but the old man interrupted him.

"Assume, assume, who the devil's assuming? I saw you, as it happens. Now, then! What have you to say?"

The young man had nothing to say. "But—I don't understand," he stammered, utterly taken aback.

Lord Sharrow then drew away from the fire, sat upright in his chair, and Sandy saw that he was shaking with laughter.

"You silly young idiot. How could I possibly see you? Did you never hear of bluff? A noble game, Sandy, and a

most useful one. Well, so she has got her own way at last, has she?"

Sandy was white with anger. "I can't very well tell you what I think of your noble game, sir," he said rapidly, "so I had perhaps better go——"

"Oh, yes—go, and hasten back to the maligned virgin and console her for what she doesn't know, with more kisses! Don't be a fool. And as to kissing the girl—kiss her as much as you like—only, no nonsense about marrying her, mind."

"Marrying her! But such an idea——"

"Never entered your mind. I know that. It rarely does enter the man's mind until the woman puts it there. Well, it *has* come into hers. She has fallen in love with you, though God knows you're no beauty, and she means to marry you *if she can*. So I sent for you to warn you. That's all, my boy," he added, suddenly gentle, "you may go."

CHAPTER XXII

SANDY went down the little corkscrew staircase very quietly, placing his feet with care on each hollowed oak step.

Instead of going back to the small hall, he turned to the left at the foot of the stairs, and, finding a cap of Keith's on a chest, went out.

It had been raining at intervals all day, but for the moment the only moisture that fell was that which dripped from the eaves and from the bare boughs of the trees.

It was only five o'clock, and in the west a break in the clouds showed a faint glory of gold rapidly fading to grey. This was the side of the house where the moat had not been drained and lined with turf, so the door led on to a small bridge leading over dark, gleaming water to a slope down which one went towards the wild part of the park and White Shirley.

Sandy took off Keith's cap, and stood for a moment on the bridge; the damp was grateful to him, for he was aflame with anger and something like shame.

The old man was a beast, but—suppose the old man were right?

He, Sandy, had meant by his half-dozen kisses only just that—half a dozen kisses; and even without his great-uncle's warning he might by this time have regretted them; for, after all, the girl was in his mother's employ, and thus deserved far more chivalrous consideration than if she had been merely one of his fellow-guests. His great-uncle had had no business to say that she wanted to marry him, but—suppose she did?

He knew quite well, as he stood there on the old nail-studded footbridge in the dusk, that his kisses had meant to her far more than hers, sweet though they were, had meant to him.

Besides—he flushed again as he put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a bit of blue satin ribbon. She had drawn it out of her hair and given it to him “as a remembrance.”

The ribbon, as he held it in his hand, gave out a faint smell of something supposed to be like new-mown hay; it was not in the least like new-mown hay, but it was very sweet, and he remembered that as he kissed her the same scent had assailed him from her hair, her skin, her frock.

“He had no right to play me that trick, he’s an old satyr,” he reflected, pressing the ribbon for a moment to his face, and then putting it into his pocket. “He had no right to assume anything so absurd, and I *will* show her the ruin by moonlight to-night!”

Whistling, he went across the bridge, down the silvery slope, and turning sharp to his left, started by a footpath towards the village.

Mr. Dingle, the steward, and his widowed daughter who lived with him greeted their distinguished guest warmly, and he was constrained to accept a glass of elderberry wine and a large slice of excellent seed-cake—the recipe for which was one of the Dingle’s Family Secrets.

Dingle, who had grown to be rather fat, presented, as he sat in his pleasant parlour on the walls of which were hung samplers worked by his ancestresses, a delightful picture.

Randolph Caldecott, of blessed memory, would have rejoiced in him with his honest red face and his dignity.

Sally, still pretty, still a flirt, though the mother of stalwart twins, to one of whom Sandy was godfather, wore a large white apron over her black frock, and was as jolly, as chuckling, as contented a young widow as one would wish to see.

“How I loved that ship when I was a youngster,” Sandy observed, munching cake and trying to forget the taste of the wine as he manfully bolted it, “and the big pink shells. I still believe they’re the biggest shells in the world, Dingle!”

“The biggest in Sharrow, at all events, sir,” returned Dingle placidly, with the air of a man producing a smashing bit of confirmation. “Lord, Lord, Mr. Sandy, it does seem a long time since that first day when you came riding along on that black pony of Master Keith’s, and told me ’is lordship wanted me. Do you remember? ‘A jolly old wiggling you’re going to get, Mr. Dingle,’ you said, sir, and—I did!”

"Poor father! he still does," Mrs. Linter declared, nipping delicately with a pointed lip at her glass of wine. "'Is lordship's temper doesn't improve with age, sir, does it?'"

"No, poor old man!"

There was no impropriety in this talk, no hint of disrespect in the manner of the steward and his daughter. They were old-fashioned folk, who would have gone to the stake for Sharrow as an institution to which they belonged; but as they *did* belong to it, and worked for it, they felt a placid right to criticize it, and this Sandy understood.

"Mr. Sandy well, sir?" asked Dingle presently.

"Yes. Has a fine moustache, and is, as you of course know, engaged. He will, of course, be coming to see you soon—he only got here on Tuesday."

"Oh, yes, he'll be coming. Always polite, Mr. Sandy, always considerate,"—

The old man's voice held level on the last word as he paused, and Mrs. Linter waved a dimpled hand in affectionate reproach.

"Now, Father, don't you say it! You know that Mr. Sandy—*our* Mr. Sandy here—doesn't like it. 'E never did."

Sandy rose. "Never mind, Dingle," he said, shaking hands with his hostess. "Sally bullies the life out of you, so you'd better obey her. But—I know what you mean, and I fear I rather like to have you *think* it. Good-bye, Sally; good-bye, Dingle. I shall be seeing you soon at the house, no doubt."

He went out into the now lamplit street of the little village, and, turning to his right, went towards the inn.

There he would kill two birds with one stone—call on his old friend Mrs. Babbage, and get something to take the taste of that confounded concoction of Sally Linter's out of his mouth.

Sharrow village was small and straggling. It consisted of two dozen or so houses set down on the edge of an irregularly shaped green on one side of which gleamed a horse-pond.

The cottages were, for the most part, thatched, and many of them were very old, and seemed to have grown into the earth from which the whitewashed stones had been torn.

The inn was opposite the horse-pond, and was a fairly large house, one of the oldest in the place.

Over its door, which led into a cobbled courtyard, swung an ancient sign, bearing its name in black letters on a white ground: "The Sheepsheers' Arms."

Sandy paused at the door, and looked about him.

There was the blacksmith's shop, where once he and his first horse, Rhoderick Dhu, had taken refuge, on his way home from a hunt, from a terrific thunderstorm. He could still hear the strange reverberation of the thunder among the iron things in the shed.

On the other side of the road was Mrs. Gidding's sweet-shop. Oh, vanished bull's-eyes and lost Edinburgh rock!

As he stood there, something white came scurrying down the road, and with a final elastic bounce lay sprawling at his feet—a panting, gasping something, too fat underneath (its underneath was now uppermost), a something delighted, servile, triumphant.

"Winker, you scoundrel, how did you get out?" He bent and patted the old dog whom he loved. "I left you in the small hall sleeping the sleep of satisfied gluttony. Did *she* let you out, eh? Did pretty Maggie,—open the door for you?"

He paused a moment, for he had never before used the girl's name, and then went under the whitewashed archway and into the inn.

They were glad to see him. Mrs. Babbage herself bustled forward to meet him, bade him mind not to bump his head in the doorway. Lord! but he 'ad grown!

And then, as he stood still shaking hands with the three or four villagers who were wetting their various whistles, as one of them quite superfluously explained, the door leading from the bar into the hostess's private parlour opened suddenly, and Sandy forgot to give his hand to old Peter Bustard, Farmer Linter's shepherd, and stood staring stupidly.

"Oh, Sandy, don't you know me?"

Viola Wymondham came forward into the glare of the oil lamps, her father's parishioners making respectful way for her, and held out her hand.

"Viola!"

"Yes. And you didn't know me. Now isn't that unkind, Mrs. Babbage? Peter Bustard *always* knows me, don't you, Peter?"

Peter, who was well over eighty, was a little senile, but

he burst into an understanding roar of delight at this most excellent joke.

Five minutes later, Sandy having explained to Mrs. Babbage that he must walk home with Miss Viola but would call again very soon, found himself in the dusky village street with the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XXIII

NEVER for an instant did Sandy ask himself what it was that had happened to him. From the minute when the door opened, and she stood on the threshold, a little cloud of tobacco smoke floating between her and him, he knew that he loved her.

There she stood, his wife. It was rather overwhelming, but beautifully simple.

She wore dark furs, out of which her little fair head rose like a flower, and she had a buoyant walk that not even the abominable greasy cobblestones of the village could discourage.

She had a rather serious little manner, a sort of aloofness that to him was perfection, and she told him her simple news in a gentle voice that ravished him.

Yes, Mary was well; and her father, too, bar his occasional attacks of bronchitis. Yes, she was glad to be back at home; yes, she felt the cold a little. Oh, dear no! she was no longer delicate. That is to say, not *very*.

And Sandy literally drank her words.

The air was by this time soaked with moisture, though no rain fell, and the earth gave out a cool, spicy smell that reminded them that spring was somewhere in the near future.

"Look, Sandy! all the trees are covered with drops of water—how pretty it is!"

They paused where the light flowed into the narrow channel of the village street, and looked at the branches of the trees that hung over the road from the doctor's garden.

The lamp over the surgery door cast a red halo round the girl's upturned face. Sandy looked at her, not at the trees.

"You are sure you *quite* understand about my not calling?" he asked presently, although she had already

assured him that no one at the Vicarage had taken offence at his note.

"Oh, yes, Sandy! We were sorry, but, of course, we knew that you couldn't do anything else. How—how wicked of him, isn't it, still so to hate poor grandmamma? Perfectly absurd!"

They had turned into a path leading across the park towards the Vicarage, and under the dark trees her laugh echoed gaily.

"If only you could have *seen* grandmamma, Sandy. Why, she had quite a long beard, and was so fat she couldn't move!"

"She hadn't a beard when she was young, Vi," he returned gravely, "and I can quite understand him."

She stood still, her little figure close to him, her face a mere luminous blot in the darkness.

"You can understand? Why, Sandy, to hate someone for fifty years because she wouldn't marry you?"

Still he was grave. "Yes, I can. Of course, it would depend—on the person."

There was a long pause; then he added jerkily: "You see, Viola, you don't quite understand. He—he *loved* her."

He had never before in his life used the wonderful word in any connection with himself, and its use, even in this circuitous way, made his breath catch in his throat.

"He—loved her," he repeated, as they walked slowly on, and downright being though he was, he was epicure enough to enjoy the subtlety of such love-making.

They hardly spoke again, for she, too, felt the magic of the thing, though she did not recognize it.

They crossed the bit of woodland and turned down the long path, which, because it was a right of way and led to the hated Vicarage, was hidden even from the uppermost windows of the house by a huge hedge.

Now it was quite dark, and Sandy longed with all his might to offer Viola his arm. But he did not do it, for he did not quite dare. They had parted as children. What if she should feel it to be a kind of travesty of grown-upness, and laugh?

Once he stumbled and cannoned sideways against her. He never forgot that.

When the silence was at last broken, it was, of course, by her.

"I *do* wish he wasn't so silly ; it is a shame that we can't see you now we *are* here. There are so many things I want to ask you, and to tell you."

"Are there, Vi?"

His voice was so beautifully gentle that she started, and then said: "You *have* changed, Sandy!"

"Yes, I was a child then. Now I am a man. I am twenty-three."

"And I'm nineteen."

"I know. Mary is twenty-two. Oh, I have not forgotten. To-morrow we are having a party—lots of people are coming. My great-uncle is quite excited about it. We are going to dance and play old-fashioned games. If only——"

"Oh, snapdragon? I do love snapdragon, Sandy! I think of all the heavenly things, it's snapdragon. Oh, dear!"

Sandy hated his great-uncle so at that moment that she heard his teeth gritting against each other, and hastened to console him.

"Don't be angry, Sandy—I am absurd and childish to mind about a little English country party. Why, I've been to *court*!"

"You haven't!"

"I have, and not only here, but at Rome. And I have had," she added importantly, "two proposals."

Sandy did not answer.

They had reached the end of the path and were walking along the south avenue towards the Vicarage gate.

"One of them was a prince, too!"

"Pooh! An *Italian* prince," he retorted, very sore and thirsting for that alien noble's blood.

The Vicarage was before them now—a long, low, comfortable old house, and its windows on the two lower stories were glowing with the reddish lamplight that is so much cosier than electric lights of any kind.

"I suppose I may go to the door?"

"Of course you must. It would be most rude to let me go up that great path all by myself," she laughed.

They stood under the porch, saying good-bye, for several minutes.

"Let me call Mary out here, just to say how do you do. She'd *love* to see you!"

"No, no; it wouldn't be fair. I've given him my word, but—I wish I had him here to tell him what I think."

As he spoke the door opened suddenly and the Vicar appeared, his finger to his lips.

"Hush! I thought I heard talking. Sandy, your uncle is here. How d'you do, my boy? Glad to see you. He has had an attack of some kind. I heard him groaning as I came home—he was in the copse behind the church, and I had him brought in here. He is better now, but has gone to sleep."

"My great-uncle here! Good heavens, sir! we had better get him home before he comes to himself."

"No, that's quite all right. He—he is too—too—well-bred to say a word under the circumstances. I think he knew, or very nearly knew, when he came out of his faint, where he was.—come in, children, come in; it is very damp,—and he asked for you. I was just going to send William up to the house for you."

Sandy remembered the old hall with its antlered hat-rack, its ochre-coloured shiny paper in imitation marble, its shallow staircase with the spindly handrail.

The old engraving of Nelson at Trafalgar still hung beside the gilt mirror opposite the hat-rack, and through the open door on the left the light of the Vicar's fire danced, as of yore, on the bare oak floor.

"He's in my study—ah, here's Mary. How is he, my dear?"

Mary, whose sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, and who held a large handkerchief folded bandage-wise, and smelling of vinegar, nodded to Sandy.

"How do you do?" she said civilly. "Glad to see you again. He's still asleep, Father, but I think he will wake soon; he's restless."

She was tall, very tall beside her sister, and was, Sandy saw at a glance, well developed and strong looking. As in her childhood, her dark eyebrows nearly met over her straight, well-cut nose, and her cheekbones were too high.

She had a clear, smooth, rather dark skin, with a faint colour in the cheeks, and her large mouth was red.

A plain young woman, but very nice-looking. That is what nine people out of ten said of Mary Wymondham, and she knew it and did not care a rush.

Viola took off her hat, her furs and her coat. Sandy watched her.

They had gone into the dining-room, which was opposite the study, so as to be near at hand when Lord Sharrow should waken.

"The house looks pretty much the same," young Sharrow remarked. "How well I remember it all! Do you remember the day you fainted, and I thought you were dead? I do."

"I don't. I often fainted, you know."

"But you don't now?" At the nervous anxiety in his voice, she turned away from the fire and looked at him.

"Oh, Sandy, how funny you look when you're serious! Dear *me!* how bushy your eyebrows are!"

"Are they? Did Mary call us? Hush! No—it's all right. I say, Vi, perhaps he'll have to make up with your father now."

Mary came to the door.

"Sandy," she said deliberately, a little louder than would have been necessary, but for the old listener in the other room, "I am so glad you have come. Lord Sharrow is better now, and wishes to see you."

The old man lay on the Vicar's worn leather sofa, a green and red worsted pillow under his head. He was pale, but looked otherwise quite all right.

"Ah, you've got here," he observed, as Sandy came in; "that's right. I had a bad turn in the wood, and—and—Mr. Wymondham had me brought in here. It was very kind of him. Will you ask him to come to me, as I am still too weak to go to him? I wish to thank him for his kindness."

Sandy was deeply sorry for the unforgiving old man, as he saw his struggle to be courteous; there was something fine in the triumph of breeding over enmity.

"I am glad you're all right again, sir," the young man said gently. "Shall I send for a carriage?"

"No, thanks. Mr. Wymondham"—the utterance of the name itself seemed half to choke old Sharrow, but he said it with peculiar clearness—"has offered to send me in his pony-carriage. Just ask him kindly to come to me, will you?"

The Vicar, himself an old, white-haired man with a weary stoop to his thin shoulders, came at the bidding of his mother's old lover, and stood mildly before him.

"I wish, Mr. Wymondham," Lord Sharrow said, sitting up and arranging his scant, unreverend grey hairs with one hand, while he leaned on the head of the sofa with his other arm, "to give you my sincere thanks for your kindness in bringing me to your house and caring for me."

"My dear Lord Sharrow, it was nothing—nothing," began the Vicar nervously.

"You would have done as much for anyone—no matter whom," interrupted the older old man, just the shadow of a sneer marring the courtesy of his manner. "I understand that, of course, Mr. Wymondham, but," and his voice changed as his face cleared again to one of greater gentleness than Sandy could remember in him, "you have been more than Christian-like, you have been truly kind. Just as I regained—my wits—I heard you speak to your daughter."

There was a pause, during which Viola drew nearer to her father, who cast a look of almost agonized appeal to Sandy.

Then Lord Sharrow struggled to his feet, and standing for the first time in his life in the house of the man he had chosen to consider his enemy, he faced that man and went on speaking:

"You said to your daughter: 'Oh, Mary, my dear, the poor old man! the poor old man!'"

After a pause he added: "And you were right. I have hated your mother—a most beautiful woman, sir, a most beautiful woman—for over sixty years. I never forgave even *you* for the wrong she did me long before your birth. But—I am just that: a poor old man. And, James Wymondham," he held out his veined and knotted hand, "I now ask you—will you and—your mother, forgive me?"

The Vicar could not speak. Sandy glanced at Viola, and then, because her eyes, too, were full of tears, at the ceiling.

The two old men shook hands.

Sandy looked on, his thick, dusty-looking eyelashes wet. There was something very pathetic in this late reconciliation. That it was too late for any practical good to come of it made it somehow more poignant.

He remembered vaguely what he had heard of James Wymondham's early struggles, the poverty that was his only heritage from his father, who died in his childhood; he knew that poor Cyrilla had on one occasion made a frantic appeal to her old lover, only to be repulsed by silence.

And now the boy whom Lord Sharrow might have helped was an old man himself.

After a long pause, during which the two hands were firmly clasped, Lord Sharrow said, with an air of relief: "We will go now, Sandy." They went, almost in silence.

As they drove homewards in the ancient pony-carriage in which Cyrilla Wymondham had driven her little son Jimmie half a century before, the old man gave a sudden chuckle.

"A strange scene it must have been, eh, Sandy?"

"What scene, sir?"

"Why, James Wymondham and me solemnly shaking hands! *She* would have laughed, you know. She did laugh at most things."

Sandy turned and looked at him in the moonlight.

"Surely, sir, you were not—not just——"

"Shamming, you want to say. Well, why don't you say it?" snapped his great-uncle. "No. I am still, thank God, capable of seeing the funny side of a thing, but—I was not shamming, Sandy."

They drove on in silence.

Suddenly Lord Sharrow asked sharply: "What is that you are whistling?"

Sandy hesitated. "I—I don't know what it is, sir; I heard a boy whistle it one morning, years ago——"

As he spoke, he realized that the air had not come into his memory for a long time. It was seeing Viola that had recalled it.

CHAPTER XXIV

THEIR arrival at home was attended with some excitement, for Lord Sharrow had been suffering from a cold that day, and had declared himself too unwell to leave his own rooms.

"And then, sir," his valet told Sandy, when the invalid had been established by his fire, "when I went in with 'is tea, 'e had gone out. I was extremely alarmed, sir, but I daren't do anything, for if I 'ad gone out after 'im, he'd 'ave"—poor Waters broke off, for his thoughts hardly bore expression, even to an old friend like Sandy.

"I know, Waters, I know. Well—he seems to have had some kind of a fit—very slight, luckily—and just by chance Mr. Wymondham found him, in the coppice near the church, and had him carried to the Vicarage."

"My Gawd, sir!"

Waters had been his lordship's valet for over twenty years, and, of course, knew of the enmity between The House and the Vicarage.

Mrs. Puddifant, *née* Babbage, who had been housekeeper for an even longer time, took the liberty of coming to Sandy's room for fountain-head information.

Then he had to explain to his mother, who was all for sending for leeches to apply to the back of the august invalid's neck; to Sandy the heir, who had a right to know, and whose handsome young face wore, during the recital, an expression that would not have been amiss if his sovereign had been in question, so polite was he and so impersonal were his feelings; Keith, too, asked a few questions, and even red-lipped Paul, whose interest took the form of scarcely veiled regret for the heir's sake, that, as he said: "Nothing really vital had happened."

"Nothing really mortal, you mean," retorted Sandy in the frank disgust Paul so often inspired in him. "For a

budding parson, Paul, you really are rather *too* much of a rotter."

"Not at all," Paul retorted with his musical laugh; "lots of parsons are rotters!"

Then little Syd came and curled up on the arm of his brother's chair, as Sandy finally sat down in the small hall to rest.

"Poor Great-uncle!" the boy said, his arm round Sandy's neck. "How dreadful to be ill in the wood, all alone! Has he made up with Mr. Wymondham, Sandy?"

"You young magpie! What do you know about Mr. Wymondham?"

"*All*," declared Syd emphatically. "Miss Penrose told me. She says he'll have to invite the Pretty Girl to the party now, too."

Sandy started. Miss Penrose, whose existence he had utterly forgo'ten, came with a shock to his memory. Could it be only four hours since he had sat in that very chair and—kissed her?

It seemed years ago—or, more exactly, it seemed as if another young man had sat there: a young man with whom this present Sandy had nothing whatever to do. But—the young woman whom that other young man had kissed—was she right? Would Lord Sharrow now invite the Vicarage people to the dance the next night? In that case, Sandy would show *her* the things he loved—this very room, the picture gallery, the library—no, on second thoughts, he would not bring her here, to the Small Hall; it would not be—

"Sandear, do you like Miss Penrose?"

The boy's voice startled the dreaming man.

"Miss Penrose? Yes, yes, of course, Syd. She is very nice. Why?"

"Because Paul told Ben that she is a wise little wench. I don't like the word 'wench'; it sounds like a kitchen-maid."

"By the way, Syd (never mind what Paul says, he *never* matters), where is old Ben? I want to see him."

"He's in your room. He told me to tell you you would find him there, and I forgot. I'm so sorry, Sandear."

Sandy rose. "It doesn't matter, Syddikin. I must go and talk with him now."

Ben was smoking and reading Loftie's "London." The

crimson curtains were drawn, the Tower Room looked very cosy.

"Hallo, Ben!"

"Hallo, Sandy! I thought I'd best get out of the way when Miss Penrose told me you had driven up in state in a pony-carriage. Was she right in saying it was the Vicar's?"

"Yes. But *damn* Miss Penrose; she seems to know everything. How on earth did she come to recognize that pony-cart?"

"Better ask her," returned Ben placidly, taking off his disfiguring spectacles and blinking at his friend.

Sandy stuffed a pipe with tobacco and set it alight. Then, leaning forward and staring into the fire, he said:

"Ben, old boy—something to tell you."

"Fire away—Romeo."

Even in the solemnity of the moment Sandy burst out laughing. "Yes, *don't* I look a Romeo! But why do you call me that?"

"Because—you come from the Vicarage, and because—oh, well, I don't know why, but—it's Viola Wymondham, Sandy?"

There was a pause, and then Sandy said softly: "Yes, Ben, it's Viola Wymondham."

They had been friends for so many years that Sandy felt not the least awkwardness in making his avowal.

"Where did you see her?"

"Met her at the 'Sheepshearers,' and walked home with her. Ben, she's—well, you must see her. I can't explain."

His face was, in the firelight, almost beautiful as he spoke. Ben watched him with a look in his eyes that would not have been amiss in those of a devoted mother.

"The old Chief and her father shook hands," Sandy went on presently, less momentarily and puffing hard at his pipe, which, to tell the truth, was a little rank. "It was rather a fine sight: the old Chief very shaky and not nearly so purple as usual, begging the other old boy's pardon."

"By Jove!"

"Yes. He's an awful old scoundrel, of course, but his manners are wonderful—when he wants them to be. Mary and Viola and I looked on as if it had been—well—Irving. Viola's eyes were all wet. It was very affecting."

Ben nodded. "Must have been, Sandy. I'm glad, for you."

"Yes, I knew you'd be. Oh, Ben!"

There was a long pause; then suddenly Sandy sprang up.

"Good heavens, man! I must dress. Why didn't you remind me?"

Ben, who was dressed, and whose very tight-fitting clothes betrayed the fact that he had grown since their young days, sat on, smoking for a few minutes, and then opened a window, and let the cold wind blow over him, to get rid of the smell of tobacco.

After which he went down the long, winding stairs and gave a bang on Sandy's bedroom door.

There was no answer, and when he had waited a moment he went in. The room was empty, and judging by its aspect of having been torn to bits by a tornado, Ben decided that its owner had dressed in a hurry.

Sandy, indeed, had been summoned to Lord Sharrow.

"Sandy," the old man snapped. "Tell Sandy to send cards to the Vicarage for to-morrow night, and to write a personal note, saying that he and I shall be much disappointed if Mr. Wymondham and his daughters do not come."

"Yes, sir."

"This is the correct thing to do, you understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you a parrot that you can say only one phrase?" Lord Sharrow's voice was positively malevolent.

"No, sir. I can say that too. I am an accomplished bird——"

"Hold your tongue. Sandy, I wish you might write the note to bid those charming young things to my house, but—it's no good. Sandy is my heir, and you—you are not of the slightest importance."

"Never mind that, Great-uncle." The young man spoke almost sweetly in his understanding of the old man's jest. "I am of importance to *some* people—to Syd, and to you, and to Ben, and—perhaps, some day, I shall be to—somebody else."

With one of its disconcertingly sudden changes, Lord Sharrow's face was again lowering and vindictive.

"Remember—make love to her as much as you like, but—and your allowance depends entirely on my will; it is not yet settled on you. And—one word of marriage to that woman, and——"

Sandy, to his surprise, interrupted him by a peal of laughter.

"You needn't worry about *that*, sir! I have no more idea of marrying Miss Penrose than—than *you* have."

"Oh, you haven't. Very well," mumbled his great-uncle, only half mollified. "Be very careful, though. She is far cleverer than you, far cleverer. Perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me your word of honour that you will never marry her?"

"Certainly, sir. I give you my word of honour never to marry Miss Penrose."

Then he went downstairs, his heart as a bird in his breast.

CHAPTER XXV

THERE were so many young men at Sharrow that some of them of necessity played the part of stage-chorus to our two principals—the two Sandys.

And, if the history of Sandy the heir were being written, our Sandy—he of no importance—would, of course, fade into the dullness of outline shown in this narrative by the heir.

Maggie Penrose, in whose breast sang no bird that night, talked but little during the late dinner. She watched, instead, the faces round the table, and, as she expressed it to herself, wondered.

She wondered, because she had a keen imagination—the keenest, bar Ben Frith's, in the party—what each young man was thinking as he took unto himself the conventional amount of soup, fish, entrée and joint.

Sandy the heir looked quite as usual. He was sorry the old man had been seedy, but was too honest and too decent to give a thought to might-have-beens. Moreover, he had plenty of money and no debts.

Keith, no doubt vivid enough to himself, presented, because deeply bored by everyone in the house and interested only in the prospects of hunting, a very shadowy aspect to the girl. He hardly seemed real.

Little Ben Frith she respected, but she feared him as well. He saw, she knew, almost as much as herself.

Mrs. Sharrow, the rouge carefully concealing her ugly stain, saw only Syd, and he mentally, for he was in bed.

Remained only our Sandy, who was Maggie Penrose's Sandy too, and something had happened to him she knew. Never before had his strange little eyes held quite that look, nor his mouth worn quite that expression.

On the possibility that Sandy was still deeply affected

by his great-uncle's indisposition, the shrewd girl wasted not a thought. She was too clever for that. But, because she was a woman, she was not too clever to make the mistake of, if not decidedly believing, at least hoping, that she went for something in his change of aspect.

She was not young enough or innocent enough to think that her battle was won because he had kissed her, but her experience told her that he was not less inflammable, in spite of his rugged face, than other young men of his age. And, gazing at him as he ate his fish with such a splendid disregard of possible bones that only the theory of guardian angels could explain his not choking to death, she remembered that he had agreed to take her to see the ruin by moonlight that night, and the prospect held comiort.

It must be remembered that she was really in love with him. She was an adventuress in that she had only her wits to live by, and in that she had always intended to marry for position; to exchange her youth, her beauty, and her charm for a fixed place in the world.

But in a measure she deserved respect because, being in the house with Sandy the heir, and Keith, who was to have a very decent fortune left him by an uncle of his mother's, she made not the slightest attempt to attract the attention of these two young men, but gave herself up entirely to the marrying of our Sandy who had five hundred pounds a year and had, as she knew, charged himself with the education of his brother.

She had, at least, the bravery of her love, and as she watched Sandy—reckless with fish-bones and then bolting his beef with as great a disregard for his digestion in his absent-mindedness—she loved him very dearly.

He, meantime, was thinking about her. He had kissed her, and he knew that she cared for him in a way, although in his new-found reverence for it he would not have dreamed of applying to her feeling the sacred word "love."

A *béguin*, he called it. Yes, just a *béguin*. But because no goodness on earth could possibly equal that of Viola, he wished to be as good as lay in his black and evil nature, and no one knows how black and evil he thought himself in comparison with Viola.

And kissing women one does not love suddenly appeared to him as something closely approaching a crime.

He had been a beast, and the poor girl might have mis-

understood him. He rose from the table with a fixed determination in his mind.

He played a game of billiards with the other Sandy, talked about the chance of mild weather holding, with Keith, and then went to the Yellow Drawing-room, where the two ladies were reading. Ben was in the library, he knew, and Paul, who sat at the piano, picking out a song from the score of *Patience*, did not count.

"Miss Penrose," he called out as he opened the door, "come along out and have a look at the ruin. It's a glorious night and I have something to tell you."

She rose, flushing a little, and lamenting his lack of atmosphere. A trifle of mystery in his manner would have pleased her more.

"Do you mind, Mrs. Sharrow?" she said.

"No, of course not. But get something to put round you or you'll take cold."

Miss Penrose's prettiest shawl already lay on a chest near the moat-door, out of which Sandy had that afternoon gone, all unsuspectingly, to meet his fate.

She wrapped the shawl round her shoulders, and in silence followed him out on to the little bridge.

"A jolly night, isn't it?" he began nervously.

"Yes, 'In such a night as this——'"

She knew that he read Shakespeare, but he did not respond now, and stood, looking very big, leaning on the handrail that had been added to the ancient bridge after a child of the family had, in Queen Anne's day, fallen from it into the water and been drowned.

"Miss Penrose——"

"Yes, Mr.—Sandy?"

"You don't want to go to the ruin," he said, hurriedly, "it's a goodish bit of a walk, and the grass is damp. Look here, I wish to apologize to you."

"To—apologize?"

"Yes. I was—a brute, this afternoon, and I beg your pardon."

There was a long pause.

"Will you forgive me?"

"Yes." She spoke very slowly, pulling the fringe of the shawl over her face so that he could not see her expression. "Yes—but I do not see that I have anything to forgive. It was my fault."

"Oh, no!" Sandy protested with energy, "not a bit of it. It was mine, the fault, entirely. It was just that—well, you did look so infernally pretty in the firelight—I suppose I lost my head. Young men do, you know," he added in the wisdom of his young love.

"Do they?" Maggie Penrose asked softly. She was clever enough to let him do the talking, knowing that the more he said the more chance there was that she might entrap him.

"Yes. I—well, I have asked your pardon and you have given it to me. Shall we go back?"

"Not quite yet. It is so cool and lovely here. And—Paul is in the drawing-room. He, too, thinks that young men lose their heads—only he thinks it beforehand, as a justification of whatever he wants to do."

"Paul is a beast," said Sandy, with emphasis. "Has he been annoying you?"

"No—no—not exactly. That is, he *has* annoyed me, but he may not have meant to. I fear," she added, with a little rueful laugh, "that his very existence annoys me!"

"I am sorry. If he does anything, just tell me, will you, and I'll—"

She laid a pretty hand on his arm. "Oh, no, no. You must not. You must not say a word to him. It is only that I hate being touched by people I do not love, and—he comes very close to one." Then she added. "Mr. Sandy, do not think *you* annoyed me this afternoon. I said it was my fault, and it was. I could have stopped you, but—I didn't, because—well, you are Syd's brother, and, after all—you kissed me because you liked me, at least at that minute, and I am so lonely, I like to be liked!"

Sandy knew that she was telling him with remarkable clarity that she liked him to kiss her; and that her attitude in so doing amounted to an invitation to repeat the experiment.

He saw all this and disliked her for it, even while he was sorry for her, while her little plaint, "I am very lonely," touched him.

He stood rigid in the moonlight, his arm in its inexpressive-ness feeling to her sensitive hand like a stone balustrade or a window-sill.

"Oh, now I see. *Now* I understand! You are not shocked at yourself," she cried, suddenly looking up at him,

her face quivering, "you are shocked at me. You think I was a brute, as you put it. You think I was—fast, and unwomanly!"

Real tears sprang to her beautiful eyes, and how was he to know that they were tears of anger and wounded vanity, as well as of hurt love?

He had hurt a woman, and he felt a villain. But he did not move even now. He was as immobile as a statue.

"I say, *don't* think that. It's absurd! Of course I knew that—that——" He wanted to say that her yielding had been prompted only by kindness, but he was very young and he was truthful. So his words stumbled and stopped as she put her head against his arm and burst into real tears.

"I *am* so ashamed," he went on, gazing desperately over her head into the darkness under the trees; "I was a swine."

"It was only because I was so lonely. I haven't a relation in the world," she sobbed, forgetting the claims of two sisters and three aunts, all resident in Wimbledon, "and Mrs. Sharrow has been so kind to me—just like a mother——"

Sandy's set face relaxed into a not quite pleasant grin. The idea of his mother being to anyone but Syd, just like a mother, held for him a rather bitter amusement.

"Oh, I could kill myself for being such a fool," the girl went on with passion in her voice, raising her head and showing her tear-stained face. "It seemed for a moment as if you were *my* brother as well as Syd's."

This time his grin was mental, for she was looking at him; but grin he did, for he was not so young nor such a fool as to believe in the truth of this charming touch.

He knew perfectly well that she was in love with him—in her way; a way, of course, that would be to Viola's, when Viola did come to love him, as the light of a penny dip to the glory of the sun.

"Well, well, well," he said, gently patting her arm with the air of an ancient uncle, "wipe your eyes, and we will go back to the others. I thank you for forgiving me, and I will never offend you again."

They returned to the house, and Miss Penrose favoured the company, at Mrs. Sharrow's request, with a little Chopin. She played softly, delicately, and not even Sandy dreamed of the torrent of rage that was in her heart. It is very

probable that she loved him, for his resistance, more than ever ; but it is equally true that she hated him as well.

He had made several mistakes in his young wisdom, and even while she played she began to see vaguely that there must be some concrete reason for his change of manner.

And, of course, from the very second of this perception, she set her wits to work to find out the reason.

"Play the Berceuse," suggested Paul, who was leaning over the piano.

And presently the lulling, dreamy melody filled the lamp-lit room, sending by its magic everyone who heard it to his or her little private dreamland.

Sandy, of course, was with Viola ; Keith, who had come in to chat with his so-called "aunt," whom he rather liked, dwelt for a few minutes in a happy country where it never froze, and where his new horses feared no jump.

Sandy the heir took mild pleasure in the thought of his *fiancée*, who was to become his wife in the autumn.

Mrs. Sharrow's whole being was with Syd in a rosy future quite unlike anything likely to come to pass ; and even Paul was dreaming. His dreams were centred in the pianist. He was to be a parson, and he was no fool. Therefore, it is improbable that he saw Maggie Penrose as a parson's wife. But his thoughts were certainly centred in her.

And the girl herself, as her soft, strong fingers made the piano sing the exquisite melody, thought thoughts strangely at variance with it.

CHAPTER XXVI

SANDY THE HEIR received his grandfather's guests the following evening, and he did it very well, with much dignity and even a certain charm.

Nearly everyone came who had been invited, for a party at Sharrow was a very unusual event, the last having taken place five years ago, on the occasion of the coming of age of its future master.

So the county, as the *White Shirley Monitor* expressed it the following day, was fully represented.

People were naturally curious about the young man who was to come into the vast and ancient property; there was about the Sharrow history much that was rather horrible, something even approaching the disgraceful, but there was much of real romance.

It is rare for all the men of the house, almost without exceptions, to carry out its traditions as did the Sharrows.

They had been, as history as well as memory reminded people, almost all of them, wild as hawks in their youth, and then, after marriage, while always retaining a certain strain of fierceness and roughness, very decent members of society.

The present lord had broken the record by remaining a profligate to the extreme limits of old age, but even he had done well by his lands, and would, people said, leave more than he had received. Moreover, the story of his misfortune in love was public property, and had never been forgotten; he had some excuse.

And now here was the heir apparently bent, by his extreme correctness, on farther denying the old tradition.

"I vow I should be afraid to give one of my granddaughters to him," one old woman declared, with vehemence, as she settled at whist in the Chinese Room. "These

Sharrows can't be respectable all their lives; not one of 'em ever has, according to the story, and this boy surely has not had his fling. He's bound to have it sooner or later——"

"Perhaps his grandfather's double share will go down to his account—even things up," suggested her partner with a chuckle. "I am sorry the old villain is ill, I haven't seen him for fifteen years and should like to."

"Yes, so should I. I, you know, was to have been poor dear Cyrilla's maid-of-honour—I saw a lot of him at that time."

The other lady at the table turned to her interestedly. "Oh, *did* you, Lady Charlotte? Do tell me about him. Was he very attractive? My father used to say——"

But Lady Charlotte brooked no rivals. "Your father, my dear Audrey, hardly knew Sandy Sharrow at all. *Was* he attractive? Dear me, yes. He was—wonderful. As ugly as sin, you know, like all of 'em, but with a charming manner and the most beautiful voice! The young man who is dancing so much with Jimmie Wymondham's girl is like him, I should say, only rougher. There were moments when Sandy was *not* rough, and then, my dear, no words on earth can express his—smoothness!"

"Really? And who is the boy dancing with Viola Wymondham?"

"That's another Sandy Sharrow—Sydney Sharrow's son; but you never saw Sydney. He married a Frenchwoman."

Mr. Boreham saw that Lady Charlotte wished him to subside and let her talk, but he would not. He was a small compact man, with an obstinate chin and a prodigious memory.

"This Sandy," he went on deliberately, "is the old gentleman's favourite. He is a nice boy, but I should not call him fascinating, as his great-uncle must have been."

"Bosh!" exploded Lady Charlotte. "What boy of twenty-three ever was fascinating? Sharrow was twenty-seven when he married. Now then, Mr. Boreham, suppose we get on with the game?"

Viola, in white, was wonderfully lovely, and Sandy dwelt from men apart, in a heaven inhabited only by her and him. He danced, though with vigour, without any remarkable grace, yet she gave him all the dances he dared ask for.

Keith, who danced perfectly, devoted himself to Mary

Wymondham, who excelled her sister as he did his cousin.

"Vi dances well," the youth remarked, as he and Mary waltzed, "but not nearly as well as you."

"Nonsense." Mary's eyes rested on her sister with an expression of almost passionate love.

"It isn't nonsense. She's light because she weighs nothing; you're light because you are marvellously well balanced."

They stopped dancing, and Mary said in an abrupt way that seemed natural to her: "Let's go up in the gallery and look on for a while, shall we?"

He assented, and they climbed the stairs and sat down, leaning their arms on the broad oak balustrade.

It was a beautiful sight, the great hall full of dancers.

They were silent for a minute, and then the young man and the girl, who had been playmates in their childhood, turned and looked at each other.

"You have changed since I saw you last, Keith," she said. "Let me see, when was it?"

"I don't know. Wasn't it at Lady Armerod's ball?"

"No, I was in France then. It must have been two years ago—yes, it was. I saw you one day in the village, don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, of course. It rained and we all took refuge at the doctor's. Well—so I'm changed?"

"Yes. You aren't a real Sharrow, you know. Sandy isn't either—I mean your brother—but he is more than you."

"If you mean that we are not as ugly as Chinese goblins, thanks—in his name and mine."

The young man laughed and bowed.

"You certainly aren't ugly. He is really handsome. But you aren't Sharrow-y at all, are you?"

"Our hair is red."

"Reddish. Your noses are too small," the girl went on thoughtfully, her eyes noting with great calm each feature as she named it; "your mouths aren't stern enough; *your* chin doesn't stick out at all."

"Thanking you again and again; the other Sandy must be more satisfactory to your critical eye."

Mary laughed. "He is! He is really absurdly like his great-uncle, isn't he?"

"He *would* be pleased at that!"

"Well, but isn't he? I haven't seen him angry, but I'm sure his jaw protrudes, now doesn't it?"

Keith, who did not care much for women and was rather bored, laughed. "If it will do you any good, Mary," he said, "I don't mind telling you that when he is angry he is as ugly as the very devil himself!"

She glanced at him.

"Thanks. Now let's go down. You want to dance."

He did not protest, and presently left her standing by her father, and went to seek a partner.

Her father was talking to an old man whom she did not know, and so for some time the girl stood studying in detail the scene which, as a whole, had been so effective from the gallery.

There were about thirty couples on the floor, but it was not at all crowded, because the hall was very large. There was Sandy the heir waltzing with one of Lady Charlotte Grantley's granddaughters, and Keith with a pretty woman in old gold satin, and yonder young Paul stood talking to his partner.

Mary wondered who she was. Whoever she was, the Vicar's daughter decided with a fastidious shrug, she was flirting with Paul, whose smooth, apricot-coloured cheeks had flushed to a warmer hue than that which they naturally wore.

The strange girl, like several other women present, wore black; but Mary knew that this glittering garment was expensive as well as becoming. Vaguely, it made her think of the stage.

"Sandy."

Our Sandy stopped. Viola was dancing with Sir John Wycherley, and he was waiting for her.

"Hullo, Mary! not dancing? Come along."

"No, thanks; I'd rather look on. Sandy, tell me, who is the pretty woman Paul is making love to?"

"Paul? I cannot see—oh, yes. It's Syd's—my brother's—governess, Miss Penrose."

He eyed the split thumb of his second pair of gloves as he spoke. Mary eyed him.

"A flirt," she said.

Sandy chuckled. "Is she? Yes, I daresay. Pretty, isn't she?"

"Extremely! Paul thinks so too."

"Paul does. I hope he's not annoying her." There was real anxiety in his eyes as he leaned forward to try to catch another glimpse, through the shifting foreground of his cousin.

"She doesn't look annoyed, Sandy. I don't like her."

Mary's voice was always sure, but it was surer than usual as she uttered these words, and her face was stern. She was a person of strong likes and dislikes, and, he remembered, always too cocksure to be perfectly agreeable.

"Don't you? I am sorry for her. It must be horrible for a girl—earning her own living."

Then Viola came in sight, being subjected by her unskilful partner to a series of jerks and bumps, of which he, judging by his serene face, was happily unconscious.

Mary watched as Sir John cannoned into a fat lady, and during the subsequent apologies allowed Sandy to carry off his pretty partner.

Miss Penrose watched the little incident, too, and Mary caught a glimpse of her face as Sandy and Viola passed them.

"Handsome girl, the governess, eh?" asked Sir John, joining her. "My wife says she looks dangerous, and, by Jove! I believe she does."

"Lady Wycherley seems to be very discriminating," returned Mary absently. "No, thanks; I'd rather not dance."

Meantime, Paul was having a very good time, as he put it mentally. Never before had Miss Penrose been so charming to him, and, hopeful sign, she certainly was flirting with him, even while she asked questions about Mary Wymondham.

Paul had known the Vicarage girls ever since he was a very small boy, although they had of late years been a great deal away; and now, as he watched his companion's beautiful face, glowing and eager as he had never yet seen it, he consciously allowed her to draw him, telling her, because it kept her by his side, all he knew of Mary. She did not mention Viola.

"She isn't handsome, but she looks very nice," was Miss Penrose's comment, when he could think of no more to say. "I wonder whom she will marry?"

"What on earth has made you so interested in Mary

Wymondham?" the young man asked. "She isn't the least your sort—or mine either," he added hastily. "She's a regular young God Almighty—knows everything, and wants to rule everybody. Now *Viola*——"

But Miss Penrose shrugged her shoulders. "The other one does not interest me. She is—a bread-and-butter miss, although so lovely."

"Let's go and have some claret-cup. She's not *my* kind either. But," he added, with a chuckle, "don't let Sandy hear you say that—my cousin, I mean."

She took his arm. "Yes, I should love something cold to drink. Oh, then 'Sandy' is interested in her?"

Paul laughed, for once in his life quite without malice.

"Where are your eyes?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE next day Lord Sharrow had two very strange and very important interviews. The first of these came to him without his own volition, the other he arranged himself.

It was late in the afternoon, and the house seemed very quiet, for Sandy the heir, Keith, and Ben Frith, had gone.

Lord Sharrow, who was tired of his own rooms, and yet not sufficiently recovered to subject himself to accidental intercourse with the members of his house-party, had had Waters instal him in the Chinese Room, and there, surrounded by Chinese monsters, vases, and bronzes, the old man was encamped by the fire.

When Sandy knocked and was bidden to enter, he stood for several seconds in silence.

The beauty of the old-fashioned lighting systems is that under them the room is as subject to change of expression as is a human face.

The brilliance of an oil lamp is, owing to the state of its wick, the amount of oil in it, the very outdoor atmosphere, subject to great variations; the shadows made by it vary in intensity, and even in size—what one evening remains in relative obscurity, can the next glitter bravely, while the foreground of the night before retires into duskiness.

The fairy qualities of wax candles need no comment.

Now Sharrow was lighted from garret to cellar by lamps and candles. And Sandy, going into the Chinese Room that evening, stood still in the doorway to look at his old relative in this new frame.

The walls of the room were hung in once white, now ivory-coloured, satin, completely covered with a *v* of finest, most delicate embroidery.

Seen in detail, Sandy knew, there were small mandarins in red and yellow and blue, going up nearly perpendicular

staircases; there were be-trousered ladies of high degree sitting in pagodas drinking tea; there were lions, griffins, strange dogs, and dragons rich in spangled tail. There were fabulous flowers and lovely willows weeping green tears in a high wind, which luckily refused to ruffle the mandarins and the ladies. It was wonderful embroidery and of great value, but to the young man it had that day a new and rather startling aspect.

It was a magnificent background for a red-faced, sinister old man, who, wrapped against a possible taint of chill in the rarely-used room, sat by the fire in a mandarin's coat of blue, embroidered all over with malevolent-looking dragons.

"Come in, Sandy, come in. Shut the door, will you? Well, what are you looking at? Oh, at this." He glanced down at his coat with a smile that did not lessen his resemblance to a jabberwock-like porcelain monster who sat on a tall teak-wood tub behind him. "It's a fine coat, if you like Chinoiserie—well, what has happened?"

Sandy stood before him. "Great-uncle," he said rather solemnly, "I have something to tell you."

The porcelain dragon seemed to wink in the lamplight, but the old man's face wore a peculiar arrested look. He waited in silence, his dark veined hands folded on a big golden sun.

"I wish to marry," Sandy went on slowly; "and—you have been so very kind to me, I thought I would tell you before I—say anything definite to—her."

Lord Sharrow did not move.

"I—of course, I am not sure about her answer," Sandy went on simply, "but I think she will have me."

Presently he added: "Of course, I am not nearly good enough for her."

There was another pause, and then at last Lord Sharrow spoke.

"Miss Penrose, I suppose?"

"Good heavens, sir, *no!*"

"No? Then—who? You have seen no one here. Someone in London?"

"I know I have seen her only a little, Great-uncle, but"—one look was enough. "It's Viola, of course."

It must be borne in mind that for over sixty years Alexander Sharrow had hated with a hatred that was Old Testament-like in its intensity both the woman he had always thought

of as Cyrilla Dallaford and her descendants. It must not be forgotten that he knew his own life to have been wasted, and that he blamed Cyrilla Dallaford for that waste ; that he knew himself to have had great gifts, and to have neglected them for her sake. He had loved his hatred and cherished it, and he believed it to be a perfectly justifiable one.

And he was eighty years old ; he was ill, and Sandy, the one human being whom he loved, wished to marry the girl in whose veins ran the blood of his enemy, and the man for whose sake he had been betrayed.

Very quietly, without a single violent word, Lord Sharrow refused his consent to his great-nephew's marriage with Miss Wymondham.

" You know my reasons," he added, still without moving. " If you disobey me, I will never see you again, and I will never again give you one penny. I have no more to say. Good-evening."

Sandy turned and marched out of the room.

He would, he knew, never forget the scene—all the little Chinamen climbing their stairs in the lamplight ; the smiling green and white animal on the barrel-like stand ; the hideous old man, very pale, in his embroidered coat.

Sandy went to the hall door and out into the courtyard he so loved.

It was a dark, cloudy evening, and the flames of the big torches were already blowing about in their corners, casting great shadows up the walls and across the cobblestones. The moon was hidden by a huge black cloud, and a few drops of rain began to fall.

Sandy stood, his hands in his pockets, his smooth red head shining in the torchlight. He had not told his great-uncle quite all the truth, though he had told him nothing *but* the truth. He was sure that Viola cared for him. He had known last night, and that day at luncheon at the Vicarage had, though he had not seen her alone, made him doubly sure. He never doubted but that she would, if she loved him, marry him without a penny ; but he could not do her that wrong. They must wait, and he would work.

The fact that he was not adapted to any particular work did not occur to him. He was young, he was healthy—surely he could do what so many other young men had succeeded in doing.

He would go to the Vicarage at once and ask her to wait for him. And then he would tell his great-uncle and leave Sharrow for ever.

Someone opened the door of the great hall to the right of where he stood, and he caught a glimpse of the fireplace gilded by the dancing flames of a great log. His heart contracted as if a hand were crushing it.

Leave Sharrow? Suddenly all the old feeling came over him; the love that was almost a pain, the dream-feeling that it was a part of him and he a part of it.

For a long moment he yearned over the old place, his brows drawn down over his eyes, which were almost hidden in a network of wrinkles, his hands clenched in his pockets. He loved it horribly. Life would be an imperfect thing without it; with it, a great part of his own self must go.

Then his face cleared slowly, the blood rushed back to his cheeks; he drew his cramped hands out of his pockets, looked at them curiously, stretched the fingers and drew a deep breath.

"Then—it must go," he said aloud.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"MR. SHARROW—*Sandy*."

He started, for out of the shadows opposite him, coming from a small staircase leading up to the more modern of the bedrooms, came Maggie Penrose.

She wore a sealskin jacket—Lord Sharrow's Christmas present—and a little round cap of the same fur. And in the torchlight he could see that she was deeply excited.

"Listen!" she said hurriedly, catching his arm. "I know all about it, and—you must let me help you."

"Help me? But—how do you know?"

"I know because he told me," she declared boldly; "Lord Sharrow, I mean. I went in to play cribbage with him, and—he burst out and told me all about it. And—oh, *don't* do anything stupid."

Sandy hated her knowing, and he resented his great-uncle's telling her.

"I am going out," he said. "Good-bye."

She caught his arm. "But you *can't* go without a hat, and it's going to pour. Come back in just for a minute, and I will tell you how you can make him forgive you."

"Confound it, Miss Penrose!—I beg your pardon, but I wish you'd let go my arm. And—I need no forgiveness from Lord Sharrow."

"I know, I know. Don't take up my every word. Try and get the sense——"

"I know the sense of only one thing," he answered more gently, but his jaw still protruding a little. "Thanks very much for wishing to help me, but—I must go now. Good-bye."

Seeing that she might as well expect to move the house itself as to make him give up his newly-crystallized plan, she said no more. He walked quickly across to the tower and

had already disappeared under its shadow when she called to him.

"Remember Syd," she said.

He stopped, and she judged by the unbroken silence that he had not even turned. Then the old gate-porter, who had heard him coming, opened the big doors leading to the avenue, and Sandy stood silhouetted against the gleam of the lake and the darkness of the western sky.

"Never mind, John," she heard him say, in a strange voice, as though he had a bad cold, "I—I have forgotten something and must go back."

The girl stood looking at him as he returned to her side.

"You told me to remember my brother," he said heavily. "You are right. Thanks."

And again she stood alone in the windy darkness, the rain splashing her hot face, as he crossed the court and went into the great hall.

After a few minutes she went in, and without taking off her jacket went straight to the Chinese Room.

"Well?" the old man asked impatiently looking up. "Did you catch him?"

"Yes. He was just going to the Vicarage, and I cut him off (I saw him from my window) in the courtyard. He wouldn't listen to me, though I told him I had come from you——"

"You idiot! I beg your pardon, but why in Heaven's name did you tell him that? The very thing to send him off hot foot to the girl——"

"Not at all," she retorted calmly, unfastening her jacket and sitting down unbidden. "I didn't tell him that you had sent for me to tell me—I told him I came in to play cribbage as usual, and then you—well, just told me, on an impulse."

"Oh! Well, that's a little better," he conceded grudgingly.

"A 'little better'? It was the only thing to do. You must remember he doesn't like me. I shouldn't have been able to keep him for one second without telling him I had seen you."

Old Sharrow rose and moved restlessly about the beautiful room, looking so much one of themselves among the costly and hideous monsters of the collection that the girl's quick eyes saw the resemblance as Sandy's had.

"And he came back in with you?"

"No. He said he was going to the Vicarage. He left me and went as far as the Tower door, and then"—she made a little dramatic pause—"I had a flash of genius."

"Oh! And what may your flash of genius have been?" He sneered, but she did not care.

"I said two words to him. Now, Lord Sharrow, you are so much cleverer than I—see if you can guess the two words that brought him back into the house!"

"Nonsense—of course I can't guess. Tell me—tell me at once," he insisted. She smiled, and did not reply.

"Tell me." This time there was pleading in his voice.

"I said, 'Remember Syd.'"

After a short silence Lord Sharrow said: "You are right. It *was* a flash of genius. I was right in telling you. You have a brain. 'Remember Syd.' Yes—I can put on that screw. And," his voice rose angrily, "by God I will! I forgave the man and asked him here—had to—he had been kind to me. But I would rather see the boy dead than married to Cyrilla Dallaford's daughter."

"Granddaughter," corrected Miss Penrose.

He nodded. "Of course, of course—granddaughter. Well, if he does marry her, his beloved Syd can go to the Blue Coat School for all I care. Not one penny will I give towards his education—not one farthing. And I will tell him so, too. Just ring the bell, please, will you?"

She did not move. It was, she realized with great poignancy, the turn in the tide of her affairs. Lord Sharrow meant to use her; she could, with a little skill, manage to use him.

"The bell is at your elbow," he added.

She rose.

"Lord Sharrow," she began very slowly, her fingers interlaced, her eyes downcast, "may I speak to you quite frankly?"

He grunted assent, his eyes on the bell.

"What you wish is to prevent your great-nephew's marrying Miss Wymondham."

"Yes."

"And—you would do nearly anything to prevent such a marriage?"

"Nearly anything? I would do anything on earth to prevent it. And I *will* prevent it, too; I'll—I'll——"

She held up her hand. "Please let me finish. Then, if you do not like my plan I will ring the bell, and you can send for him, and—and spoil it all in your own way."

"What do you mean?" he growled, but looking at her with unwilling interest.

"I mean this. He is already very angry with you, and—mind you, I have seen him since you did, and I know what his state of mind is. At one word from you he would take Syd, marry Miss Wymondham, and leave the country to 'make his living' in Australia or America!"

The old man heard the scorn underlying her words, "make his living," and his attention deepened and quickened. For several minutes he sat watching his confederate while she unfolded to him a plan that had two great merits: it was very simple, and it would undoubtedly keep Sandy near his great-uncle for a year.

The girl spoke rather slowly, a thing that invariably impresses hot-headed people, and she spoke with an assumption of authority that left to the old man only a passive part to play.

And he was very tired.

Presently she paused, and he answered her.

"I agree with you," he said, "and I will take your advice. Will you do your first part this evening, and let me know before I go to bed what he says?"

"I will, Lord Sharrow."

"I will not ask you," he said with a change of voice that did not escape her quick ear, "why you are so beautifully ready to sacrifice yourself on the altar of friendship to a poor old wreck like me——"

She looked him full in the eyes. "Do not sneer," she said. "You know quite well why I wish to prevent his marrying Viola Wymondham. I love him myself, and you know it. Therefore, it is not kind to jeer at me."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Penrose. You are quite right to rebuke me, and I beg your pardon. But—I think it fair to tell you that I will never consent to his marrying you, either."

She started and flushed. "Sandy Sharrow would never dream of marrying me," she said with the dignity that had impressed him before, "because he does not love me. There will never be any question of that."

"Good. Then—our unholy pact is sealed. Wait a

moment." He opened the drawer of one of the inlaid cabinets and, returning to her, handed her a small jade god, beautifully carved.

"This old person," he told her as she took it and held it under the lampshade to inspect it, "is a Chinese Devil-God. It seems, under the circumstances, an appropriate gift from me to you."

"Thanks." She unfastened a little gold chain from her neck and slipped it through a hole in the carving in the infinitesimal monster's anatomy. "I will wear him always. And if ever I decide to break our—partnership, I will give him back to you."

They shook hands gravely, and parted, the old man standing for some time where she had left him, his face thoughtful.

CHAPTER XXIX

MAGGIE PENROSE had agreed without demur to Lord Sharrow's classifying their pact as an unholy one, but as a matter of fact it was one which could have been told to anyone and received approval.

It was simply this: His great-uncle disapproving his marriage with Miss Wymondham, Sandy was to put it off for one year, thus securing for his young brother the educational advantages he craved for him.

It was bribery, but bribery that sounded perfectly justifiable, and as such Sandy was bound to accept it.

"You will promise, sir, to let us marry if I wish one year from to-day, and—to send Syd to Eton and Oxford?" the young man said when his great-uncle had confirmed Miss Penrose's interpretation of his intentions.

"I will. If, at the end of the year, you and Miss Wymondham still wish to marry, I will *settle* on you the five hundred a year you are now having as an allowance. You may do what you like with it, and your brother's education will continue to be my affair."

"You will promise?"

It was about eleven o'clock, and the two men sat in Lord Sharrow's sitting-room. The sunlight, pale but beautiful, streamed in over the carved white woodwork and brought into unwonted distinctness the dark old pictures let into the panels. Sandy stood thinking by one of the windows, his big shoulders nearly shutting out the light from it.

It seemed quite reasonable; to his bodily ears it sounded an offer such as no young man would be justified in refusing; it was more than fair—it was even kind, for there was no reason why the old man should undertake Syd's education, a thing he had never suggested before. And yet—Sandy

hesitated, as one hesitates on a dark staircase, feeling for a step that is not there.

"I don't see why you should—dislike he! less in a year's time than you do now," he said presently, in a hesitating voice.

"Then you are a very ungallant lover! Could I not be vanquished by a closer acquaintance? Could not her manifold virtues——"

"No, sir." Sandy wheeled round and faced him. "I don't think you could. I know *I* couldn't, if I had hated a family, root and branch, for sixty years. And I am sure *you* couldn't. That is why I don't accept your offer, which is, of course, a most generous one, at once. It—it sounds all right, but—I am not quite sure. There seems to be something I don't quite get at."

His great-uncle loved him very much at that moment, but he did not say so.

Instead, he returned with great suavity: "And, may I ask, if you do *not* accept my generous offer because of this black something which you cannot quite get at, how do you intend to live?"

"I could live all right, sir. I have a hundred a year of my own, and I own the house in Guelph Square. And—I could work. But—you have me on the hip about Syd. There's the truth."

Eventually, after a day's reflection, during which the astute Maggie persuaded the old man to refrain from saying a word to him on the matter, Sandy accepted his great-uncle's offer, and a few days later returned to Cambridge an engaged man.

For Viola accepted him without a moment's hesitation, and James Wymondham shook him by the hand and told him that he would be glad to give him his little girl when the time came.

"The time will come in less than a year, sir—four days less than three hundred and sixty-five. Oh, Vi!"

They were very happy, the tall, ugly young man and his beautiful little sweetheart. No unwise stipulations about secrecy were made by Lord Sharrow, so the congratulations that they received from gentle and simple were many, and served to consolidate what still seemed to Sandy like a dream of impossible bliss.

Old Dingle had, it transpired, seen in them one day years ago a future couple!

"You were holding her on your horse, Roderick, and she wore a pink frock, with 'er hair all round her face, and I said to Lally—didn't I, my girl?—'there's the future Mrs. Sandy!'"

"You did indeed, Father. Now, Miss Viola, just another teeny drop of the wine—I made it myself, it couldn't hurt a baby——"

Wonderful dreamdays, never to be forgotten. Never to be forgotten, too, the lovers told each other, was Miss Penrose's sympathy and kindness.

"If it had 't been for her the fat would have been in the fire now," Sandy said, laughing, but serious-eyed. "In fact, Miss Penrose, we owe it all to you."

Maggie Penrose did not answer for a moment. Sandy and Viola were walking hand-in-hand, like two children, and she was on Viola's other side.

"I didn't make you love each other," she said presently, clearing her throat.

"No. God did that."

Viola spoke quite simply, as parson's well-brought-up daughters used, but the governess started. She was a traitor, but not yet an altogether hardened one, and she had been taught to believe in the God to whom of late she had hardly given a thought.

And then, as she invented some excuse and hurried back to the house, she told herself hotly that as yet she had done nothing to hurt the lovers. "I can just clear out, and the old man will have to keep his word. No one else will ever—'do it'—if I don't. And I won't. No, *I won't*. He'd never look at me, anyhow, and now he does like me, at least."

But that evening Sandy listened while she played, the little green god gleaming on her white neck, and she fell a degree deeper in love with him.

She went to bed declaring to herself that she did not care if he never married her—that she knew he never would do that; but that she might manage to catch a certain kind of love from him on the rebound. And she told herself that she *would* "do it."

Even now she was not sure what it was with which she had charged herself. She had told Lord Sharrow that in the year granted to her she would manage to break the engagement, and definitely prevent the marriage from ever taking

place, but she had no distinct plan. She was one of those who trust to luck, and to whom a year seems an eternity.

And in the loneliness that followed Sandy's return to Cambridge, the interminable length of each day as it dragged by strengthened the girl in her resolve.

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. SHARROW and Syd and his governess stayed on and on at Sharrow. The elder woman liked being there, for it enhanced her boy's importance in her own eyes, and, as she believed, in those of other people.

Syd, a most amiable child, enjoyed the country life, and during the next two months he developed very satisfactorily. His thin legs and arms hardened, his delicate face grew broader and less girlish, and the colour in them took on a more boyish brown.

He learned to ride, and to Lord Sharrow's surprise—for the old man had hitherto made no secret of the fact that he regarded the boy rather as a milksop—showed a real talent for the management of horses.

"Sits like a Centaur, by Jove!" the old man declared one day shortly before the Easter holidays, when he, driving back from White Shirley, had chanced to see the boy take a rather dangerous fence. "Looks nearly as well as Keith. H'm! he must have a horse."

It is hard to say how much of real generosity there was in the old man. He was certainly free-handed, but possibly there was too much self-gratification in his gifts to have them greatly counted unto him.

So a fortnight later, when Sandy came for his holidays, his young brother met him at the station, mounted on a magnificent little mare.

The boy refused to let his treasure be ridden home by a groom, even for the joy of coming in the dog-cart with Sandy, and rode by the dog-cart's side, handsome, proud, *pimphant*.

Sandy eyed him as they made their way homewards in the bright spring sunshine. The boy had grown, developed, become handsomer and less pretty, and he sat his horse as if he and it were indeed one.

"You've grown, kid," he said gruffly. "Who persuaded mother to let you wear human clothes instead of that beastly velvet?"

In the matter of Syd's dress, although in nearly every other she had learned to obey her big son, Antoinette had hitherto been immovable.

"Great-uncle."

"How'd he do it?"

Syd chuckled as Stareyes picked her way daintily through a puddle. "By raising his eyebrows."

"By——?"

"Oh, yes. Every time I came near him he'd take a bit of velvet between his finger and thumb and look at it without saying a word, but with his eyebrows climbing up to his hair. At first she used to ask him if he didn't like it, and to explain that it was the very best to be got at Marshall and Snelgrove's, but he never answered; he just wriggled his eyebrows—so at last she took me to town. We had a glorious feed, Sandear, and saw Toole, and she got me a lot of these things," glancing with satisfaction at his serviceable tweeds.

Sandy blessed his great-uncle's eyebrows.

"And—the tutor?"

"Oh, he's a topper! Got a blue at Oxford for throwing the hammer, and knows no end. I really like Greek now."

Sandy nodded and remained in meditative silence for a time. Presently, as they clattered over the murderous cobbles of the village, he shouted to his brother: "What about Miss Penrose, Syd?"

Syd bowed with foreign grace to the doctor's old-maid sister, and then in the sudden quiet of the high-road answered the question.

"Oh, she's all right. She plays to me a lot now, and is working like fury at her own music since she hasn't had to bother with me."

"I see. But—is she staying on?"

"I don't know—but I should think so. No one seems to think of her going. Besides, where should she go? She's awfully poor, you know, and she likes Sharrow."

On the arrival of Mr. Boniface, the tutor, Maggie had gone to her employer and suggested her own immediate departure. Mrs. Sharrow demurred, but feebly.

"I don't want to lose you, Miss Penrose; I shall miss

you dreadfully," the Frenchwoman said. "But—I suppose, now that he has a tutor——"

"Exactly. I shall hate going, but it would be a great expense to have us both."

Mrs. Sharrow, of course, then "consulted" her hostess with the result that Miss Penrose's valuable services were, on behalf of her late pupil, musically, and on that of her late pupil's mother, socially, retained for an indefinite period.

"She is so easy to manage," Maggie said later to the old man; "it seems a shame to do it."

"A womanish and foolish argument. Besides everyone in the world can be managed in some way. The trouble sometimes is to find the way," declared her ally with least pleasant grin.

So, but for the addition of George Augustus Boniface, shy, powerful man, with the great love of sport that Lady Sharrow had insisted on in Syd's tutor, the little household party remained what it had been left by Sanderson's departure for Cambridge.

Boniface, whose shyness was constitutional, was in the presence of ladies nearly mute; and this fact, which resulted in his more or less complete absorption of his pupil's time, was a welcome one to the old man.

"No, Antoinette," the tyrant declared, when the tutor had been there about a fortnight, "I will not send him away and get a Miss Nancy, who would, by spending all his time with you and Miss Penrose, make of the boy a greater milksop than he already is. Boniface remains."

"Syd is not a milksop," the widow protested passionately.

"And I say that he is."

Under the rouge the purple of the poor woman's birth-mark darkened slowly. "If only we were not so poor," she said rapidly in her own tongue. "If only my poor Sydney had lived!"

The old man, studying her face as her anger was a spectacle produced to amuse him.

"If your poor Sydney had lived," he began suavely, and then remembering that she was his guest and bound to be grateful to him, he stopped short; adding in his gentlest voice—that voice which old Lady Charlotte Grantly had qualified as smooth—"My dear lady, let us not quarrel. As Sydney has gone, will you not try, in the all-important matter of bringing up your son, to trust to my judgment?"

So she dried her eyes and forgave him, and a little later wrote to Bean, who was in London, that she was much pleased with the new tutor, who, while perhaps a trifle gauche, was a fine manly young man, beautifully adapted to counteract in poor little Syd certain girlish characteristics that had of late begun to disquiet his mother.

And Bean, who was that afternoon offering a hospitable cup of tea to her old enemy, the mother of Lionel and Milton, read the letter aloud.

Mrs. Bilkington, now long since safe in the folds of matrimony, and living in some state in Somers Town, listened with the deepest interest.

"Always was a little girlish, wasn't 'e?" she said, as the letter was restored to its envelope. "Sandy was more *my* style."

"Well, Cook—I mean to say Mrs. Bilkington—that's just according to taste, as I always say. For those who like strength, of course, Mr. Sandy is the one; but Syddy is a sweet boy—very sweet, and as 'ansome as 'ansome."

"Yes, 'e is that. Sandy never was one for looks, was 'e? Lor', I can see him now, showing me the portraits and asking me, so anxious, did I think 'e would grow up to look like 'em?"

Bean sighed. "'E 'as done, too. But 'e's a fine young man, for all that, Cook. The other day he came to see me, and—blest if 'e didn't bring 'is young lady's likeness to show me!"

Mrs. Bilkington's interest was intense. "Oh, now, Nurse, *do* tell me about 'er. Pretty, I 'ope?"

"As a picture. Of course, I always think 'pretty is as pretty does'; but, then, 'e says she's an angel; she certainly looks like one."

Thus Somers Town took an interest in Sharrow, for Mrs. Bilkington returned to her domestic hearth full of this chronicle of high life, and with it duly entertaining her friends.

And down in the green country Sandy and Viola spent long hours together: in the woods, where his great fingers gathered thin-stemmed spring flowers for her, while the silky young leaves shivered over their heads; in the dull rooms of the Vicarage, transfigured for him, by her presence, to the greatest beauty; in the old house itself, where, by the hour, he showed to her its—and his—treasures, read or told her its history, tried to reveal to her its magic.

In the last point he failed utterly. She "admired," she was sometimes even enthusiastic, but she never caught his fine rapture. It was not in her, the blood to which the very atmosphere of the house was as a torch to kindle, and fire, and uplift.

The little alien governess was, had he but known it, of all the people under its roof, after his great-uncle and himself, the one who came the nearest to feeling what he felt.

Syd, though always ready to listen, to admire what he saw thrilled his big brother, and really loving his Froissart and other tales of knightly deeds, yet never knew why Sandy's voice grew so strange at times as he told him stories in the twilight of the bold Sharrows. Any knight was as good to Syd as a Sharrow provided he was brave and romantic, but only a Sharrow made Sandy's eyes glow in that particular way. The younger boy, who was an expressive, used to ask his brother, his mother, even Viola, whom he adored, why this was.

Sandy, who was an inexpressive, talked to no one, not even to his sweetheart, about his brother's failure to understand. Viola was Viola, but—Syd was Syd.

He was of those whose loves and friendships never overlap. Personal discussion of his dear ones with each other was an impossibility to him; each love, each friendship, he kept, so to speak, in an air-tight compartment; they never touched each other.

CHAPTER XXXI

MAGGIE PENROSE, at this time, was living breathlessly. She had not as yet raised a finger to further the fulfilling of her agreement with Lord Sharrow. Spring had come; all the world was green; she was young; her own beauty was to her at that time as a sharp weapon which, at any moment, she might use.

In a word, she felt her power generally, without any specific end in view. It is a wonderful sensation this of being able to do anything; it comes but seldom even to the few who ever experience it, and it is a powerful intoxicant.

What she would have to do to prevent Sandy's marriage she did not know; but during the spring days she knew that when the time came she could do it.

So, deliberately, she drifted. And, during her period of keen passivity, she saw circumstances moulding themselves to her ultimate end.

Without her taking one step to secure it, Viola's friendship began to come her way. The younger girl, often a little bored by her sister's strenuousness, liked the governess, whose grace and beauty pleased her, and who, as the Vicar's younger daughter put it, never bullied her.

That Mary did bully her sister there is no denying, although it was the bullying of great devotion. Mary, who since her childhood had had impressed upon her the necessity for her replacing, to the best of her ability, their dead mother, had early developed a wisdom regarding draughts, shawls, over-shoes, and other such tiresome matters that at times made life a thing almost burdensome to Viola.

Viola hated shawls, overshoes, camomile tea, and what, generically, may be termed "fuss." And the robust Mary, who had never had a cold in her life, appeared to revel in them in her relation to her sister.

Viola was never out of temper, never impatient, and Mary

had no suspicion that her attentions were irritating; but Viola, loving her sister deeply, was yet, at times, bored to death by her.

And Maggie Penrose was an ideal antidote to Mary. So the two girls became friends, and, as the fashion of the day prescribed, used to practise duets again. This gave them hours of dual solitude, in which Maggie learned to know very well the girl Sandy Sharrow meant to marry. And even while she never mentioned her discoveries to a soul, while even with a strange delicacy she rarely put a leading question to the simpler girl, yet at the back of her brain was a slowly-growing accumulation of knowledge regarding Viola which Maggie knew would some day be of use to her.

Lord Sharrow, who grew stronger with the increase of power in the sun's rays, used occasionally to come and sit in the drawing-room, newspaper in hand, during the practising of the duets.

At first his presence embarrassed the friends, but after a while they grew used to it, and sometimes quite forgot it.

On these occasions the old man gleaned, in his turn, bits of information that pleased him. He rarely mentioned Sandy to Miss Penrose, although they played cribbage together every afternoon; but she knew that his determination against the marriage had never faltered.

He was, she realized, but staying his hand, giving her a chance; if, when he considered her time ripe, she did nothing, he would put her aside as a worthless tool, and take the direction of affairs himself.

And she would be obliged to go forth into the world again, begin a fresh struggle for her very bread, and lose even the occasional sight of Sandy.

She was not a born adventuress, for the excitement of the hazard had no charm for her. She was not one of those not very unusual women who are capable of enjoying the uncertainty of life, who can buy a good meal with their last sovereign and laugh as they do it. She liked security and good food and a good bed, and—here all the good things of life were hers. She would not lose them, even though she could never win Sandy's love; but the time had not yet come when she must act. So spring came to its full beauty, and she had done nothing but allow Viola to make a friend of her and to trust her.

One morning, when Sandy and Viola and Syd had gone for a long ride, the summons she had for days been expecting came to Miss Penrose from Lord Sharrow.

The day was very mild, so warm that the old man was in the rose-garden, walking gently about among the glistening greenery with a plaid over his shoulders.

"Good morning, Miss Penrose." They shook hands politely and she joined him in his walk.

"Isn't that wall beautiful?" he began, pointing to the south wall, which, indeed, was a marvel of ripe stone, arabesqued with lichens, stonecrop, and other delicate sprouting things. "If only age improved us humans as it does stones! A hundred and fifty years ago that wall was, in its newness, an eyesore. And now—look at it!"

He spoke sadly. Sometimes of late she had been on the edge of thinking that his cynicism grew less, but an occasional outburst of it had always undeceived her.

"Stone walls don't think, for one thing," she suggested, as they stopped to walk round a huge toad, who was sunning himself in their route.

He glanced at her. "No, presumably not. And we do, and thus wear out our muscles and tissue, you mean. I daresay. By the way, that is why I asked for the honour of your society for a little while this morning. What do you think about my great-nephew?"

His voice changed sharply at the last words, but it was not its business-like tone that caused her to flush angrily and look away. It was because never once, since the beginning of their acquaintance, during either their days of ceremoniousness, their strange little friendship, or their conspiracy, had he spoken to her of Sandy otherwise than as "my great-nephew."

He had often been sarcastic and disagreeable to her, more than once he had been rude (although he invariably apologized for such a lapse), but none of his words ever annoyed her so much as the two "my great-nephew." They seemed to put between her and him a barrier of caste, and he, watching her sideways, misunderstood.

"You think I am hurrying you. You are wrong. This is April, so you have only eight months in which——"

"But I am not at all sure that I am going to do it," she burst out, giving way to the temper that she, as a rule, kept batted down by her will, "I rather like Viola."

It was an absurd speech, as well as an injudicious one, and she knew it, but for the moment she did not care.

A gardener was trimming a high espalier rose at the far end of the garden, and the clipping sound of his shears rang out rhythmically. The old man glanced at the green god.

"Ah! You rather like 'Viola'!"

She whirled round. "Yes, Lord Sharrow, and you needn't emphasize the name. She calls me Maggie, and I call her Viola, and I really can't see that it is anything to you."

He laughed, his dark teeth showing behind his discoloured lips, his red-edged old eyes crinkling with amusement.

"I see. Very well, then, my dear Miss Penrose—you and Viola are friends. Is that why you are going to allow Sandy to marry her? I thought you loved him yourself."

The gardener was whistling now a popular waltz. He was a young man, and fond of music.

Suddenly the girl's eyes filled with tears, and she felt weak all over, as though she were going to faint.

"I do, Lord Sharrow, indeed I do. And that is why I sometimes think I had better not interfere——"

It was made on pure impulse, the speech, for she had never seriously contemplated staying her hand, but its effect was electrical.

For ten minutes the old man talked, brooking no interruption. He spoke quietly, rapidly, with a choice of words that struck her as remarkable, with a force of argument that would have convinced her had she not already been convinced.

And finally he clinched things by a compliment.

"You have told me that you are poor," he said, "and I am rich. It would be easy for me to offer you a heavy bribe. But—your being what you are, closes my mouth in that respect. It would be to insult you. So do not use my powerlessness against me."

That evening Miss Penrose made the first move in her game.

When Sandy, having taken Viola home after luncheon and stayed to tea, came into the small hall, his clothes were glistening with drops of water. It had come on to rain, and he was wet and cold.

"No tea going?" he asked.

"Yes; but—have a brandy-and-soda instead, you will take cold, you are so wet."

"Brandy-and-soda?" he hesitated, and she rang the bell.

"Yes. Why not?"

He did not answer; she gave the order when the servant came in, and Sandy sat down by the fire, enveloped with peaty steam from his drying tweeds, a stiff brandy-and-soda at his elbow.

CHAPTER XXXII

VIOLA WYMONDHAM could never recall the occasion on which she first knew that Sandy had a fondness for brandy.

Later, on looking back and probing her memory, it seemed to her that she had always known it, yet she knew that could not be. As a matter of fact it was Maggie Penrose who hinted at it as a kind of heritage, and in this the ex-governess told the strict truth, as fortune by some freak granted her the doing on many occasions as she pursued her end.

Over and over again it happened that the truth thus turned itself to a weapon in her hand, and this caused a feeling almost of righteousness to grow up within her.

If she had been forced to many lies, her own iniquity could not but have become clear to her, and this, for she needed her own approbation, would have hampered her to a certain extent.

But as she was telling for the greater part of the time only the pure truth, how could it be that she was doing wrong? And Sandy *did* like brandy.

This he had found out when he was a child, and his great-uncle had given him bits of sugar dipped in it. As a youth of nineteen he had once drunk himself into a heavy sleep, but after a horror-stricken morning, in which he beheld himself another such as his great-uncle, he had taken a vow not to touch the stuff for a year.

He had kept his vow, but at the end of the year, to try his strength, he bought a bottle of Three Stars, and, keeping it in a cupboard, took a glass every afternoon. He never took more than one glass, and thus, having proved himself his own master, allowed himself the occasional joy of a drink.

For it was to him, unfortunately, a real joy. He did not bolt the brandy, nor drown it with a careless spurt of syphon water. With the connoisseur's eye he measured it into a glass, and with deep attention added the desired exact amount—and it was an infinitesimal one—of soda. Then he sat down in a comfortable chair and very slowly, luxuriously, sipped, holding each mouthful in his mouth, moving his tongue in it as a tired man moves in his bath, and then letting it slide slowly down his rapturous throat.

And this was his only secret. Even Ben Frith had no idea of his friend's danger. To Sandy himself it seemed no danger, because he could check his desire for a second glass. He honestly believed that he was safe, and in the arrogance of youth looked down on his great-uncle for his lack of self-control.

Only three times in his life had he taken what he himself admitted to be "too much." Once, on the occasion already referred to; once, when Syd had pneumonia and he, Sandy, had sat up with him for three nights and could find no rest in his anxiety; and the evening of the day when he had rushed in a rage away from Sharrow after quarrelling with his great-uncle. This last time the brandy had been the accompaniment of other pain-deadeners, and he had awakened in a place the memory of which always caused him a sharp twinge of pain.

And now in his great happiness he found brandy-and-soda to be met with in greater frequency than ever before at Sharrow.

Like many men who nearly or quite deserve the name of drunkard, Lord Sharrow disliked seeing spirits about his house. No whisky ever came in with the tea at Sharrow; and only wines were served with the meals. So Sandy observed with surprise that this order of things had changed.

One day he was told why. It appeared that the doctor had ordered Miss Penrose to drink a glass of weak brandy-and-soda twice a day as a tonic.

"Old Gill ordering 'speerits' to a patient? By Jove! that is a change! Miss Jeannie will be murdering him."

"Oh, it wasn't Dr. Gill," interposed Maggie hastily. "I saw my own doctor when I went to London the other day——"

Sandy, his moustache still wet with brandy, eyed her

benevolently. "I am so sorry you have been seedy," he said. "When were you in town?"

She bit her lip, furious with herself, for she had not been to town at all. Suppose he mentioned her visit to Syd or to his mother.

But Sandy, to whom she and her doings were of the most sublime indifference, never gave the matter another thought. For the moment he was happy.

Although he was a particularly big, strong man, and as healthy as a man could be, he was peculiar in that even one drop of spirit went to his head. It made him, not quarrelsome or sombre, but it rocked him in exquisite bliss; two swallows of brandy made him love all the world. Four glasses did not make him stagger or speak indistinctly.

Maggie watched him closely. She meant to ruin what he considered his happiness, but she loved him and had no wish to make a drunkard of him.

Once he refused to have "some of the medicine," as she put it, nipping gingerly at her own glass of very weak spirits and water, which she detested.

"No—Viola doesn't like me to," he said laughing. "She thinks it wicked, bless her!"

Maggie said nothing, but she smiled.

Now Sandy could be like a stone image for immobility if he thought anyone was trying to control him. But he was as far from suspecting the girl, whom he believed to have befriended him, as he was from suspecting Viola herself; and her smile, because she was a pretty woman and he a very young man, piqued him.

Moreover, the day was cold, and an east wind banged at the window and reminded him that his fingers had been chilled as he rode home from a very bad day's hunting.

"One of the last runs we shall get, too," he grumbled. "A disgusting day——"

"Why not change your mind, then?"

He did, and was soon restored to a balmy humour in which no east wind raged.

When the young man went back to Cambridge for his last term, his great-uncle sent with him, as a gift, several cases of wine.

"But I rarely touch wine, sir," Sandy said, when the intention was made known to him. "Don't like it."

" Ah ! Very well. I'll have Brownlow put in some of the old Cognac——"

There was a short pause, and then Sandy said shortly :
" Thank you, sir."

Then he went, and once more dullness reigned at Sharrow.

To Maggie it was almost intolerable, for she had seen so much of Sandy during the short holiday that she missed him at every turn. He had grown older, too, changing more rapidly than the short lapse of time would seem to explain, since the coming of the New Year, and her companionship had been valued by him. He believed her to be a good sort, and told her so on more than one occasion, and she knew that he still thought himself to have been a bounder in kissing her.

And she, violently in love with him, had, although of necessity passing hours of something approaching torture when she knew him to be with Viola or when he talked to her of his future, been very happy.

His trust and friendship were, morals to the contrary notwithstanding, as dear to her as if she had fully deserved them, and she had made the very utmost of them both.

And Sandy, for his part, had, if not forgotten his suspicions of what she had felt for him, at least put them aside long since as absurd. If she had had any nonsense in her head about him, he argued, would she have come to the rescue as she did about Viola ? And would she be so fond of Viola, as she undoubtedly was ?

The Easter holidays, then, passed most happily for all at Sharrow, and when Sandy had gone back to the 'Varsity, Mrs. Sharrow, Syd, Mr. Boniface and Miss Penrose returned to the quiet of Guelph Square.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"VI, darling, can't you tell me?"

"Can't I tell you what?"

"What it is that is troubling you." The elder girl's voice was very gentle as she spoke, but Viola did not answer.

They were sitting on a pile of new-mown hay in an upland meadow not far from Brockett Wood. Their walk had been long, but Viola had of late taken to long walks. In the bright sunlight they made a pretty picture, for Viola sat under a pink silk umbrella—not a sunshade, but a huge old umbrella that had been a caprice of her mother's years and years before—and Mary wore a cotton frock of a pleasant cool green, trimmed with straps of white piqué.

On the ground under them lay a letter, closely written in a small hand. It was from Sandy, Mary knew, and yet she had been told only that Syd was better and that they were coming home in ten days' time.

Mary Wymondham hated asking questions, and to put unwelcome ones, which would be received as an intrusion, caused her almost physical pain.

"But," she asked herself sadly, "was she not Vi's Little Mother? She *must* try to help her darling."

So presently she began again.

"If it's only that poor little Syd's illness prevented Sandy's coming, I could understand, dearest—but is it? He writes nearly every day; you know how miserable he is to be separated from you—it isn't his fault in the least—and yet you seem to me to be—nearly angry with him."

Viola turned away her head.

"I am angry," she declared fiercely. "I—I hate him!"

Mary sighed. "No, you don't, Vi. You are just being a goose, now. He hasn't done a thing to make you hate him, and you are unjust and unkind to him."

Viola then burst into tears, and Mary flung both arms round her and held her close, murmuring all sorts of silly, charming pet names and words of comfort into her ears.

But the elder girl was alarmed; even allowing for her sister's nervous exaggeration of trifles and her childish impatience of events, Mary knew that something must be wrong.

However, she waited, and presently Viola blew her nose on her sister's handkerchief, pushed her curly hair out of her eyes and sat up.

"Mary," she said, "Sandy drinks."

Mary started. "No, no, it isn't true. It can't be! Who told you?"

"Well—I *know* he takes brandy. I saw him once, and he told me that—that he loves it. Three times he has been drunk."

"Viola! You can't mean what you're saying! When did you ever see Sandy Sharrow drunk?" Mary rose and stood looking down, her dark eyes afire with indignation. "I *don't* believe it."

"I didn't say I had seen him drunk. He told me himself that he had been——"

Mary knelt suddenly in the sweet, warm hay. "Vi, dear—if poor Sandy confessed that to you—his fault—if he really told you, whom he loves so, that he was—drunk—don't you see that you ought never, never to tell a soul? Not even me?"

"There's no harm in my telling *you*. You are my sister."

"I know, I know—of course I am your sister. But he is your lover, darling—he's going to be your husband—oh, Vi!"

There was a pause, and then, because Viola was frightened, and because she was weak, she took from her pocket a second letter.

"I'll read you what Maggie says," she began; but Mary interrupted her.

"You haven't told *her*? Oh, Viola, I don't see how you could. Father would die if he knew!"

Vi gave a little sob. "Of course I didn't tell Maggie. It was she who warned me and asked me to help him. You see, Mary, she noticed it at Easter. And she was so nice about it, and made me promise never to tell him. She said I might influence him——"

"I've seen Maggie Penrose drink brandy herself," snapped Mary fiercely; "I loathe the woman, and I distrust her! Well. And then you wrote to her?"

"She drank it by the doctor's orders. No, I didn't write. But last week she wrote me this. Let me see: 'I am so glad your cold is'—no, that's not it. 'Syd is really better, and I get out every day for an hour'—no—oh, yes, here it is. 'I hope, Viola dear, that you don't forget to remind Sandy sometimes about that of which we know. I have given up my b. and s., because it seemed to make him want some; but, of course, I can't mention it to him. And I have been thinking for a long time over something that happened last week, and whether I ought to tell you. I hate to, for it will hurt you, but I feel that for both your sakes I ought to.'"

"Oh, do stop, Vi! I can't listen. Tell me what it is, can't you, instead of reading it?"

And so, sitting under the rose-coloured umbrella, Viola told her.

Sandy had taken too much spirits one night when he was out, and Maggie, hearing him try to open the door with his latchkey, had let him in.

"He did not stumble, she says," Viola explained, her lip curling fastidiously, "but he could not speak, and was as white as a ghost, and went straight to the library, and went to sleep on the sofa and slept for thirteen hours."

Mary rose again, too indignant to sit still, her dark cheeks crimson. "If he didn't stumble and didn't speak," she said sharply, "how did Maggie Penrose know he was drunk? Being pale is no sign, nor is sleeping thirteen hours."

"But Maggie says——"

"Viola Wymondham, you don't even try not to believe this awful thing. I *won't* believe it, and you just let yourself. I shall ask Sandy myself the very minute he comes. Then we shall see."

She set her mouth firmly. She had always liked Sandy, and she meant to stand by him.

But Viola only sighed, and took up Sandy's letter, on which a beautiful green grasshopper was sunning himself.

"I did ask him," she said, "and here's his answer. 'You ask me about the brandy. Darling, I am not a drunkard. Are you bothering your precious head about that? I made my confession to you once, and now I have, alas! to make

another. Since I saw you I have once had too much to drink. But I was not drunk, and it was only once. Forgive me.' That's all he says, but—"

Mary was silent, and looked very grave.

"All men drink a little, I suppose," she began hesitatingly; "but—Sandy ought not to. Lord Sharrow's example ought to teach him that."

Three days later, Syd being now fairly convalescent from his fever, Sandy came to Sharrow.

After greeting his great-uncle, who had been to Paris, and come back, having apparently renewed his youth there, he went to the Vicarage. His mother had sent by him an invitation to Viola to come to Guelph Square for a week.

"Syd can't spare me for long yet," he declared, "although the dear old thing is coming on famously—he's grown a foot, sir—so mother hopes you'll let Vi come. It's very cool in town, and there are some good plays on. Maggie can chaperon us, and it will be a change for Vi."

The Vicar agreed readily to the plan, and thus Sandy and his love travelled up to town early the next morning. As they left Victoria Station Sandy put up his stick and stopped the hansom.

"There—that island there, where the old man is standing, is where I first saw you, Viola. I should like," he added, her hand in his, "to put up a stone there with the date on it. Oh, blessed day!"

To Maggie Penrose, shut up for weeks as she had been with Syd—and a very good nurse she was, attaching his mother to her very strongly by her devotion and gentleness—Viola's visit came as a rather unwelcome interruption.

Syd had been very ill with typhoid, and Sandy had hardly left him for uncounted nights and days, and the common anxiety of the brother and the governess had drawn them very close together.

Once when Syd had, after hours of pain, fallen asleep with his head on the girl's arm, Sandy had knelt by her and held her in his arms to relieve her cramped position. His mother was seated at the foot of the bed, and the doctor had been there part of the time; but it seemed to Maggie that she and Sandy were alone in the world. She could feel his heart beat, and as he whispered to her now and again his breath stirred her hair.

She never forgot that night.

Often and often, too, the hazards of turn-about nursing brought it to pass that she and Sandy lunched or dined alone together; and then, in the domestic intimacy of the hurried meal, she could almost imagine that they were married.

Sometimes he brought her a handful of flowers, and these she carefully dried and kept in her Tennyson—a large green volume he had given her on her birthday.

To the terror-stricken mother, the girl's quiet, cool presence was as balm, and Sandy himself grew really fond of her who was so good to his brother and so unthoughtful for herself.

"You must go to bed," he said one night, just before the crisis; "you really must, or you'll be crocking up yourself, and then where should we be?"

It was after midnight, and they stood on the landing near the Angelica Kaufmann niche. Maggie, who wore a blue dressing-gown—for she had been on duty in the sick room for the past three hours—was very tired. Her eyes were heavy, her face pale, but she looked unusually pretty.

"I'll lie down on the sofa in the library."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. You are going to bed. Come along—up you go."

He took a brotherly arm round her, and pushed her towards the stairs.

"I'd far rather——"

"Now look here, Maggie," he insisted kindly, "you are done up, and you *must* rest. There's a dear. Come!"

"I—am—so—tired," she murmured, half because she felt faint, half because his arm was round her.

And then he caught her up, carried her upstairs, and laid her on her bed.

That had been a moment that repaid her for days and days of weary watching over Syd.

And now, when he was really becoming fond of her and her plot beginning, she knew, to have its due effect on Viola, the gods had sent Viola to Guelph Square.

Maggie felt that the gods were on her side.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SANDY, in his rather selfish joy in having Viola to himself, made a grave mistake. Mary's presence might at that juncture in his life have made a huge difference to him, and saved him much suffering.

But Mary fussed, and tried to control both people and events; so he rejoiced that Mary was safely at the Vicarage, and refused to allow his mother to invite the elder girl. He wanted to have Viola for his very own for a few days, as later she would always be.

He felt for Mary the slight current of irritability that is often the effect of one strong nature upon another, even before their two wills have ever come into conflict.

And thus, even the elder girl's daily letter to her sister annoyed him.

He was extremely tired, those early days of Viola's visit, for he had been under a tremendous mental strain for the past three months, and it now began to tell on him.

"What on earth does Mary find to write about every day that makes you unhappy, beloved?" he asked one morning, before his mother and Maggie had come into the ugly dining-room.

"It doesn't make me unhappy, Sandy," she faltered. She could not tell him that Mary's letters always exhorted her to watch over him and to believe in him. Poor Mary's letters did not irritate Viola: they bored her by continually reminding her of a thing she wished to forget.

During the three days that had already elapsed of her visit to Guelph Square, Viola had seen neither brandy nor signs of brandy in her lover. They had gone to a play, and supped afterwards at a very resplendent new hotel; they had spent an afternoon at the National Gallery, and another at the Zoo. And Sandy had been delightful.

Viola would have been perfectly happy but for the re-

minder given her every day by her sister of the skeleton in poor Sandy's cupboard; and this cupboard was, to its supposed owner, as empty of a skeleton as the Vicar's own.

Sandy, having made the confession, which he believed it to be his duty to make, to his sweetheart, stopped his occasional glass of brandy and forgot all about it.

Wine he detested, whisky he mildly disliked; and now that he had, after Viola's timid inquiry after her receipt of Maggie's letter, not tasted a drop of brandy, he felt as sure of himself as if he had never tasted it in his life.

"But Mary does torment you, darling. Is she worrying you about silly little parish doings? If she is, I'll write and stop it."

Viola drew back with a little tremor. "Oh, no, Sandy; you mustn't write to her. She hasn't mentioned parish affairs—except that Julia Mitten has twins, and that isn't *her* fault. Oh, no, Sandy. You mustn't be cross with Mary. She is so good and—she is so fond of you. You don't know how she likes you, and—" Viola bit her lips; she had nearly betrayed the fact that Mary stood up for him, and that, of course, would have led to questions and been fatal.

Viola was loyal, and she had promised Maggie never to tell Sandy what Maggie had thought it her duty to tell about him. But she loved Mary more than all the Maggies in the world, even though Mary did "fuss," and she could not let Sandy think hardly of her sister.

"It's—it's just a little worry of Mary's own," she faltered, lying very badly, but as best she could, to protect the two girls. And Sandy believed her, of course.

Then in came Maggie, delightfully pretty in lilac-coloured muslin, with a black velvet ribbon round her throat, and the three began making plans for the day.

"You are pale, Sandy," Maggie remarked presently, helping herself to marmalade. "Is your head bad again?"

He frowned slightly.

"No—not very. It's going to be a hot day, that's all." But she watched him closely all that day and the next. His face was a little thin, its bony structure showing through flesh that was less ruddy than formerly, and his eyes were sunk deep in his head.

Once, in talking to him, she laid her hand for a second

on his, and his was hot. Her heart smote her. If he were going to be ill, what should she do?

But he seemed to get no worse, and by making an effort, which she alone saw, he prevented any notice being taken of his health by his mother or Viola.

All Viola observed was that he was what she called "cross." Little things seemed to irritate him: a sudden noise would make him jump; any continuous discussion annoyed him. "All right, then; I agree to anything," he would say, "only let's decide quickly."

He was conscious of these things himself, and tried to maintain his usual manner, but vainly.

Once he confided to Maggie: "I say," he whispered hurriedly, meeting her on the stairs, "I've told Vi I'm going out. Don't say you've seen me. I have a touch of neuralgia, and am going to try to sleep for an hour. Would you mind waking me at six?"

And at six she stood by his bed, on which he had thrown himself fully dressed, looking at him.

He was sleeping soundly, but his bushy brows were knitted and his face troubled. Her heart ached as she studied him. Then very gently she stooped, and just touched his brow with her lips, which she pointed so as to make her touch as light as possible. He did not move, and she knelt, tucking her ugly little talisman into her bosom to prevent its falling on his face.

"Sandy," she whispered, her face close to his own, "Sandy, I am going to hurt you, but it is for your good. She is not worthy of you—no one is that, my beautiful darling—but she is a coward. You frighten her even now, and—she has no backbone. She is only pretty. And if you married her, you would lose the money, and you couldn't care for Syd. Oh, it is for your good, it is! And then, when she has deserted you—for she *will* desert you—Mary wouldn't, but she will—then you will come to me, and I will take care of you. I won't tell you any lies then; you will know that I love you, and though you won't love me, you will like me, and—and—oh, so help me, God! I will be good to you, so help me, God!"

It was the nearest approach to a prayer that she had ever made in her life.

For a long time she knelt there in the cold, rather bare room, her face hidden, while the man slept heavily.

Then she rose, composed her face, and woke him.

"Wake up, Sandy. It's six o'clock," she said.

He stared, and muttered Viola's name. Then he opened his eyes and stared dully at her.

"Oh, it's you, Maggie. Six, is it? All right, I'll come. Oh, my head!"

He groaned and closed his eyes again.

"Viola is dressing, Sandy, and as she thinks you are out——"

"All right. I'll get up. Thanks, Maggie."

She went slowly downstairs and into the deserted drawing-room. She pulled the heavy red curtains, rearranged the chairs, and filled the vases with flowers that had just come. And as she worked, her light touch bringing the gaunt room to a semblance of beauty, she reflected.

Sandy was going to be ill; therefore, her time would come. He must not be ill in England, or Viola would, of course, fly to help nurse him. He must not be ill before their quarrel took place, or that same quarrel would never be. It must all happen at once.

When she had removed the stale flowers, and her work was done, she stood still in the middle of the room, her arms crossed, her head bent. Only one thing was wrong. Lord Sharrow ought to be at hand.

Why, she could not quite express to herself, but the feeling was strong. The old man ought to be wherever the rupture between Sandy and Viola took place.

Should she wait? Or should she summon her old confederate?

Still, to her furious annoyance, unable to decide, she went to her room, opened with a corkscrew a fresh bottle of Three Star brandy, and pouring a big drink into a glass, crossed the passage to where Sandy was dressing.

"This may do your head good," she said, as he peered round the door, half his face covered with lather.

His eyes shone. "Thanks—I never heard of its being good for headache before, but——" The smell reached him, and he held out an icy hand. "You *are* a good sort, Maggie."

As she went to her room, Mrs. Sharrow called up the stairs: "Oh, Sandy, I have just had a telegram from your uncle. He is in town, at Bell's Hotel in Dover Street."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE two girls met in the drawing-room before dinner and stood at the tall window, looking out into the square.

The wind had come up, and great clouds obscured the clarity of the sky. The old trees, dust-laden and nearly black, tossed and whispered as if in fear of the coming storm.

Viola shuddered. "I do so hate thunder," she said nervously.

Maggie gave a little laugh. "Thunder never hurt anyone."

"Oh, I know that, of course; but the lightning is at least beautiful, and thunder is hideous. It *does* frighten me, Maggie, whether you think it silly or not!"

Maggie glanced at her. Viola was, as a rule, not at all irritable, but it chanced that the girls had never been together when a heavy storm was in the air, and Maggie knew that Viola's nerves had never been very strong.

The tightening of Viola's lips, the line between her brows, her slight pallor, the sharpness in her voice—all these things seemed somehow to hold possibilities for Maggie; it was as if they were so many little allies, marshalling themselves unbidden on her side.

Viola wore that evening a charming new frock of flowered silk muslin, and in her hair she had stuck a rose. She made a delightful picture standing against the dark square of the window. Maggie regarded her thoughtfully.

A low rumble of thunder broke the quiet, and Viola drew back.

"Oh, Maggie, do close the window!"

"It will be dreadfully hot, dear."

Viola, with the little frown of exasperated nerves, attacked the window herself, closing it with a bang, and as she did so Sandy came in.

He was extremely pale, but greeted them cheerfully, and as it was Mrs. Sharrow's turn to dine upstairs with Syd, the three went in to dinner.

The dining-room, with its forbidding Georgian sideboard, dark walls, memorial-tablet-like mantelpiece and thick curtains, was stifling.

Sandy, without speaking, jerked the curtains back as far as they would go, and opened the window. A flash of lightning seemed to split the sky as he did so, and it thundered.

Viola moved uneasily in her chair. "Oh, Sandy," she said, "what a horrid storm!"

"It may clear the air; the heat is intolerable to-night," he returned. Then with a visible effort he complimented her on the frock, and tried to eat his dinner.

His head, Maggie could see, was splitting, and food obviously disgusted him, but he did his best.

They were planning a drive to Virginia Water for the next day when a terrific clap of thunder seemed to shake the house. Viola gave a sharp scream.

Sandy's hands flew to his head. "Don't scream, Vi," he begged hurriedly; "I—I can't stand it." His gesture and his words were involuntary, Maggie saw; but Viola, who was really frightened, was angry.

"I hated your opening the window," she said, her voice higher than usual; "thunder always makes me ill."

He tried to smile at her, and drank some water. "I am sorry, dear."

The electricity gathered force, the heat seeming to come in at the windows in waves.

Presently, at the very crisis of the storm, when a blaze of lightning was followed almost instantly by a deafening roar of thunder, Viola, her exasperated nerves quite mastering her, gave several ear-piercing shrieks, and Sandy rose.

"For Heaven's sake, Viola," he cried, his face contorted with what Maggie knew to be pain far more than anger, "stop that! It—it is perfectly absurd."

And he left the room, slamming the door.

"Wasn't he *horrible*, Maggie?" Viola began, when the sound had died into a silence broken only by the furious lashing of rain on the windows.

"And—oh, Maggie, he has been—drinking again. I—I smelt it when he kissed me!"

Maggie's task was made easier to her by her honest scorn for the silly little creature.

If Sandy had drunk petroleum it would not have shattered her love, and strong in this strength she despised Viola.

"Did you, dear?" she said gently.

"Yes. It—oh, Maggie, it made we feel quite sick!"

Maggie did not speak. The less she said, the safer, she knew, would be her future.

After one or two more bursts of thunder the storm died away, and the two girls went into the drawing-room. Here they sat on a little satin sofa and continued their talk.

"I don't think he has before—since I came, do you?" Viola asked presently. She was very fond of Sandy and began to long to make up.

There was no answer, and she repeated her question, adding: "Oh, he *has*, and I didn't know, and you did, and you didn't tell me!"

"But, Vi, darling, how could I? I am not sure, after all, and—I want you to be happy."

Viola drew away from her. "Maggie," she said solemnly, her little figure in its flowered frock bolt upright in the shadowy room, "you *must* tell me. If ever I saw him—you know—*drunk*, I—I never could love him any more."

"Couldn't you?" The other girl eyed her with such open scorn that only Viola's tremendous self-centredness prevented her perceiving it.

"No. He would kill my love. Besides—I am so *afraid* of drunken people," she added in a lower voice.

And again Maggie felt honestly justified in separating Sandy from such a weak idiot.

"I have not seen him drunk again," said Maggie truthfully.

"But you know he has been drinking, and I know he has to-night. That's why he was so cross at dinner!"

Maggie listened keenly. This argument was worth gold to her.

"And he would always be cross when he had been drinking," Viola went on; "and he is exactly like Lord Sharrow when he scowls."

Maggie felt as must have felt the man into whose mouth flew ducklings already roasted. She had an exquisite feeling that all she had to do was to sit still on that sofa and let the gods and Viola bring Sandy to her waiting arms.

She did not speak. And in the silence Sandy called from the landing above: "Maggie—I say, Maggie——"

She turned her head, but did not rise. He was coming. "Yes, Sandy?"

"Where is that stuff you gave me some of before dinner? I want a little more."

"Oh, it's on my dressing-table, Sandy; help yourself."

"Thanks."

They heard his retreating footsteps, and then Viola asked curiously: "What stuff?"

Maggie answered with perfect serenity, knowing that Sandy would never tell: "Only some court-plaster. He cut himself, shaving."

The room was warm, and presently she rose and went to a window.

The evening was now beautiful; faint moonlight fell on the newly-washed trees in the square, making of it a little fairyland in which a man and a woman walked, his arm round her waist.

Maggie stood staring at them as if held by a charm. Would Sandy—poor, innocent, brave old Sandy, now drinking brandy in his bedroom—ever walk like that with her?

It was quite true that her love, for all its evil, was strong above the influences of circumstances. Sandy might drink, he might steal, he might betray her, yet she would continue to love him. She was not a good woman, but her love was fine in its immutability; and she knew it, and felt the fact to be her justification.

The man in the square had sat down on a bench and drawn the woman to his side. She put her head on his shoulder, and they sat apparently in silence, in the pale light. Still Maggie watched them.

"Play something to me, won't you, dear?"

Maggie went slowly to the piano, and sat down at it. She struck one chord, and rose.

No. If she played, Sandy might come down before the brandy had done its work. She made some excuse, and the two girls went up to see Syd.

"Where is Sandy?" Mrs. Sharrow asked, looking up from her place by the bed. She and Syd were playing Old Maid.

"In his room," answered Viola coldly.

Mrs. Sharrow turned to Maggie, and then again to the younger girl.

"In one of his black fits, is he?" asked his mother lightly, quite without malice.

"Yes; he left the table in a temper, and has not appeared since."

"Oh, never mind Sandy, Vi," put in Syd in the thin, high voice of invalid children, "he gets what he calls 'the black dog' every now and then; but it doesn't matter. Dear old Sandear!"

Syd, with his transparent, bony face and cropped black hair, was comfortably propped up with pillows; the gas glared down on the tumbled bed, on his thin hands, and on the green leather board on which the cards lay. The walls of the room were covered with yellow roses of hideous and impossible design, and on them hung the steel engravings that Sandy had known in his little-boyhood.

There were no Treasures in this room except, on a small table in the corner, the old medicine-chest, given long since to Sandy, and which Sandy had transferred to his brother.

Maggie stood and watched the little homely scene as Viola joined in the game, the mother and the future daughter-in-law, in their pretty, simple frocks, devoting themselves to amusing the invalid boy.

Although the room was ugly with the left-over ugliness of mid-Victorian era, the picture was a charming one, and the looker-on appreciated it.

But before long, after she had noiselessly arranged one or two things that were out of place, and set a jug of crimson roses on the landing for the night, she went upstairs.

Sandy's door was ajar, and she looked into his room. Through the frame made by the twisted posts of his bed, she saw him sitting by his table, a book on his knees, Winker asleep at his feet. By his side stood a bottle, his water-carafe and a half-empty glass.

"Hallo, Maggie! that you?" he asked.

She went in. "Yes. How's the head?"

"Oh—beastly! I can't imagine what's got into it!" he answered, not quite distinctly. He spoke with the greatest good-humour, and bade her sit down.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, and forgot to apologize; she had never come into his room except on short errands before,

and he did not notice it. She glanced at the brandy-bottle ; it was one-third empty.

With a shudder she realized that although one drink affected him pleasantly, it would take an appalling amount to reduce him to the condition necessary to her purpose. And suppose, indisposed as he undoubtedly was, it should make him seriously ill? With resolution she banished the thought.

"What a beautiful bed that is!" she began, leaning against a chair.

"Yes; it's very fine. My grandfather bought it s-somewhere." He took another drink, and then set down the glass.

"By Jove! I've had enough of this stuff! It made me feel better, and I kept on and on."

He took up the bottle and looked at it. "You must excuse my greediness, Maggie. I—my head was in-tolerable just after dinner. The storm, I daresay. I must go to Viola now. I owe her an—apology for being cross."

He rose, but she motioned him back to his chair.

"Vi is playing Old Maid with Syd," she told him. "Sit here till your head is quite all right; it will be far wiser."

"But—isn't poor Vi annoyed with me?" he insisted, settling himself comfortably. "I was rude to her."

"Nonsense! I tell you she's playing Old Maid. Give me a wee drop of your brandy, will you?"

She tasted it and uttered a little cry. "Oh, how strong! Drink it, and then mix me some very weak—there isn't another glass."

Gravely he obeyed her, and then, still talking, he poured another big drink for himself.

"You don't like it?" he asked her. "No? Well—I'll tell you a secret, Maggie." He took a great draught. "I—I love it—Brandy. I hate wine and—and whisky. But brandy, it—it—yes, I love it. Are you shocked?"

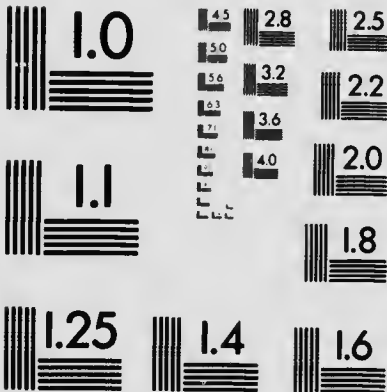
His speech was thickening rapidly now, and his eyes shone in an odd glassy way.

"Shocked? No, certainly not. Well, look here, Sandy. I've got something to do; it will take me about an hour. Then I'll get Vi into the drawing-room. Syd will be asleep by that time—and you can come down and apologize to her. See?"



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"Yes. I'll come and apologize to Vi. Will you call me?"

She hesitated, walking slowly to the door; then she said, her hand on the knob: "No. When you hear me playing, just come down."

"All right," said Sandy.

call
said,
ring.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LORD SHARROW'S man, Waters, had been allowed to go that evening to see his married daughter, so one of the waiters, an elderly man named Wilson, was assisting the old gentleman with his toilet for the night when a lady was announced.

Lord Sharrow was over eighty, but he raised his ancient head as the announcement was made, and drew his plush dressing-gown closer round his thin old legs.

"A lady, Robert?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Why the devil isn't Waters here, confound him! He could have gone and seen whether *I* wished to see her or not. What's she like, Robert?"

"A young lady, my lord, and very pretty, if I may say so, and—a young lady, m'lord, as *is* a young lady!"

"Go and ask her name."

While the man was away, Lord Sharrow put back into his mouth one or two back teeth that he had removed, and struggled, with the patient Wilson's aid, into his pumps, which hurt him.

And two minutes later he and Maggie were shaking hands.

"Lord Sharrow," she began without preamble, but speaking deliberately, her gaze full on his, "they will quarrel to-night, and to-morrow or the next day he will leave England."

"The deuce he will! How do you know?"

"I have no time to explain now. You must trust me, and in three days' time I will write to you and tell you all about it."

The old man made a slight movement that meant, she knew, rising anger.

"Do not be angry, I *beg* of you," she went on. "I have worked very hard, and I am on the point of success. If I

cannot leave you within ten minutes with what I need, everything may fail."

Her reasonable, unexcited voice filled him, in spite of himself, with confidence. He knew that she was telling him only what was true.

"You want money?"

"Yes. I want a hundred pounds."

"I haven't as much here to-night."

"Then give me what you have, and you can send me the rest."

He got up. "Miss Penrose," he said, "you ask a great deal of me—not the money, but the confidence; however, I will do what you ask. You are a clever woman."

As he spoke, the clock struck one. Maggie glanced at it, paying so frankly no heed to the old man's compliment that he smiled as he opened a drawer and took a leather case from it.

"You are not va'n," he commented, counting banknote after banknote on to the table.

She watched him, her blue eyes grave. "No—I am not vain."

"I have forty-five pounds here. Will they do?"

"Yes."

She folded the notes into a small packet, and thrust it into the front of her frock. Then she held out her hand.

"You may rest well to-night, Lord Sharrow," she said, as he took it; "your great-nephew will never marry Viola Wymondham."

"You are sure?"

"I am sure."

"Remember, if you ever persuaded him to marry *you*,—" he began brutally, but unconsciously so, in the pressure and the haste she made him feel so keenly.

"There will never be any question of his marrying me," she answered without offence. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye. You will write? I am a very old man, and——"

"I will write."

As she reached the door, he called her back. "Mind you, if ever you let him know that I had a finger in this, I will——"

"What will you do, old man?" she asked, suddenly expressing a fierce contempt.

He quailed a little, but recovered himself immediately, and retorted: "I will tell him *your* share."

Her eyes blazed. "If you let him know that I have done one thing to prevent his marrying the woman whose grandmother made a laughing-stock of you a hundred years ago, I will——"

For a moment, in the hideous banality of the hotel sitting-room, these two savage creatures glared at one another almost murderously.

Then the old man, scorning the vulgarity of her personal attack, bowed with exquisite grace.

"Dear lady," he said, as softly as a cat purring, "I have against your amiable threat a sovereign safeguard; I am so old, so very old, that I should surely be dead and in my grave before your vengeance could reach me."

Maggie left the room without a reply, for which she had no time. Her hansom was waiting, and in a minute the horse was clip-clopping over the wet stones towards Bloomsbury.

During the drive, she accomplished the perfecting of her plans. The necessity for great hurry, instead of dulling, stimulated her every nerve. If she had had more time to think, the difficulties before her might have appalled her, and lamed her powers. But she had no time. At Eagle Place she sent herself a telegram, purporting to be from one of her sisters, urging her to come at once to the bedside of another sister.

This was for Mrs. Sharrow's eye; for Mrs. Sharrow had always known of the existence of these two ladies whom she had denied to Sandy.

As she reached Twenty-seven, the clock of St. Giles' church struck ten.

Letting herself noiselessly into the house, she took off her wrap, hid it under a sofa in the drawing-room, and then went upstairs.

The little party in Syd's room was just breaking up. She joined it, kissed the boy good-night, and when Mrs. Sharrow was shut safely into her bedroom, marched the sleepy Viola down into the drawing-room.

"Have you not seen Sandy, Vi?"

Viola yawned. "No. Poor old Sandy!—Syd said he had a headache; I ought not to have yelled like that, it *does* hurt one's head. I suppose he's gone to sleep. Syd has been showing me his scrap-books. Sandy made them—

has made them for years—all sorts of verses and stories and pictures—really awfully nice. He is a dear, Sandy. And I was a beast to be cross just because he had taken a little brandy. Why, even Father does once in a while, and Father's a clergyman."

Maggie controlled her face with an effort. Her wisdom in deciding to get Sandy out of the country was made more evident than ever. This idiot not only did not know her own mind; she had no mind to know. In which she was as utterly wrong as strong people, in judging the weak, are apt to be.

Viola yawned again. "Well, good-night, dear, I'm going to bed."

Maggie ran her fingers over the keys of the piano. "All right. Wait just a minute, though. Have I ever played you this?"

She began to play, and Viola stood near the door, at first irresolute, kept only by politeness, and then held by the enchantment of the music.

It has been said that Maggie was a good musician, and never in her life before or after did she play as she played that night. What it was that she played she did not know—it was just the flowing from her fingers to the keys of the charm she wished to make Sandy, alone in his room, feel through the fumes of the brandy.

Suppose he had taken too little and was now all right? She knew as little about the effects of spirits as most women know; suppose he had taken too much and lay in a sodden sleep?

She played on and on, and Viola listened, her face flushed, her hands clasped. She had sunk on a low chair, and her eyes were fixed, unseeing on the open door.

A little melody that Sandy often whistled came into Maggie's mind, and half unconsciously she wove it into what she was playing.

In the narrow hall, the gas was turned on full, and the broad rail of the stairs, down which Sandy had slid in his childhood, glistened in its glare.

Maggie played louder. Supposing Sandy did not hear? Two or three crashing chords sounded through the quiet house, and then the calling, fascinating, insidiously-coaxing melody went on and on. It was like a voice drowning all opposition by its sweet persistence.

A door opened upstairs. Viola did not hear it, but Maggie did, and the persuasiveness of the music was redoubled. Suppose he had opened his door only to listen?

The player closed her eyes; her face, in its intensity, was nearly awful. Her entire will-power was centred in the drawing downstairs of the man she loved.

And slowly, his feet heavy, his big body once or twice bumping against the wall or the banisters, he obeyed her call.

Past Syd's door, where the boy he adored lay already asleep, past his poor, inefficient mother's, and down, down, out of the darkness into the light.

Maggie opened her eyes. Viola, wrapt in the music, had not yet heard the sound of footsteps.

But Maggie counted them. There were fourteen steps from the next landing. He had come down six.

She played on very softly, afraid of breaking her own incantation. She wondered what the little melody was. She would ask him—someday.

"Seven, eight, nine, ten"—Viola's wide eyes stared unseeing at the unsteady bulk now between her and the wall—"eleven, twelve, thirteen——"

Viola gave a loud scream.

Sandy stood in the doorway. He was still in his shirt-sleeves, his dress-shirt was stained with brandy he had spilt, his red hair was ruffled, his face as white as paper. He was a sight dreadful to behold, and Maggie shuddered as she rose and involuntarily stepped forward.

"Good-evening," Sandy said slowly, swaying in the doorway, "that'sh very beau'ful thing you were p-playing."

Viola screamed again, and rushed to the farther end of the room.

Sandy gave a foolish laugh, and lunged after her.

"Hallo, Vi," he said, "didn't s-see you. I—I have come—come"—he banged into the piano and knocked over a bowl of flowers—"to 'pologize."

Maggie Penrose slipped past him, and softly closed the door.

CHAPTER XXV

IT is characteristic of the way the lives at 27 Guelph Square had long since been shaped, that all through the long night of horror, and fear, and degradation, Antoinette Sharrow should sleep like a child.

No one gave a thought to the guarding of her rest, for no one gave a thought to her. The servants were soundly in bed, but in reality both cook and the house-parlourmaid were out, and poor old Bean's hearing was no longer keen. Therefore, a boy bringing Maggie Penrose's telegram to herself a few minutes after her momentous closing of the drawing-room door, gave the bell, in his hurry to be gone, peal after peal, until finally Maggie herself opened to him.

And Mrs. Sharrow slept quietly on, smiling in her sleep.

Maggie had gone straight up to her own room on leaving Viola and Sandy, and spent the first ten minutes in putting together her small possessions.

Then, when the telegram had come, she tore it open, and left it on the table just inside the street door.

In the drawing-room, she could hear the sound of voices. Sandy had evidently made an effort to pull himself together, and seemed to be trying to explain to Viola, who repeatedly interrupted him.

The clock on the landing ticked with the sudden weighty loudness that we all have known in crises.

Maggie sat down on the lowest step, leaning her forehead against the fluted rails, and fixed her eyes as well as her ears on the drawing-room door.

She wondered that Viola should stay so long with the drunken man. But the longer the better. The more Sandy tried to talk, the more he would disgust and frighten her.

Maggie, now that she had time to think, was not free from fear herself. But hers was another terror. Sandy was ill; she knew little of illness, but even she could not fail to

know that the alternate burning and freezing of his hands meant fever. Typhoid, she knew, was not contagious; but suppose that he as well as Syd had caught the germs at White Shirley, where there had been several cases, Sandy's developing slower because of his greater vitality?

And—suppose he was going to die? His misery at losing Viola would, of course, militate against his recovery; and all this excitement, perhaps even the terrible amount of brandy he had drunk that night might increase his danger. The girl's heart seemed to turn cold within her.

"Bah—I am a coward," she told herself impatiently, rising and leaning against the door to listen.

She must act, not think.

For a minute she could hear nothing; then Sandy said, less thickly than he had spoken when he first came downstairs, but evidently with a great effort: "I tell you, Vi, it's absurd, I am not drunk. I was ill, I tell you, ill, and—someone—someone"—Maggie clenched her hands in a fit of helpless terror; suppose he told her name! But Sandy could not remember and went on, stumbling a little: "Someone gave me some brandy. Because I was ill. My head was bad. Oh, yes," he added, just as Maggie's deep breath of relief left her lungs, "it was M-Maggie gave it to me."

"That is a lie. Maggie *never* gave you brandy," retorted Viola. "How horrible of you to lie about poor Maggie!"

There was a short pause, during which Maggie again asked herself why on earth Viola stayed with him.

"Oh, no," he agreed hazily; "of course it wasn't Maggie. Maggie's a good sort. I like Maggie——"

The girl they were thus protecting against each other bit her lips. They were making things unnecessarily hard for her, and she felt an impulse of anger towards them both.

"Let me go, Sandy. I have no more to say."

"No, you shall stay there until I have finished. Now don't st-struggle, Vi, or you'll hurt your wrists."

So he was keeping her by force.

"I tell you I am *not* drunk."

Then Maggie in her strained attention heard a sound that made her laugh. The sound of the impact of flesh. Viola's absurd little hand on Sandy's face!

He, too, laughed. Then he kissed her, and there was

confused noise as of a scuffle, a scraping of stuffs, and the tinkle of the smashing of glass. Maggie opened the door.

Sandy had set Viola on the piano, on a piece of old brocade, and had evidently been holding her there. Now, however, she was in his arms struggling to get down, and the brocade piano-cover had in some way got fastened to his cuff and to the trimming on her frock. On the dark wood of the piano lay an overturned vase, some roses, and a pool of water.

"Sandy!"

At the sound of her voice, Sandy set down his captive, and she flew to Maggie, dragging the yellow and gold brocade after her like a huge tail.

She was crying, furious, and frightened.

Maggie put her arms round her.

"Are you not ashamed, Sandy?"

Sandy contemplated them gravely. "She says I'm dr-drunk. You tell her I'm perfectly s-shober." Then he added: "Look a' that water on th' piano—somebody ought to wipe it up."

Viola was now sobbing wildly, the horror and indignity of her quarter-of-an-hour's captivity having quite broken down her nerves. Maggie soothed her.

"Hush, dearest, don't cry—"

The clock struck one. It seemed to the elder girl incredible that only an hour before she had said good-night to Lord Sharrow. Half-past ten only!

"Bed-time." Sandy stood swaying near the piano. He had forgotten that Viola was angry with him. He was sleepy.

Suddenly he sat down on the sofa near the flower-filled fire-place, and drew up his feet.

"Oh, Maggie, look at him! Isn't it disgusting? And to think that I might have married him!"

Viola's small face was calm now, and her mouth set. There was left in her only loathing for the man she had, only an hour ago, believed herself to love.

She looked at him, as his glassy eyes closed, with quiet contempt. And Maggie looked at her with a contempt so fierce, so indignant, that even Viola, had she turned, must have seen. But Viola did not turn. Sandy was snoring now.

"Come, Vi, you must go to bed."

"To bed! I am going to my aunt in Queen Anne's Gate. I would rather die than stay another minute in this house. Will you whistle a four-wheeler for me, Maggie?"

"But, Vi, to-morrow morning will do just as well."

"No. I am going now. Aunt Minnie had a dinner-party to-night, she will not even have gone to bed."

"Sandy will bombard the house in the morning, remember, to apologize——"

Viola possessed, for all her youth and her gentle beauty a large share of that old-fashioned quality—hauteur.

"I think," she said quietly, "that Sandy will never again try to speak to me."

She took up a lamp as she spoke, and, carrying it to a writing-table, set it down, seated herself, and began to write.

Maggie stood still where she had been left. Everything she wanted was coming her way; Viola was going; she was writing to Sandy a letter that would drive him out of his mind. He would rush away, and she, Maggie, would go with him.

Sandy snored on.

There were eleven great medallions in the carpet between Maggie and the still-open window; and four from the fireplace to the door. There were three lamps in the room; six bowls or vases of flowers; there were two bronze pheasants on the mantelpiece; and chairs, there were one, two, three, four—Maggie dared not let herself think. Sandy's utter helplessness as he slept, and Viola writing the letter that was to break his heart—if she thought—no, she mustn't.

Suddenly the moon sent a shaft of light in sideways, and illumined the face of Great-uncle Frederic, Sandy's bugbear as a child.

Great-uncle Frederic looked amused. He seemed to watch Maggie with interest. Almost she could have said that he winked at her.

The quiet, broken only by the scratch of Viola's pen, was nearly unbearable. Then a hansom, jerking by, brought a relief that seemed physical, and Viola rose.

She looked years older than her age, and her very walk had gained the dignity of definite resolve.

"Here is my letter to Mrs. Sharrow; I have told her only that our engagement is broken, and I beg you to say no more—and here is my letter to Sandy. Do not give it to him until he is quite sober."

She handed the envelopes, both of which were carefully sealed, to Maggie, and left the room.

A minute later, a sharp whistle broke the silence, and, after a long interval, another.

Maggie did not move.

Presently Viola, wrapped in a great shawl, came down stairs, and paused at the door.

"Good-bye, dear Maggie," she said, "I shall see you again soon."

"I—I am going away. One of my sisters—there's the telegram——"

Viola read it mechanically.

"Oh, I am so sorry. I hope she'll soon be better. I shall make Aunt Minnie take me away somewhere to-morrow—when we come back, I'll write. Good-bye, dear."

They kissed, and parted.

The four-wheeler rumbled away, and when it had turned the corner, Maggie closed the house-door, and went back into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SANDY slept until three o'clock. Then, moaning, he awoke to the most terrific headache he had ever had in his life.

Maggie, in the old blue dressing-gown that had seen so much service in Syd's sick-room, sat beside him.

"Who—what's the matter?" he mumbled, immediately repeating his question with great distinctness; "what's the matter, Maggie?"

"How is your head?"

"Splitting. What on earth——" He sat up, throwing off the afghan she had covered him with, and looked down at his stained shirt, and his shirt-sleeves, and his shabby old slippers.

Then, after a pause, he said: "Have I been drunk?"

"Yes, Sandy."

For a moment he hid his face in his hands, and she saw his knuckles whiten in their nervous contraction. "Lola was here, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"She has gone to bed?"

"She has gone."

He rose, accepting her words in the sense of his own, and walked to the looking-glass.

"Did she see me—like this?"

"Yes."

Maggie wanted to say more, her parrot-like repetition of the word annoyed herself, but she could find no others.

"Was I—very bad?"

"Yes."

He went to the window, his feet not quite certain even yet, and leaned forward to get the chill air on his face. She wondered if he were sober enough to understand the letter; she could not be sure.

"Get me some brandy-and-water, Maggie, will you?" he asked, without turning.

"Oh, Sandy——"

"Don't bother. It will straighten me out. Only a little, mind."

She obeyed, running upstairs and, stumbling heavily just outside Mrs. Sharrow's door, made a loud noise. Clambering to her feet, without a thought for the sleeper, she rushed to her room, then to Sandy's, and brought back to him the drink he wanted.

He swallowed it without a word of thanks, and then sat down near the window.

"I shall be all right in a minute, now. Dear old Maggie, it was just like you to sit up with a swine like me——"

"Nonsense, Sandy."

"It's true. You have always been good to me. You are a real friend. After Ben, I suppose the best friend I have in the world."

She did not answer.

The room was very cold now, and she shivered a little. Presently he rose, walked about for a minute or two, and came and stood in front of her.

"Maggie—will you call Viola, please? I want to speak to her."

"I can't, Sandy."

"You must, dear. You see—she is so good, so—so young. I can't have her waking up to-morrow morning to—all the horror of to-night. It would hurt her."

"But——"

"Don't argue. Be my sister and help me. I have been the most awful beast a man could possibly be—she must have been shocked out of her life, and she must see me as I am now. I—am perfectly sober now."

She watched him anxiously. Was he as sober as he believed himself to be?

She rose and, without a word, gave him Viola's letter. It covered two sides of the sheet, and was closely-written.

He read it twice.

"Do you think she means this?"

His voice was so unlike his own that she started as if a stranger had suddenly come into the room.

"I have not read the letter, but—yes, she means it."

"Read it."

There was, in his white face, not the despair she had expected ; there was furious anger, and she was glad.

Viola's letter was beautifully written, its writing as undisturbed as if it were a school-essay ; her style was measured and almost literary. But there breathed in every word a cold disgust, a repulsion that brought an angry flush to Maggie's cheeks.

She called him only one name, but that, from the fastidious Viola, told volumes. She said that she would rather die than marry a sot.

And he knew that she meant it ; that, to her he was a thing ignoble and vile ; that her chiefest thought, as she wrote, was self-congratulation in her escape from him.

One sign of girlish despair, one tear-blot, one absurdity of exaggeration, and Sandy would have hoped. This cold, well-balanced expression of disgust was the letter of a woman who knew her own mind, and her mind was such that he would have died where he stood rather than ever make one move towards her.

"A nice letter, eh ?" he sneered.

Great-uncle Frederic, now emerging from the gloom of night—the lamps had long since gone out, and Maggie's candle was guttering in the socket—watched with interest, and Sandy's sneer equalled his own in malevolence.

"I am a sot. What I did is vile. She would rather die than marry me. Good. Ask her to come downstairs, will you, Maggie ?"

Maggie would have liked to bring Viola before the furious man ; to hear his arraignment ; but Viola had gone.

She told him this, and he accepted it quietly.

"Love is a beautiful and noble thing, isn't it ?" he said. "It makes women brave, doesn't it ? And they are loyal creatures, women. Maggie"—he took up a faded rose from the pool on the piano, and looked at it—"if Viola had murdered her own father it could not have hurt my love for her. I would have died for her and rejoiced. I'd have been broken on the wheel or roasted alive for her. And—this is the way she treats me."

"She is a fool," Maggie answered passionately.

He shook his head.

"No. She is a weakling, and that is worse, for it has made of her a traitor—"

"It *was* dreadful, Sandy, and she is young—"

"So am I young," he thundered, "and do I not know that it is dreadful? It would never have happened to-night if I had not been ill—you gave it to me—you know."

"Yes, I know. But you mustn't be unjust," she repeated; "it was dreadful."

Suddenly he reeled where he stood, and held out his arms blindly.

She caught him, and helped him to a chair. He was fainting. Just as Syd had fainted before he fell ill.

Again rushing to the top of the house, she brought down an unopened bottle of brandy and, knocking the top off against the steel grate, poured some into a little flower bowl and gave it to him.

It revived him, but it revived with his strength all his fury against Viola. He raved, called her names, threatened her, he even reviled her father for bringing her up to have no loyalty, no courage.

His own fault he had by this time quite forgotten. He was to himself simply the victim of her monstrous injustice.

Maggie caught his hand in hers once; it was burning. His bloodshot eyes looked on fire; his face, ravaged with fever and alcohol, was dreadful to behold.

For the first time she was afraid.

At half-past four he rushed from the room, and, stumbling horribly, went upstairs.

He came down a few minutes later, carrying a leather bag, carelessly closed, and a greatcoat over his arm.

"Good-bye," he said; "I am going. I am going where I belong—to Hell. She shall know it, too."

This was more than she had bargained for, but she could not stem his resolve.

"I am going—all alone," he said, bombastically; "the Sot is going."

In her despair she burst into tears—dreadful, burning tears—that disfigured her face, swelling her lips and nose in two minutes. Sandy came back from the door, and put his arms round her.

"Why, Maggie—mustn't cry for a Sot! No one cries for a Sot! Come, come——"

She clung to him. "Sandy—I can't bear it! I can't let you go like this——"

Her plans were forgotten, the part she had played in his

ruin. All that she knew was that she loved him, and that he was going.

He was touched, even in his frenzy. "Maggie, dear, don't. Why do you care so much what becomes of me?"

"I love you, Sandy," she sobbed.

He drew back and looked at her. "You love me? The drunkard you sat by all night? Little Maggie; little Maggie——"

"Let me come with you," she begged.

"No."

"Please, Sandy." She wound her arms round, kissed his hot face, her body close to his. "I know you don't love me, but I—I—do love you. Let me come with you—I have money—we will go abroad, out of this dreadful country——"

His bewildered mind seemed to try to collect itself as she clung to him, and he gazed frowning at his great-uncle Frederic.

Then he said slowly: "All right. You are worth ten Violas, Maggie. Come along—perhaps I shall love you some day."

END OF PART II

PART III

AT THREE-AND-THIRTY

CHAPTER XXXIX

ONE morning in late October in the year 1894, the cheerful sun, peering in at the window of a room high up in a cheap hotel in the rue du Bac in Paris, saw, on the pillow, the face of a sleeping old man.

It was a pleasant, ruddy face, and its fringe of clean, white hair gave it a look of benevolence and even of innocence.

On the marble-topped table by the bed lay a large silver watch on a stout chain, a leather wallet secured by a rubber band, a glass half-full of water, and a carefully-opened letter.

On a chair were neatly spread the old man's clothes: rough, purplish-brown tweeds, folded with care. Over the back of the chair hung a clean shirt, with "J.D." embroidered on the flap. His boots being invisible, were presumably in the hands of the cleaner somewhere below stairs.

The "Duc de Bourgogne" was not a first-class hotel, nor did it belong even to the second rank. Clearly it was cheap, and probably its sordid roof had seen strange sights. The stained yellow walls of Number Thirteen had, one may assume, looked down many a time on sleepers very different from the old gentleman occupying the room that October morning. He looked, in his healthy goodness, out of place there.

Presently he stirred, moved, and awoke.

His small blue eyes gazed round him for a moment, as if he expected other surroundings. Then obviously he

remembered where he was and what had brought him there, and he took up his watch.

"Nine o'clock!" he exclaimed in English. "Bless my soul, I must hurry."

He rang, asked for "Ochode," and when it came in what looked to him like a chocolate-pot for two, asked for more.

Then he rose, washed, and quickly put on his clothes. When he had finished his toilette, and tied his spotted tie to his satisfaction, he pocketed his wallet, his watch, and his letter, and went down the interminable and dangerously-slippery stairs to the dining-room.

He had come from England the day before; he had slept ten hours, and he craved for eggs, bacon, toast, marmalade, and the bad coffee of his class.

He was given one very small egg in a battered metal egg-cup, and a cup of coffee that he found delicious.

The room, long, narrow, glossy and dirty, was stuffy; all the windows were closed. He opened one, and found himself staring at a lady who stood at *her* window, three yards away, in her chemise, brushing her hair.

He rushed back to his table, crimson with the thought of having distressed a lady, and asked for more coffee.

Presently the door opened, and a small dark man entered.

"Mistaire Dingle?" the dark man asked.

And our old friend John Dingle nodded, and invited his guest to sit down.

John Dingle had come to Paris, by his employer's orders, on purpose to see this M. Octave Loiseau, and it was M. Loiseau's letter that had greeted him on his arrival and lain all night on the table by his bed.

But he considered it, with all respect to Lord Sharrow, a dirty business, that of the private detective, and M. Loiseau was of that interesting order.

M. Loiseau, in his turn, could make nothing of the rosy, fat old man, in the clothes of a lunatic, who was so keen on jam, whatever that unobtainable delicacy might be.

It was now ten o'clock—late for John Dingle.

"Well," he said, as he finished his breakfast and rose, "let's get to work."

"Yes."

They went out over the cobbles that led from the courtyard into the street and stood near the door.

"We will walk, *hein?* And you will tell me about it," suggested the detective.

But Dingle shook his head. "You begin," he said. "Have you found him?"

"No. For two days I have searched; many people knew him a year—two, four, six years ago—but now—pouf—he exists not."

"He *does* exist," contradicted the old man stoutly, "and he has got to be found."

They walked towards the *quai*, and presently sat down outside a *café*, and Loiseau ordered an absinthe.

"I have the letters," the Frenchman began, as the sugar melted in the little flat, pierced spoon. "The main facts I know. It is thus: Ten years ago he left England, very angry. For six years after that his mother had news sometimes——"

"Regularly. Every summer his brother came to him in France for six weeks. He travelled, went all over the East, spent a year shooting in Africa. At any time," Dingle went on impressively, "up to eighteen months ago, we could have found him in a month's time."

"I see. And eighteen months ago—*pas?*—no more letters, no more news."

"Just so."

"What kind of a man is he? He love society—the ladies, *hein?*"

"Everything that's right 'e likes, does Mr. Sandy," Dingle spoke stoutly, but his honest face had suddenly clouded.

"He is not married, I understand."

"So far as we know—no."

Loiseau was disgustingly business-like. He took out a grimy little book, licked his finger, turned several pages and began.

"*Voici mes notes.* Age 33; tall, strong, very well-dressed. Not handsome; hair red; wears a ring with a crest cut on an emerald. *Bien.* Has been in Paris a good deal in the last ten years, but none of the tradespeople who knew him have seen him for many months."

"His letters are all at his banker's—he has not been there for well over a year. About thirteen months ago, a lady called with a note from him and got them. Now," the little man added, with a change of tone from the demonstrative to the speculative, "I ask myself: *Who is the lady?*"

Dingle gave a kind of snort.

"That doesn't matter at all," he declared; "we want to find *'im*. The lady is none of our business."

Loiseau eyed him with scorn. "You have put the matter into my hands; well, what *I* say is this: *Cherchons la femme*. Seek the woman."

And they sought.

They went first to the Prefecture de Police; they went again to the shops where Lord Sharrow had taken Sandy years ago, and where they knew he had traded; they went to the bank, and John Dingle learned that the lady had not been very young, but decidedly good-looking, and that her appearance had given the clerk to think things.

"Was she French?" asked the detective.

"No, she was English, and I think had been here before. One of our gentlemen thought he had seen her with Mr. Sharrow."

Dingle mourned inwardly.

And when evening came they were still seeking.

It was a beautiful evening, and the detective, true to his principles, was "looking for the woman" in the Champs Elysées.

They walked slowly along, always on the point of bidding each other good-night, always waiting for one more carriage to pass.

Suddenly the Frenchman had an idea. "How about money? He must have been having it sent out from England."

"His lordship himself thought of that. His London bankers gave him a big advance a year ago—sent it to the bank here. Since then they have not heard of him."

Loiseau shook his head.

"He had some motive for that. He has left the country."

"But a lady who has known him all her life is sure that she saw him at the—the big Spring Race Meeting in June."

"*Le Grand Prix*?"

"Yes."

The detective, his eyes still fixing each carriage as it passed, shrugged his shoulders. "Well—in that case, he is living under an assumed name."

Dingle started angrily, his honest face red.

"He's not doing that, I'll be bound," he declared with

vehemence. "He's not one to be ashamed of his own name."

"No. But—he may think his own name might be ashamed of him."

Dingle hated him.

A moment later and the two men had parted for the night, and Dingle went heavily back towards the Place de la Concorde.

His old heart was sad. He knew that Loiseau was in his line the best that money could buy, but he hated that such a man should come in touch with the old house he had served all his life. And the man's taking for granted that Sandy was not all he ought to be, hurt Dingle's pride.

He turned towards the bridge, and stood looking at the rush of the swollen river. He had never been in Paris before, and he loathed it. Two girls passed him and laughed. He thought that they were laughing at him. He wanted to be back in his own country, in his own village, with his own fat daughter to comfort and pet him.

He felt, in the crowd, as an insular, reticent British egg might feel on suddenly finding itself a part of a French omelette.

Suddenly an open cab went by, going across a bridge. The lady in it turned as she passed him, and he saw her face.

He knew her, but could not place her. He couldn't place her, but he knew she was necessary to him.

He hurried after the cab, elbowing his way through the crowd, unheeding the cries of "boor" and "clown" that were hurled at him.

At the far end of the bridge he jumped into a cab, and pointing, with the stick that had prodded so many pigs, pierced so many clods, in Sharrow, towards the lady he was following, said to the cabman: "*Ally.*"

The cabman, who by a miracle was a genial man, and fully sober, understood, and, lashing his beast, made after the quarry.

CHAPTER XL

WHEN the first cab pulled up at a large door in the Rue des Saints Pères, its pursuers were at some distance behind; but by the time the lady had paid her Jehu and placated his storm of abuse by another and apparently reluctant contribution, John Dingle had come up to her.

She was slim, charmingly dressed, and, it seemed to him, young.

He hesitated for a moment, and then, as she went in under the *porte-cochère*, he stopped her.

"Surely, madam," he said, baring his old bald head, "you are Miss Penrose?"

Now everyone likes to be remembered, and nearly everyone is conscious of a pleasant feeling of gratification on having his or her name remembered with glibness, after a long period of years, by a mere acquaintance.

She turned, smiling.

"Yes—that is, I used to be Miss Penrose. But I am afraid——"

A blackbird in an osier cage, hung outside a window in the courtyard, burst into a trill of lovely melody, and somehow the bucolic sound gave her a clue.

"Wasn't it in England? Surely it was at Sharrow!" she cried.

"Yes—I am John Dingle, the steward."

"Of course you are! How do you do? And how delightful of you to remember me! Will you," she hesitated a little and then went on cordially, "will you not come upstairs with me and tell me—the news?"

The old man assented, paid his cabman, and stumped heavily beside her as she went up, up, up, with graceful lightness of foot. And then she made him sit down near an open window, and poured out some wine for him.

In the clear light that, so high was the room, still filled the sky, he now saw things that had escaped him in the street.

Her dress was well-cut and well put on, but it was shabby; one of her small boots was carefully patched, and her face was wan. She looked poor.

The old man watched her sympathetically as she bustled about, putting away her hat and gloves, folding a newspaper, pushing into greater prominence on the table a potted fuchsia covered with bells.

The room was rather bare, but spotlessly clean. On its scrubbed and waxed floor lay a long strip of cheap carpet.

The chairs and sofa were of the rigid French kind, and covered with dark green satin, except the *bergère*, in which the old man was resting his tired bones. It was of old leather. The table, very highly polished, was decorated with small red and white crocheted mats, and over the gilt mirror pink mosquito netting was draped against the onslaughts of flies.

To a Frenchman the room showed, not only comparative poverty, but something close to the real, vital kind. This was hidden from the Englishman, because to him satin on chairs and gilding on picture-frames meant a certain sort of luxury.

And there were flowers, and a canary in a new cage.

The wine did him good, for he was over sixty, and he had had a hard day.

"How is your pretty daughter?" Maggie asked, coming at last and sitting down by him.

"She is enjoying excellent health, thank you. Too stout, of course, but she gets about as quick as many a thinner woman—and you—did I understand you to say you were married?"

The sky was changing to a warm apricot now, and gold-edged clouds peered above the roofs opposite.

"I am a widow," Maggie Penrose said composedly.

"They will ask me at home," he returned, to explain his curiosity. Meeting her was to him a real adventure, even if he had not felt vaguely that she might help him to find Sandy.

She winced at the simple good faith of his words, although she was glad in a way to hear them, for they assured her that Lord Sharrow had kept his promise.

"My poor husband died three years ago," she went on, "and I have lived here ever since."

"You—you have no children?"

"No." She sat in the shadow of the curtain, so he did not see the quick flush that swept up her face at the question.

"That is a pity," he said, with innocent sympathy. Suddenly he noticed her start, her eyes fixed on the opposite side of the room.

"Mr. Dingle," she said, rising, "have you noticed that perfectly lovely cloud over there to the left?"

She pointed and, perforce, his eyes followed her indication. But he knew as he turned, and she slipped behind him, that she was getting between him and something she didn't wish him to see.

He stared at the cloud for a moment, heard the light jar of a closing drawer, and resumed his seat.

"Miss Penrose," he said bluntly, "I have come to Paris to look for Mr. Sandy."

"For"—she put her hand to her side and sat down quickly. "For Mr. Sandy? Is he not in England?"

"No," answered the steward, his face suddenly shrewd as he looked at her.

And she knew that he knew she was tacitly lying.

"I saw him once, four years ago," she continued doggedly, trying to smile; "but since then—no. I supposed he was in England."

Dingle was puzzled. He did not lightly incline to think ladies lied, and yet,—“It's this way,” he began slowly, leaning his hands on his stick, his chin on his hands, “his lordship is a very old man. He's over ninety, and hasn't done more than get from his bed to his chair, and from his chair to his bed for the past three years. And it is absolutely necessary that 'e should see Mr. Sandy before he dies. Ab-so-lute-ly necessary.

“He has been advertising for over six months in papers all over the world; his solicitor himself came over here in June and tried to find 'im. They have written to dozens of people in different places, who would 'ave recognized 'im if he had been there; they have done everything they can think of. And they *can't* find 'im. So I finally persuaded 'is lordship, when they decided to get a—a detective to look for him here in Paris, to let me come too. I thought he might mind it less”—he paused, casting about for words to express

his thought—"I thought he might mind it less if he was found by one from the old place."

In the gathering gloom, Maggie Penrose leaned towards him. "I see," she said gently.

"And when I saw you, I thought you might know something to tell me."

"No. I can tell you nothing, Mr. Dingle."

He rose, straightening his back with a jerk.

"That does not mean that you know nothing. What," he asked her sternly, "did you hide away from me in that drawer a minute ago?"

It never even occurred to her to tell him that that was her concern alone. She was silent.

"You know where he is, you have seen him," he went on passionately.

She raised her head.

"I haven't seen Sandy Sharrow to speak to for over a year."

This time she spoke the truth, and the old steward knew it.

"Look here, Mrs.—you have not told me your name—you must tell me all you know about 'im."

"Is it Lord Sharrow who wants to know?"

He could no longer see her face, but her dark figure stood out against the bare wall, and he knew that she was tense with interest.

"It is," he said slowly, "entirely for his own good."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Am I sure? Would I, John Dingle, who have known him since 'e was a little red-headed child—would I harm 'im?"

"No," she answered very low. "I am sure you would not. Well—sit down again and I will tell you."

Dingle obeyed, and waited with bucolic patience while she lighted a green-shaded lamp, drew the curtains, and came back to him. In her hand she held a silver photograph-frame. This she gave to him.

"Is that—yes, it is 'im. Well, well—he looks older."

"He is older; we are all that," she returned without bitterness, sitting down. "And that picture was taken two years ago."

Clasping her hands on the edge of the table, and looking steadily at the old man, she began:

"I will not tell you the beginning of the story; he may tell you that, or not, as he pleases. I will go back to one

night a year ago. A year ago this very night. You must understand, Mr. Dingle," she hesitated, trying to find words that would not hurt him in his innocence of life, "that we had been living together—off and on—for several years."

He nodded, without speaking.

"He was not always with me, for he is restless; he gets 'go-fever' every now and then, and has to travel. He went to Africa once, and stayed two years; then he went East, and he—he left me for six months in Ceylon, while he went to Saigon and Burmah and the Settlements. He is, as I said, restless."

"But—excuse my interrupting you—every summer, except one, his brother was with him."

She nodded. "Yes. And I was not. He used, at those times, to pull himself together"—she bit her lip, but as Dingle did not speak or appear to have noticed her slip, went on hurriedly: "But in the end he always came back to me. So I waited."

Someone was drawing water at the well in the court below, and she paused until the creaking noise had ceased.

"But—a year ago he left me, and he will never come back."

"He isn't *dead*?" ejaculated the old man, half rising.

Her little gesture reassured him. "No, he is not dead. I wish he were."

"You mustn't say that, my dear," he said kindly; "he will be happy yet—he is young."

"Yes, he is young. Well—to go on, he left me. We will not read my letters when I write, nor see me when I go to his house. He—hates me."

"His house! Then he is here in Paris?"

"Yes. Come with me."

Leading him through a passage to her tiny kitchen, she opened a window, and pointed to a kind of broad terrace several floors lower than where they stood.

"There; you see those two lighted windows, behind the terrace, over the garden? That is his house; those are his windows."

Tears of relief and joy stood in the old steward's eyes as he gazed.

"Thank you; thank you," he said. "You are good."

"I? Ask him when you see him—ask him if I am good. And he will tell you that I am a plotter, and a liar, and a thief; he will tell you what I did, and how, after nine years

of devotion and patience—ah, yes, I have been patient—he left me for it as if I had been poisonous, when he found it out—a year ago this very night. The long arm of coincidence, eh?”

“Poor girl! poor girl!”

If she had cried, Dingle would have tried to comfort her; but quite suddenly she was calm again, and led him back to the *salon*.

“It is Place de l’Arbre Vert 16,” she said, as he took up his hat. “Wait; I’ll write it down.”

He put the paper safely into his wallet, shook hands with her, and she opened the door.

“Make him go back to England, if you can,” she said; “that may save him even yet!”

“Save him?”

“Yes. *Make* him go! And, some day, write and tell me. My name here is Madame Brown.”

He was half-way down the dark stairs when she called him.

“Mr. Dingle, wait. *His* name, at that address, is M. Alexandre, ‘Mr. Alexander.’ Don’t forget.”

“So that detective was right,” the old man thought sadly, as he went out into the lighted street.

CHAPTER XLI

JOHN DINGLE could never recall anything about the meal he had that evening at a neighbouring restaurant, except that the radishes were partly peeled, and looked as if they wore fantastic pink jackets over their little white bodies.

After many months of disappointment, Sandy was found, and it was to the faithful old servant a matter of warm self-congratulation that it was he, and not the detective (who in his mind was closely, if vaguely, connected with burglars), who had found him.

Maggie Penrose's story had somewhat disquieted him; but as he ate his dinner, the comfort of the food and the warmth of the restaurant—for he was chilly with fatigue, though the evening was warm—gained on him, and he lost all misgivings in the satisfaction of the main point.

Sandy was even now within a stone's-throw of him, and he it was who had found him.

When he had paid his modest reckoning, Dingle rose, and waited patiently at the restaurant door until an empty *fiacre* passed. This he hailed, and standing up in it, stood, like Mr. Boffin, with his stick under his arm, until he had found the paper Maggie had given him.

"*Ally*," he said, and the man, holding the paper for a moment to his lamp, drove slowly away.

At the far end of the next street the *fiacre* pulled up at a low door leading into a small, irregular place, a back-water of old Paris.

"*Ally*," repeated the steward.

"*On n'y passe pas en voiture, M'sieur*," explained the man rapidly; "*c'est un cul-de-sac*."

Out shot the stick. "*Ally*."

He was curt, *le vieux copain*, but he had a smile, but name of little St. Antoine, a smile!

"*Je r'grette, M'sieur, mais y'a pas moyen. Regardez—mon sapin y resterait pincé.*"

He pointed to the low archway, and the steward understood.

"All right. I'll walk. You wait here. Understand?"

After a pause, fishing painfully in the depths of his memory, he added: "*Attendez.*"

And it is to be doubted whether he or the cabman were the more delighted over this inspiration.

The old man went his way into the Place de l'Arbre Vert, feeling that the mysteries of the French language were greatly exaggerated.

The Place of the Green Tree was old and treeless in Henry the Fourth's time. Its cobbles, huge, round, and separated from one another by deep interstices in which grass grew, were as large as cabbages; of those cobbles that make one pity the ladies of long ago, when coaches were springless, and hung on leathern straps at the best.

The tall, old houses in the Place, which may be described as a rough triangle, had roofs that seemed to come down over their brows as if they did not court recognition, and several of them were empty. They looked, in the light of the oil lamp—that was the Place's only source of light—as if the hand of Time had never been laid on them. They were very old, very grey, very shabby, but they appeared to be just as they had been left on the day of their completion hundreds of years ago. They had never been restored.

And over their great doors coats-of-arms were still hanging, having escaped the destruction of the revolutionary patriots; because even then the Place de l'Arbre was too old, too secluded, too insignificant to matter.

Only a few lights burned at the windows, and under the lamp old Dingle stopped, looking round him. There were no numbers to be seen anywhere.

He was about to go back to the cabman when a little girl came out of the nearest door, a jug in her hand. On her, out of the darkness, came a most alarming apparition, who thrust a scrap of paper under her nose, and said determinedly: "Oo?"

Being a woman-child in France, she wept aloud, for the purpose of luring from his box in *la maison du coin* the porter Auguste.

He came, and fiercely, with the air of being the world's

only champion of woman-kind, flung himself towards the malefactor. When a bit of paper was, in his turn, thrust under his nose, and "oo" was roared at him, he was staggered.

He read, almost in spite of himself.

Then he sulked. "*Eh bien, qu'est-ce que vous voulez que je fasse, moi?*"

"Mr. Sharrow."

"M. —?"

"Sharrow. No, no, Mr. Alexander."

In spite of his saying the name in English, the porter understood.

"M. Alexandre—*oui, c'est bien ici*——"

Besides *ally* and *attendy*, the steward understood another word. This chanced to be *oui*.

The little girl rushed away to the well, which presently yielded to her grinding, and brought up water for her jug.

And the porter, explaining that at his master's that evening there was of the world, flatly refused to let this old person, whom he qualified as a rustic, to interrupt the festivities. Poor Dingle tried coaxing, then he tried threats. All in vain. Auguste was a young man and very strong.

Presently he led the Englishman to the extreme edge of the Place, and pointing upwards, said more gently, for he was not a bad fellow, and the light showed him that the rustic had a good face: "*Vous voyez?*"

It was now about ten o'clock, and the night was very dark. Round the stone coping that edged the terrace Dingle had seen from Maggie Penrose's kitchen, Chinese lanterns swung on a wire, moved gently in a light breeze; and beyond, from two tall, open windows poured the sound of voices.

"I see. It's a party. I'll wait."

Auguste hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his pen-like room where he was reading "*Le Cowboy des Montagnes Rocheuses*."

Obviously there was no harm in the old man, who, having gone down and dismissed his cab, sat down on a bench, and waited with the patience never known to those who dwell in cities.

Ladies came out on to the terrace, and their voices were shrill. They were joined by several men, and they all smoked and all laughed.

Someone in the lighted room was singing now ; a woman's voice rang out, nasal and bold. When the song ceased, everyone clapped and laughed loudly.

Then nearly all those on the terrace went in. Only one man remained and one lady. The steward could see by the swaying light from the lanterns the glimmer of her bare shoulders. They did not talk, the two ; they sat quiet, the man's arms on the coping.

Presently a church clock, very far off, struck—eleven, or twelve—Dingle lost count, and did not know which. Then, in one of the windows another figure appeared—a man's. He nearly fell as he joined the man and the woman who did not talk ; he caught himself, and sat down with his back to the listener.

In the breeze the lanterns swayed more rapidly. The woman was singing again, and other voices joined in.

Suddenly the man by the coping put up his hand and tilted the lantern over his head. For a moment nothing happened, then the gaudy paper caught fire and flared up. The man rose, tore it down, and threw it over the edge of the terrace. As he did so, the fierce light danced for one second over his face. It was Sandy Sharrow.

“ Mr. Sandy ! ”

The man started, and the woman near him rose, and with him peered down into the darkness.

“ Mr. Sandy ! ”

The old servant stood on tiptoe as he spoke, and then, in the great silence—for the music had ceased—he distinctly heard the man he sought cry in a queer, frightened voice : “ Great God ! did someone call me ? ”

And then Dingle spoke again.

“ It is me, John Dingle, sir. May I come up ? ”

CHAPTER XLII

THE old man stood at the door of the great room, blinking like an owl in the bright light.

There were about a dozen people crowding round him; he was, to them, an unexpected delight, a curiosity, and they were not of those who conceal their amusement.

"Where is Mr.—Mr. Alexander?" he asked a little tremulously.

And a young woman, clad in black lace over flesh-coloured silk, a combination that led to extraordinary effects, laid her hand on his arm.

"E is—on ze terrace," she said, in very bad English.

"Come—*allez-vous-en, monstres*—I will conduct you."

"*Brava, Lise!*"

"*Ecoute-moi ça, Lise qui parle Anglais!*"

They all laughed and talked at once.

The old man raised his grave, worn eyes, and looked at them. These were queer people, he felt, to be Mr. Sandy's guests.

Some of them were silenced for a moment by his glance, and he was allowed to go his way with the accomplished pink-and-black Lise.

The walls were hung in pink satin brocade, and there were flowers everywhere. The floor was like brown ice. And everywhere was light—the crude, glaring light of unshaded electricity.

Near the window old Dingle slipped, and would have fallen had not Lise caught him. He thanked her, stood for a moment to recover himself, and she said kindly:

"Very silly peoples; never mind, Alexandre glad to see you."

He was grateful to her, and smiled at her, still leaning on his arm.

They passed out through the window, and there in the cool darkness, leaning against the coping, stood Sandy; the steward recognized his big shoulders.

"Mr. Sandy!" the old man's voice broke a little as he faltered the words.

Sandy did not move, and Lise continued to advance.

Suddenly Sandy sat down on the coping and covered his face with his hands.

There was a long silence; then, at a noise behind them, Lise turned, and seeing a bouquet of curious faces at the window, slammed the shutters as if she meant to smash them all.

At last Sandy spoke

"How do you do, Dingle?" he said, holding out his hand. He spoke so strangely that the old man turned instinctively to the young woman.

"*Eh, oui*," she explained easily; "it is late—at this hour he is always—how says one—*drunk*!"

"Oh, my dear God!" whispered the old man, in reverent anguish.

"It is true, D-Dingle;—i-it is late—Lise," he added sharply, and continued to speak for a moment in rapid French.

She nodded. "*Bien*."

She drew Dingle to a chair, and making him sit down, laid her hand on his, while Sandy walked swiftly, but in jerks, to the window, and went into the house.

"'E come back—'e drink water—and wash 'is countenance. What beautiful weather we have been having lately!"

This abrupt transition to excellent English made poor Dingle fear he was losing his reason.

"Yes—beautiful," he stammered, staring at her.

She burst out into a funny little tinkle of laughter.

"*Ca c'est du livre*," she explained. "Zat I learn in ze book Alexandre gave me."

They sat for a while in silence, and then there was a sound at the window.

Sandy came slowly towards them, holding himself very erect, his face set. His hair, the old man saw, was wet, and one side of his collar was limp. He had been washing in cold water.

"I am better now," he began in an even, rather sing-song

voice, sitting down. "Now then, Dingle, what is it? Is—Lord Sharrow dead?"

Lise listened and watched eagerly, her little black eyes glittering like a mouse's under her oddly clumped hair.

"No, Mr. Sandy. His lordship is—as well as one of his great age could hope to be."

"Well, then?"

"Shall I speak before—the lady, sir?"

Sandy glanced at her. "Oh, yes," he said carelessly; "she doesn't matter."

"Then"—instinctively the old servant got up—"it is this, sir. His lordship wishes you to come back at once, and I have come to—to—fetch you."

Sandy gave a hoarse laugh.

"Aha! I was sent away; now I am brought back! Delighted. Well—I am glad to have seen you, Dingle, but—you must go back and give—Lord Sharrow this message. Tell him that I, Alexander Sharrow, outlaw and scapegrace, would not soil my hand by touching his, nor dishonour my manhood by looking into his treacherous eyes. There—that is my message."

"But, Mr. Sandy, I——"

"Hold your tongue, Dingle. You don't know what—you're talking about. You don't know what he did to me, he and that"—he used a word the steward had heard only occasionally, in church, in the First Lesson.

"But he is ninety-four years old."

"What the devil does it matter to me if he is nine hundred years old?" asked Sandy, with such ferocity that Dingle drew back from him with horror. "I believe he is nine hundred—or nine thousand years old. Only the devil himself could plan what he planned, and do what he did. No; go, Dingle—you are an honest man, and a good one. I am sorry you have to serve a—a swine like Lord Sharrow."

High up, above rows of dark windows, was one little red light. It was the light of Maggie Penrose's kitchen. The old man unconsciously looked towards it, and Sandy saw.

"There—just where your eyes are now," he went on, his eyes glaring, "is where *she* lives. And even now, probably, she is looking down at my lights here. She saw my guests, heard my music—and it tears her to pieces. A year ago

to-night I found her out—her and the old demon who dared to—to send you to me. And I told her what she was and left her. And if the two of them lay rotting in a ditch, and I could save them by raising a finger—they should rot, and kites should feed on them.”

He strode away to the further end of the terrace and stood there, his back turned to the old man, and the woman, who in the faint light looked as if her nakedness were only veiled by black lace.

“Go now,” the woman whispered; “go quickly, m’sieur. He is mad to-night. Whatever you wish he will not make. He is *furieux*—but, yes, furious.”

But Dingle shook off her hand and rose.

“Mr. Sandy!” he called.

Sandy turned. Someone inside was playing a waltz, and through the slits of the shutters odd slices of shadow moved in the lantern light. The guests were dancing.

“Please go, Dingle,” Sandy said.

“No. You must come to Sharrow.”

“I will never come to Sharrow.” But he turned and walked slowly towards the old man, who summoned him with such strange peremptoriness. Between them, the girl, in her indecent black draperies.

“Your great-uncle cannot live long——”

“Ah, he wishes to make his soul, is that it? He wants my forgiveness? Tell him he may ask for that again when he has roasted in Hell for a thousand years——”

“Mr. Sandy,” Dingle said, after a pause, “I have come to tell you that you are your great-uncle’s heir.”

The waltz went on, and several women laughed at once. The shadow-slices danced more wildly.

Sandy did not speak.

“You—you are to be Lord Sharrow when that old man dies.”

“Are you mad, Dingle? No, you are not mad. I am drunk. That’s it,” the younger man said, standing still.

“You are not drunk, and I am not mad. It is true. Master Sydney found some paper in an old medicine-chest—it’s a marriage-certificate.”

Sandy opened the shutters and stood in the doorway. He said something very quietly, and it was met with a shout

of laughter; he said it again and the music ceased. He waited for what seemed to be a long time, and the sound of voices within gradually died away.

Then he came back to the edge of the terrace.

"They have gone," he said. "Now, then, Dingle, tell me that again."

CHAPTER XLIII

THEY talked, the two men, till nearly five o'clock, the mouse-eyed Lise sitting by them. When two o'clock struck, and the old man shuddered, they went into the house, and, crossing the ball-room-like apartment, settled themselves in a small, shabby room like a study.

Here Lise sat on the floor, her head resting, uninvited, against Sandy's knee. Sometimes she dropped off to sleep, and then her quaint little face under its liquid powder and its rouge looked almost like that of a child.

In a basket in a corner an old white dog lay asleep. He was a grandson of Winker, Sandy explained shortly.

Over and over the old man told the story of the discovery of the marriage certificate.

"They had been married secretly in Switzerland six months before the German marriage they went through for the sake of the daughter who was coming. They doubted the legality of the Swiss marriage, it seems, but it, and not the other, was all right. I don't know all the details—but it is quite certain Mr. Bolsover himself went to the place. I think, sir, you would not be quite so hard on the old gentleman if you knew how glad he was. Why, when he told me, he—he broke down, Mr. Sandy. 'Is lordship cried!'"

Sandy's grim face did not relax. There seemed to be no pity in him.

He had changed far more than the ten years which had passed seemed to justify. His red hair was as red as ever, but it had receded from his brow—and his eyes were set in deep hollows and surrounded with wrinkles that no man of thirty-three should have.

But it was his mouth that made his old friend's heart ache.

Always a thin mouth, and long, it now turned down at

the corners as if it could never move, and the corners were buried in a fold that extended from his nose to his chin.

His always slightly underhung lower jaw protruded now even when his face was in repose, and between his eyes was stamped a sign like a small inverted horseshoe. He looked fifty, and he looked as hard and cruel as the old lord himself.

Once his face softened suddenly. It was when the steward chanced to mention Syd's joy in the discovery.

"How is my brother?" he asked.

"He is a—a beautiful young man. And—good, sir."

"Yes, yes, he's a good boy. I—I have not seen him since the 30th of May, 1892. That was in the Vosges."

"I know. He—he was very sorry, sir, that—that you did not write," ventured Dingle.

"I could not write."

"I see, sir. Since—since Mrs. Sharrow's death he has lived in Italy; he is very fond of music——"

Sandy, who was softly pulling a lock of Lise's hair, much as if it had been a pet dog's tail, looked up.

"Ah!—then my mother is dead?" he asked calmly.

"She died in the autumn of '93."

"Poor mother!" his voice was gentle.

"Yes."

There was a pause, after which Sandy said suddenly: "Dingle, how did you find me?"

"Miss Penrose told me, sir. I met her in the street quite by chance——"

"Ah! My great—Lord Sharrow will be pleased to hear news of her. They were friends—and allies."

"Mr. Sandy, I don't quite understand, and I have no right to ask you to explain things to me, but—it is painful to me, as an old man who knew you as a little child, to hear you—sneer like that——"

Over the sleeping mouse, Sandy stretched out his hand, on which the green ring sparkled.

"I beg your pardon, Dingle. I have been rude. But—I am not a good man, nor a pleasant companion. Life has taught me to be a bully and a—a selfish beast. But to you I would be kind if I could. Listen! She is asleep, poor child!—I will tell you. You will not repeat this to anyone? Ever?,"

"No, Mr. Sandy."

"Well, then, here is my story. It won't excuse me—"

no—nothing external excuses anybody. But—it will help to explain me, perhaps.”

The glaring electric light, unwavering, unbeautiful, unpoetic, streamed down on his hard, ravaged face, and on the tawdry figure of the sleeping woman. In his basket the old dog growled in his dreams. The city was very still. And Sandy Sharrow told his story.

“When you saw me last, Dingle—the day I came to tell Sally and you of my engagement—I was a boy of twenty. I wasn’t a young girl, but I was a decent boy enough, and I had in my heart something that would have made of me a more than decent man. You know what I mean. You know, I daresay, of my great-uncle’s stipulations about our engagement.

“Well, I distrusted him, even then I distrusted him, but—I loved my brother, and I was too happy to allow a vague feeling against my great-uncle to upset my brother’s life. Then there was my brother’s governess.

“I had flirted with her a little—I kissed her once, but I meant no harm, and once I had seen—Miss Wymondham, I begged her, Miss Penrose’s, pardon. I never touched her again until—afterwards. Then comes what those two did.” He paused, drew a deep breath, and went on, the determination to speak calmly written on his face.

“They put their heads together to break off my engagement. And, being clever, they found a clever way to do it. I suppose you have not been told? No? They made me drink. It was ingenious. It was born in me to love spirit—brandy. As a child I loved the smell and taste of it. And once, when I was under twenty, I drank too much. This I told—Miss Wymondham, because I thought I ought to. Then Miss Penrose set to work. She frightened Miss Wymondham. And after that the devil himself apparently came to the rescue of Lord Sharrow and his friend.

“When my brother had typhoid fever, I once drank too much, and went to sleep in the library. This was told to Miss Wymondham. It was exaggerated, of course. She wrote and asked me, and I acknowledged it. Even now I’m not a liar, and in those days—I always told the truth.

“And, finally, when Miss Wymondham came to visit my mother, their opportunity came.”

He broke off for a minute as Lise turned, grunting sleepily, and leaned her other cheek against his knee.

"I had been sitting up for six weeks; I had been nearly out of my mind with anxiety, and—I was twenty-three. For days I had had such a headache that I could hardly see. I can remember, even now, how things seemed to wave when I looked at them. I was ill. Good God! if it had been Syd they did it to, I should—however, it was not Syd. Well, Maggie Penrose bided her time; she came to my room and gave me a stiff drink of brandy while I was dressing. And after dinner—I had quarrelled with Miss Wymondham—I took more. I took enough to deaden the pain, and then—remembering, mind you—sat down with my dog, to wait till I could go down and—apologize to Miss Wymondham. Then Maggie came to my room. She gave me more—she made me drunk. I kept on drinking. And, finally, an hour later, I heard her signal—she was playing. She was playing a little melody that had always been associated," he went on dreamily, as if to himself, "with Viola. Drunk as I was I recognized it—well, her playing was the signal for me to go down and apologize. So down I went, so drunk I could hardly stand, and made a fool of myself before—the woman who had promised to be my wife."

"Poor girl—poor young lady!" murmured the steward softly.

Sandy stared at him with haggard eyes. "Yes, poor girl! But also—poor boy. Remember, Dingle, I—adored her. And I believed her to be as good as God. And she wrote me a letter, and called me—a sot. So I went away and made myself what she believed me to be. I was a fool, but—I was twenty-three."

The dog in the basket scratched himself; a clock struck.

"Twenty-three. I rushed away as two years before I had rushed away from—Sharrow. Only this time Maggie Penrose came with me."

"Ah!"

"Yes. She didn't tell you? She was," he added justly, "very good to me. I was as miserable a young ass as ever lived, and as reckless. She did her best, once she had got me away from Viola, to save me. But I would not be saved. And so I wallowed with the swine. Some swine have excellent manners and remarkably well-trained minds. I saw much, even learnt much. Also, I drank much."

He laughed bitterly.

"But—your brother? He came to see you every summer——"

"Yes. He—does not know. I have not been weak, Dingle—I have been bad. When I chose I—stopped. And Syd—I have not hurt him. He does not know."

After a pause he went on in a different voice. "A year ago to-night, quite by chance I found a letter of Mr. Bolsover's to Miss Penrose. It was written by Lord Sharrow's wish and it—betrayed things. I then searched her papers and found other letters—a round dozen, and a little jade ornament he gave her to ratify their bargain. Why she had kept them, God only knows—women do queer things—but there they were. And that—is the end of my story."

He rose and opened the window. It, too, looked out on the terrace.

The sky was already growing lighter, and the trees in the garden beyond showed as individuals against its pallor; a bird chirped.

Sandy walked out without a word, and stood in the chill dawn. Presently the old man, who stood behind him, noticed the red light in the high room opposite sink, rise, and go out.

"You see?" asked Sandy, "she is going to bed. She is tired of watching me."

"Poor soul."

"Ay, poor soul. She has ruined me, Dingle. You have come too late. I believed in her. She was good to me in my desolation, and she—she cared for me so much that I grew fond of her."

Another bird stirred and chirped, and somewhere a cock crowed. Sandy, his voice clear, his face held up to the sky, seemed purified by the dawn.

Behind him lay the past years, and by his chair, sleeping, the poor Lise.

Before him, the growing light.

The old man laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"And now I am not fit for Sharrow."

"You are, you are, Mr. Sandy," protested Dingle, tears running down his old cheeks. "There is time yet——"

After a pause he added, tremulously: "You won't refuse to come? You will come?"

Sandy turned, and held out his hand. "Yes, I will come," he answered gravely. "I *must* come."

CHAPTER XLIV

ONE day in November, a man walked into Rome by the Porto del Popolo.

He was very dusty, his clothes were patched, torn and weather-worn. His boots, which showed signs of having been cobbled many times, were nearly worn out.

Strapped across his back was a small knapsack, and under his hat he wore a coloured handkerchief knotted into a kind of cap. He wore a rough, unkempt beard.

Two priests, meeting him, bowed courteously; obviously a pilgrim, and as such, meriting respect.

Inside the gate, the pilgrim stood still, looking round him with the air of one glad to arrive at his journey's end.

It was a glorious day; the trees on the Pincio were still fully leaved, and near the obelisk stood a girl selling flowers.

Seeing him, she came forward, holding out a bunch of violets; and he, laughing, showing strong white teeth, gave her a small piece of silver, and drew the little bouquet through his buttonhole, where it made in its freshness a contrast to the rest of his belongings.

He walked slowly across the square to the right, and sat down outside a *café* of the humblest sort.

Although it was November, a stupid awning still hung over the rush-bottomed chairs and wooden tables. The summer had been long, and the autumn a rare one.

"A glass of *est-est-est*," the wayfarer told the waiter in very fair but plainly foreign Italian.

Then he sat resting, sipping the delicious wine made famous long ago by the German bishop who drank so much on his pilgrimage to the Holy City that they had to bury him on the way.

It was eleven o'clock, and Domenico, the *padrone*, was kept busy, for his wine is good and wise men in Italy go

where the wine is good, even to humble *trattorie* like this one.

Two officers, brilliant as parrots in their different uniforms, sat at a table near the foreigner.

He displeased them for two reasons: he was obviously very poor, and he *was* a foreigner.

A rich American or Englishman is welcome in Rome; but foreigners in ragged clothes and broken boots are not beloved, the Italian market being already glutted with such objects of home manufacture.

So the officers discussed the *mascalzone* as he sipped his wine.

An old woman carrying a baby came and partook of a red syrup in a thick glass; a wild-haired German painter, with very large red hands, drank half a flask of *chianti* in one breath, and departed.

Then came two Englishmen, sitting down near our pilgrim, and ordering, as he had done, the yellow wine of the Bishop.

"Delicious stuff, isn't it?" the elder of the two said.

The shabby pedestrian smiled as he sipped his own. It was to him so very delicious after his seven-hour tramp that morning.

"Exquisite! I'd like to take some home with me, only they say it doesn't bear transportation."

The pilgrim set his glass down suddenly. He could not see the speaker's face, but he knew his voice.

After a while the voice went on: "Look at that poor chap, Marston, sound asleep!"

"Yes. He looks dead-beat. Is he a tramp, I wonder, or a 'holy pilgrim'? They are sometimes hard to tell apart!"

The elder man laughed as he spoke, but the younger went on: "I don't know—that coat was made for *him*—it's well-cut, and it fits him even now. Come down in the world, I daresay." Then he added lightly: "Poor devil! Come along; the Duchess will hate us if we're late for lunch."

When their voices and footsteps had died away, the man they had discussed raised his head. His lean, burnt face was wet with tears.

Presently he made his way down the Via de Babuino, and turning off it, engaged a room at a small inn.

He sent a servant to the station, and when the man re-

turned with a small, shabby trunk, no more was seen of the guest for an hour. Then there appeared at the bureau of the hotel a gentleman dressed in dark blue, brown boots polished to the colour and gloss of horse-chestnuts, and an old Panama hat.

The *padrona* looked up. "The gentleman wishes to see—" she suggested, staring at this unusual caller.

"I am the gentleman of Number Four," he answered her courteously. "I walked to Rome—that is why I was so shabby—and now I go out to seek a barber."

The old woman's eyes flashed.

"A holy pilgrimage!" she cried, for she was old enough to be religious. And she crossed herself in congratulation.

The gentleman held his beard in his hand, and smiled at her, a strange expression in his eyes. "Yes—a kind of pilgrimage," he assented slowly. "Without doubt, a kind of pilgrimage."

Half an hour later he returned, showing where the beard had been—a reddish jaw and chin that contrasted strongly with the brown of the upper part of his face. He paid his bill, made his adieux with the leisurely politeness of one who has travelled much in polite countries, and, his box on a cab, went his way.

Mr. Alexander Sharrow was well received at the hotel where he had already stayed more than once, and he made an excellent luncheon.

The *maître d'hôtel*, hovering round with the wine-card, was dismissed.

"No thanks, Paolo; I don't want any wine."

But Paolo was of those gifted *maîtres d'hôtel* who never forget the tastes of a good customer.

"Should I forget that, sir? I, Paolo? No—it is the Tre Stelle—the Three Star of Martell that *il Signore* likes. It was to ask if I am to fetch a large or a small bottle."

Sandy shook his head. "No, I don't want either, thanks." And Paolo was convinced that only illness could have wrought this fearful change.

Two hours later, Sandy arrived at the villa on the Janiculum.

While he waited in the drawing-room, he stood for some minutes in front of a large mirror. He saw a lean, weather-beaten face, apparently the face of a man close on fifty, but it looked the face of a *healthy* man of close on fifty.

The eyes were clear under their bushy brows, the grim mouth looked as though it could smile.

"A good deal better," he told himself sadly, "but——"

Then the door opened, and Syd came flying in, in a velvet coat and purple leather slippers.

"Sandy! My dear old Sandy! I was asleep when the man told me, and I couldn't believe him—so I rushed down, just as I was. If it hadn't been you, I should have murdered whomever it was!"

He held Sandy's hand in both his, and then with a little gurgle of laughter flung his arms round the elder man's neck and kissed him.

"Now then, if you're ashamed of me for that—but you aren't. It has been such ages. Sit down, dear old chap, and tell me all about it. Where on earth have you been all this time?"

Sydney Sharrow was nineteen years old, and a very beautiful boy. He was slim, and his shoulders were too narrow, but he walked well, with a little swagger that became him. And his head was, in its way, wonderful. There was in it—with its soft, dark hair, which, when he was warm or there was rain in the air, curled round his forehead like a child's, his golden-brown eyes and the mellow tone of his skin—little or nothing of the Sharrows.

His mother had always declared him to be like her people, but he was not at all like her.

And now, since Sandy had seen him, he had grown, and on his short lip grew a tiny moustache not nearly so big as one of his brother's eyebrows.

Sandy studied him as they talked, and, presently, Sandy's face had so melted into happiness that the boy himself noticed it.

"That's right," he said; "let your old face do as it likes. It wants to be cheerful; you seem to be holding it back. Laugh and be happy, for to-morrow you die."

"Do I? I hope not." The elder man was suddenly very grave.

"Nonsense! I'm rather given to cynicism," the boy declared, deeply interested in himself; "but—I suppose all musicians are."

"How goes the voice?"

"It's good, Sandy; it really is. The *maestro* seems delighted with my progress. I work awfully hard, too. Hardly

ever go out at night, and—that sort of thing. One has to respect one's *moyen*," he added, with a touch of importance.

"Of course. I suppose you have to be careful, too, what you eat—and drink?"

His voice maintained a careful level, and he looked at his own brown hand as he spoke.

Syd smiled. "Rather! No nuts, you know, nor vinegar; sweets don't matter. As to drink—I loathe spirits and wine, don't you?"

There was a short pause.

"Yes, I loathe spirits and wine. I have given them up. To-day, however, I took a glass of wine when I arrived. I went to Ciarro's and tried a wine I used to like. It is called Est-est——"

Syd's eyes grew enormous over the marvel of this coincidence.

"You did? Why, Sandear, how wonderful! So did I! I, too, went to Ciarro's—with Charles Marston, the painter—and I, too, drank Est-est-est! What a funny thing! Suppose we had met there? How small even Rome is, and it is much bigger than the world!"

Then Sandy told his plans. He had come to Rome on purpose to see his brother, and was going back—home, in two or three days. Would Syd go with him?

No, Syd couldn't. He must stand by the *maestro*, or the *maestro* would not stand by him. But he would come for their birthday and the holidays. Was Sandy not thrilled to death by finding himself to be the heir? He—Syd—had nearly gone out of his mind when Mary wrote to him about it; and then, when they couldn't find Sandy, Syd had really thought his mind would give way.

"Where were you all the time?" he added, glowing with fresh curiosity.

"Like everybody who is searched for, I was ridiculously near at hand. Old Dingle found me in Paris!"

"No!"

"Yes, he did."

"By the way, you say Mary wrote to you about it. Mary Wymondham, I suppose?"

"Rather. She always writes to me. We're great pals. She's a dear, Mary is."

"Not married?"

"Not she. Hasn't time, I daresay. Since the Vicar

died, and Viola married—I suppose you had cards? She lives in the doctor's—Gill's, you know. Gill has built himself a villa, if you please, on the Dipwater Road—a real proper villa, with tiles and turrets and machicolations and things!”

Sandy was silent. He had not known that Viola Wymondham was married, and even now the news hurt him. He no longer loved her, but she was a part of his youth, and she, too, was gone.

“A villa!” he repeated mechanically. “How awful! So Mary lives in the Corner House. A charming little place! I remember stealing plums in the garden.”

CHAPTER XLV

SANDY SHARROW, in his self-inflicted pilgrimage to Rome, was not actuated by religious motives. Although when he had made the decision, the rather absurd side of which he plainly saw, all that was romantic in him, as well as all that was practical, rose to greet it. The reasons for this were simple.

For the past year, ever since his discovery of Maggie's connivance with his great-uncle to separate him from Viola, his downward course had continued with greatly accelerated speed, and he had deteriorated physically as well as morally, with frightful rapidity.

Having lost Viola not only as a wife, but what to a man of his temperament was even worse, also as an ideal, he had rioted wildly for many months, as he had declared to Maggie his intention of doing.

He was young enough to take a savage joy in revenging himself on Fate by not only giving full rein to, but in cultivating as well, the worst impulses within him.

If the fever, that seemed that last night in Guelph Square to be attacking him, had really done so, the chances are that it would, in the course of its run, have burnt the madness out of him, and left him, as it has left many a man, too weak for anything but mild resignation.

But by some freak of the gods, not his madness, but his fever passed away, as if the force of his will to ruin himself vanquished the mere bodily ill; and the day he and Maggie Penrose reached Paris he disappeared, and was gone for nearly a month.

Finally, when he did come back, he found Maggie pale, anxious, and far more frightened by his looks than she dared own.

"I have been among the swine, and I have wallowed," he said.

"You have come back," was her reply.

It would be unfair to say that he was not touched by her patience, but he did not love her, and she was no anchor to him. Moreover, she spoiled him.

When his fits of hopeless longing for Viola came over him, and then turned, as they invariably did, to a fierce loathing for her, not all Maggie's wisdom and tenderness could keep him with her. Off he went, seeking the worst there was to be found in the city of diversified vice, drowning himself, as he himself expressed it, in mud.

But—when the fit was over, and he came to himself sick, ashamed, weary of himself and everyone else, one degree more hopeless, many degrees nearer a total loss of self-respect, he turned to her, much as a child turns to its mother, and as, even as the mother's, her arms were always open to soothe and comfort him.

She had made him what he was, but she had not meant to do it; she had not been wise enough to see that such awful possibilities lay in the cheerful, healthy-minded young man. Confident in her own powers, her plan had been that when, after one desperate plunge he came to the surface, he should, feeling himself unfit to go back and try for another chance with Viola, then turn to her. She meant to comfort him, win a certain degree of affection on the rebound, and have for her pains a few happy months at least.

She had reckoned without one factor in his nature—strength. Having decided to go to the bad, he went, each plunge taking him deeper and more hopelessly under, bleeding him of his self-respect, filling him with a kind of desperate indifference that was dreadful to see.

Maggie Penrose did not even have her few happy months. She suffered horribly. But no matter what he did, she stuck to him without one instant's wavering. She abided faithfully by her bad bargain. And for this faithfulness he came to have for her a queer kind of respect, even while he failed to understand it.

"Why don't you chuck me?" he often asked her, and in answer she gave him the simple truth: "Because I love you, Sandy."

So as the years passed, and his love of spirits took a firmer hold of him, she—the woman who had not deserted him—became of supreme importance in his poor failure of a life. He came gradually to attribute to her many virtues that

were not hers ; as he learned more and more to distrust everybody in the vile world, he learned to set her apart as The Woman who could be trusted.

To Syd and to her he clung, the sole spars out of his miserable, self-inflicted shipwreck.

During the six weeks every summer that Syd spent with him, always in France, he never touched a drop of spirits, and devoted his every moment to the boy, who, of course, never knew what kind of a man his splendid, rather silent brother had grown to be.

As time went on, the yearly period of teetotalism became a time of torment to Sandy. He missed the effect of the spirit he now took in such great quantities. Night after night, while Syd slept, he struggled with the horrible craving. Sometimes it took the form of a hardly to be conquered faintness ; sometimes a pain in his stomach nearly maddened him ; oftenest of all a keen, enforced visualization of his ruined life drove him to a frenzy for the one thing that would deaden it.

The man suffered real torture ; but he conquered. And probably the yearly six weeks' abstemiousness saved his health.

But Maggie dreaded Syd's visits, for each one was succeeded by a period of unspeakable horror to her. " Making up for lost time," he called it in dreary jest.

His terrible heritage, nursed by his own will, would have killed him long since but for his brother and Maggie. Her efforts to save him were not altogether a failure, for he was a kind man by nature, and her misery grieved him.

" All right ; I'll be good now for a fortnight," he would say occasionally, and then they would walk or drive, or go for a journey somewhere ; and he, during the time, confined himself rigorously to whatever amount of brandy he had decided to allow himself.

These periods were her only reward for what she had done, and they were, at best, a tragic one. She loved him, and she had wrought his ruin. That was the thought that never left her.

One thing was spared her. She was not a very jealous woman, and if she had been, the women in Sandy's life would hardly have stirred her jealousy ; they were so utterly indifferent to him, he so soon tired of them, so frankly despised them.

"You are the only woman in the world I care a rap about," was a phrase of his that was music to her. And it was the truth.

So when he found, through the hazard of a fallen letter, what the only woman for whom he cared a rap had done, his blaze of scorn and hate passed over like a fire, burning and blackening her.

And when he had gone, she was alone in the waste made by her own hands.

She was to be pitied, in spite of all that she had done, for no punishment equals the horror of solitary confinement; and she was thus condemned to solitary confinement of the soul until she should die.

And he, in his rage, plunged lower and lower into the mire, until, as Lise had told John Dingle, he was always drunk late in the evening, and, indeed, sometimes all day as well.

Even Syd was forgotten.

He had now no friend. All the world was evil and false, and only brandy made him forget.

The poor Lise, as he called her, was not bad for one of her kind and when he allowed her to hang the walls of his big *salon* with pink brocade, and to cover her own meagre little body with the stuffs she coveted, she was content. It pleased her to be called "Madame" by the *concierge*, and, *ma foi*, for her part, she was not afraid of a drunkard. There were worse things. Besides, she loved Jules, the dear little Jules who painted; and Alexandre was kind to Jules—

John Dingle came to the Place of the Green Tree like an angel from heaven to deliver Sandy from himself. And Sandy, waking the next morning quite sober, knew it.

Sharrow was to be his, and he must arise and go out to a place of purification to make himself fit to touch the meanest stone of the old place.

Gravely he told Lise that he was leaving; gravely he gave her money, kissed her little round forehead with surely the most innocent kiss placed there since she had left her mother's arms; gravely he got rid of his house, and his servants, all but his valet Anderson, an Englishman he had picked up in Hong Kong.

And then he pondered. Where he should go, how he could clean himself.

One afternoon he went out to the Forest of Vincennes, to walk in the wood. He could get no drinkable brandy

there, and he would be alone. He had a great desire for solitude.

Evening came, and he still walked among the great trees, unable to come to any decision.

Old Dingle had returned to England, bearing Sandy's promise to be at Sharrow within six weeks. The six weeks were to be passed in pulling himself together. But where? And how?

Presently he came to a small chapel in the wood; a little grey building filled now with darkness in which glowed only the red light before the altar.

Tired with his long tramp, Sandy went in and sat down. It was a very humble place; the wooden Christ on the Cross was hideous, and needed fresh paint; the windows were of plain glass. But it held one vital, interesting thing; a man kneeling before the altar.

The man was praying, and did not look up. Sandy watched him. It never occurred to him to pray too, but the man interested him.

And when the long prayer was over, Sandy followed the man, who, he saw, was old and work-worn, out into the gathering dusk under the great trees.

The wind had come up, and the trees were all in motion, the motion that makes them such vital things.

Sandy spoke to the man, whose blackened face and hands proclaimed him to be a charcoal-burner, and asked his way to the nearest village whence he could return by train to Paris, and as it was the man's own way they walked on together.

"I saw you in the church."

"*Oui, m'sieur.*"

"It must be good to pray."

The old man shot a suspicious glance at him.

"But, yes——"

They went along for several minutes, and then Sandy said:

"Look here, my friend, I am in trouble. Advise me."

"I? Monsieur laughs at me."

"No. Listen! I have been very bad. I have wasted the years of my life that should have been the best; I have wasted my youth, my health, my brain. I have given up my country, my family, my home. And now—I am sorry. What shall I do?"

The old man stopped. The gentleman spoke French like a Frenchman, but ' was not French. Therefore the chances were that he was *Irish*. Surely this was a strange question to ask an old peasant?

"Tell me," Sandy said gently. "You are old, and you are fresh from your prayers. What shall I do?"

The trees were barer here, and beyond their great branches the stars shone in the sky. The tiny village—a little congeries of charcoal-burners' huts—was not far distant, and lights were in the windows already.

At last the charcoal-burner spoke.

"I am an ignorant man, sir—I can't read or write—I can but burn charcoal. But I come from Brittany, and there we love the Holy Church and our Blessed Lady. I think if I were you, and I wanted to be good again, I should make a pilgrimage to some holy shrine, and there I should pray——"

"Yes—I see. And where? To what shrine?"

"Well—I am poor, I could not go far. But you—you are rich, sir, you could even go to Rome!"

And thus was set in Sandy's brain the germ of the idea of his rehabilitating pilgrimage. His ends were hygienic, rather than religious; the long tramp would harden his muscle, help him to master his craving for spirit, teach him to sleep and to eat again. The air would refresh him, the rough fare in the country inns would heal his outraged digestion.

And the solitude among ever-changing scenes would regain for his mind the balance it needed.

He would walk to Rome. It should be his penance and his pilgrimage.

CHAPTER XLVI

AND the pilgrimage had done its work. The man who spent the next few days in Rome with his brother was not the man who had left England nearly ten years ago; he was gone, and not even the miracle-worker of Galilee could bring him back to life. But that other man, he of Paris, lay in his grave as well, and this Sandy knew, and for this he gave thanks.

The spirit within the grave, quiet man, with the distinguished carriage and the sad mouth, was a new spirit created by the mystery of God from the other two, and as yet he was a stranger to the man in whose body he had come to live.

Syd, who was bubbling over with the joy of his twenty years, treated Rome as something he himself had discovered, and to his brother he proudly displayed it.

Together they visited the galleries, the churches, the wonderful gardens that are perhaps the best of all.

And Sandy listened kindly to the boy, never impatient of being told, hastily or incorrectly, things which he himself knew all about.

It mattered nothing to him when Syd attributed to some Pope Clement the crime or the good deed of one of the Alexanders, but the boy's enthusiasm, his air of utter happiness mattered everything to him.

Sandy submitted, too, with the greatest patience, to the amused snubs youth has always in affectionate readiness for the elder members of its family.

Sandy, admiring marble pillars and gold ceilings, was told with a shriek of horror that he must reform his taste.

"It's awful, Sandy, really awful!" the young purist cried. "Dear old chap, you *mustn't* like the rococo!"

And Sandy, feeling like an old man, smiled and promised. He remembered Syd's childish love for the yellow satin

drawing-room, but he said nothing. His own taste in pictures had always been deplorable, and it had not improved. The only interest lay for him in the story it told, so he found real (but reprehensible) pleasure in some of the seventeenth and eighteenth century historical paintings that plaster the walls of Rome.

He liked soldiers in armour rushing through a break in a wall, clambering, with the indifference of blood-thirstiness, over dead men, or hewing each other down.

He liked the classical narrative paintings—the old Æneas borne from the flames of Troy by the man who subsequently boasted of the deed; Hector dead on his shield, and the rest,—miles and miles of stories in colour.

And over his taste Syd groaned in comic, but quite serious, dismay. It seemed to him of the utmost importance that Sandy's taste should be reformed, and, cheerfully, with the beautiful courage of youth, he set himself to the task. Unconsciously he showed his brother how very vast he felt to be the difference between their ages.

"Of course it's cheek," he would say, "a kid like me telling a man like you these things, but—well, you see, I have always been so fond of artistic things."

And Sandy would smile his grave smile that never seemed to touch his eyes, and answer: "Fire away, oh, youth, thy servant heareth."

Once Sandy was taken to lunch with a friend of the boy's.

"She's a dear old thing—awfully keen on art, and all the things that really matter—and very good-looking, too," Syd added, with his air of extreme sapience, "for a woman of her age. You'll see."

And what Sandy saw, when they reached the Duchess's villa, his eyes prepared to receive an old lady, was a woman of rather more his own age, lavish as to war-paint and, moreover, a woman, with whom he himself had once had an intense though fleeting intimacy.

Not in the least discountenanced, she greeted him with pleasure, and informed him that his baby brother was the only real love of her life.

She added that he, Sandy, had changed, had grown unjustifiably old, and that she was delighted to see him even though he did remind her of times antediluvian.

Then as they ate their excellent *risotto* with truffles, she favoured him with a brief but picturesque account of her

first husband's death, and her marriage with the duke, which absent gentleman was, she declared, something over a hundred years old.

"And you?" she resumed, with a vivacity which seemed to Sandy to be somewhat lugubrious; "you are married, of course? Have you children?"

Syd burst out laughing. "Sandy married; good Lord, no!" he declared with authority, seizing the conversational helm. "Imagine old Sandy with a wife and family!"

The Duchess, who had heard of the turn in the wheel of her old friend's fortunes, turned her eyes, which were rather glassy and swollen under their pencilled brows, on the young man.

"Touch wood, my friend," she said with a little smile; "your brother is still young!"

Syd was silent for a moment. "Oh, I see," he said at length. "I hadn't thought of that. Until you *do* marry, Sandy, I am your heir-apparent, ain't I?"

Sandy nodded. "You are."

He said no more, and the Duchess changed the subject.

After lunch Syd went into the next room, on a sign from his hostess, to look at some odd engravings she had *déniché chez un vieux fourbe d'antiquaire*, and Sandy and the lady smoked their cigarettes on a small terrace overhanging the umbrageous and be-statued garden.

"You were surprised to see me, eh?" she began, settling herself on her chaise-longue.

"No."

"But he did not know I knew you—I did not tell him."

"To tell the truth," Sandy returned, not without malice, "I had clean forgotten you."

"Bear!"

"Yes, I am a bear. And, my dear Duchess, bears protect their cubs."

"Ah! I thought you had no—cubs?"

"Syd is my cub. Let me see—I am three-and-thirty; you are two or three years older than I. Syd is twenty. So, remember, *Belle Dame aux Mains Blanches*," he added very gently, using his whilom pet-name for her, "hands off."

"You remember the old name, at all events—Sandy. However, you wrong me. I may not be very good, but I have some sense of humour. And as you rightly, though

rudely, say, I am thirty-five years old, and your cub is twenty. Even if he were attracted by me, which he really isn't, I should not make myself a laughing-stock by responding to his infantile ardour."

"Good."

After a pause, during which he sat in unconcealed abstraction, she asked a question which, although she did not know it, touched the matter occupying his thoughts.

"And the boy is your heir?"

"Yes."

"Until you marry, my friend, remember that——"

In spite of her multi-coloured past, her paints and dyes and crayons, she was a kind woman, and presently, as he continued to sit there smoking in silence, she added: "Don't let him learn to regard himself as your heir, *Sandro mio*—it would be cruel."

He looked up, recognizing the real good-will in her words.

"But he is my heir, Maddalena; I shall never marry."

It was a strange thing that for all his love for Syd, the idea that his great good fortune was to descend on the boy had never before occurred to him.

Probably because he was mentally as well as physically ill when the news came, and because the subsequent weeks had been passed in a fierce struggle to retrieve himself, the only thought he had had regarding the boy was that he could now see him again and be with him.

Ironic it was that the tremendous importance of what he could now give his brother should have dawned on him as the result of a word uttered by this woman with whom his brief *liaison* had almost completely died from his memory.

Sharrow was his, but he was no longer fit for it; his young enthusiasms, his young ambitions, were gone; gone, too, the very power of rejoicing in having for his own the place he had so deeply loved.

This had been the sad refrain of his thoughts during his long tramp southwards. And, when the fierce craving for spirit came over him it had been his strongest temptation. Sharrow had come too late. He could be no good to it in his deep unworthiness; it could no longer make him happy.

Once, in a little inn in the St. Gothard Pass, his enemy had so nearly worsted him that he had a glass of rough, cheap brandy poured out, and was about to pour it down his

longing throat when his eyes fell on his ring. "*Ce que Sharrow possède, Sharrow garde.*"

With an oath he flung the stuff, for lack of a better place, on the floor.

Sharrow was his now. He would keep it.

But now, sitting there, looking into the sunlit cypresses in the Duca de Roccagliano's garden in Rome, a faint stirring of the old feeling came to him: the Sharrow Feeling—the beauty, and mystery, and coolness of the old place. Starting, mentally, to catch it, it flew away like a gay butterfly and was lost.

But he had felt it flutter; it still lived within him, and it might come back.

He rose. "Forgive my being rude—I was always rude, you know—you used to say so. But I must go. There is something I must tell my brother."

She held out her hand. "Very well. Something has happened to you—something mental. Come to see me again before you go. And—I have not congratulated you yet, but I am *very* glad for your good fortune."

He held her hand in his for a moment. "I am sorry I misjudged you about my brother," he said. "You are very attractive, you know—"

Then he and Syd walked away in the pleasant autumn sunshine back over the bridge of St. Angelo, behind St. Peter's, and up the long, winding road among the trees towards the villa where the boy was living with friends.

On the little plateau in front of San Pietro in Montorio, Sandy, who had been very silent, stopped.

Syd, whose French blood predominated much more than Sandy's did in him, had slipped his arm through his brother's and, thus linked, they stood looking down at the view that rarely is the most beautiful view of a great city in the whole world.

"Syd."

"Sandear?"

Syd, as he spoke, hastily pulled off his hat, bowing to an old man dressed in black that gave him, in some subtle way, the air of being connected with the Catholic Church, and a girl, evidently his daughter.

"That's Don Ramon Suarez, Sandy," Syd explained, with a touch of pride in the acquaintance. "He was the lay secretary to the Archbishop of Barcelona, and it is his

'History of the Last Hundred Years of the Papacy' that caused all the talk and lost him his position. An awful brilliant man."

"Looks like an old rat."

"He does, rather! And his daughter plays the piano better than any woman I have ever heard, bar Teresa Carreño."

"Does she? Delightful! Syd, there is something I wish to say to you."

The boy again took his arm, and stood leaning affectionately against him as he spoke.

"Syd—do you understand what Sharrow is?"

"Rather! Awfully jolly old house, and lots of money, I suppose?"

Sandy sighed. He remembered his fruitless efforts of long ago—to convey to the boy what he himself thought about it.

"No, no; not that. It is hard to explain, but I will try, and you must be patient and listen."

"All right. I say, Sandear, if Señorita Maria Paz does come out as a professional pianist, perhaps we could give her a leg up in London. She really plays magnificently, and she's a nice girl, though not a bit pretty, poor thing!"

"All right, Syd, we'll try," returned Sandy patiently.

Then, standing there in the Roman sunshine, he made his declaration of faith.

"Just as the earthworm is a part of its clod of earth, and the clod of earth part of the field, and the field a part of the whole estate, so, it seems to me, that you and I, Syd, are a part of Sharrow. Not of the concrete place itself, of course, but of it as a system, an idea, a fabric. And just as the acres of Sharrow are a part of the kingdom, so the history of Sharrow is a part of the history of England. And so on, until we find ourselves, just you and me, two ordinary men, an integral part of the history of the world and the universe."

Syd listened, his beautiful face turned to the view below them.

"According to the Bible," he murmured, as if half asleep, "every man is a part of the universe."

"I know; but try to understand what I mean; I am not talking about souls. Well—England is full of rich men, and beautiful estates, and historical names. But many of

the historical names have changed hands over and over again, through deaths, marriages, and even through bargains with the Church or the King. There are, of the old original families who go straight back without a break to their founders, but very few left. And of these we Sharrows are one. We are, among the transferred names and the new peerages, a kind of Old Guard. That is one thing I want you to remember. We belong, you and I, to a kind of nobility among the nobility, and it is a great heritage."

"I'm a Socialist," murmured the boy, with a little smile.

"No, you're not, you're a Sharrow. But this isn't the— the best of it, Syd, this material side. There is a kind of feeling I can't express—it's like a scent, or a colour—a kind of realization of belonging to—to the Thing. Of—of being a crumb in the loaf, a leaf on the tree, a thread in the fabric. And it is at once the proudest and the humblest feeling in the world; it makes one long to die for the name, for the place—to give one's very blood for it."

"Do you feel like that, Sandy?" Syd spoke very seriously.

"Yes. And when I was young, there was in it a—a glory that I can't find words for. You are young now, Syd. And I want you always to remember this one thing. You are a part of Sharrow and—Sharrow will one day be yours. I shall never marry."

The boy turned, his eyes wet. "Nonsense, Sandear; of course you will! Why, you aren't old, you're really *quite* young," he added, with what was evidently a generous exaggeration of his own convictions. "You'll marry, and I'll be Uncle Syd!"

Sandy shook his head, smiling a smile that was intensely sad.

"No, I shall never marry. You must marry. You must marry while you are young—a good woman—and I will be Uncle Sandy."

Then they walked slowly up the hill.

CHAPTER XLVII

IN the arm-chair in which Sandy had, twenty years ago, first seen his great-uncle, his great-uncle received him when he came as his heir.

The old man, now the oldest peer in the kingdom, sat, wrapped in a wadded dressing-gown and several shawls, by a great fire, for he was always cold; he had been freezing, he himself was wont querulously to quaver, for years. And the afternoon was a bitter one in late November.

On a small table close to the arm-chair stood a clock with peculiarly large figures on its white face, a pair of tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles, a bottle and glass that were evidently wedded, and a coil of black rubber terminating in a kind of brass-lined petunia of giant growth.

Lord Sharrow was nearly blind, and even more nearly stone deaf. The only faculty old age had been powerless to injure in him was that of speech.

In a high peevish tone he now berated his nurse, a placid-faced woman in blue and white uniform, who sat by the window engaged, as if in unconscious irony, in knitting a garment such as, close on a century ago, some long since dead woman had knitted for the old man, for whose death she, the nurse, so patiently waited.

"The train must be in long ago—long ago," he fretted. "He hasn't come. I suppose he has stopped in London to amuse himself. He was always a selfish young dog. If he does not come soon, I won't receive him. Nurse, do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Lord Sharrow." Her shout reached him as a whisper.

"I think I'll have some of my tonic. I feel weak—very weak. No one realizes how weak I am," he whimpered, his claw-like hands twisted together piteously.

Holding a napkin carefully under his chin, she poured the medicine into his poor old mouth.

"It is only four now," she shouted into his better ear. "The train wasn't due till three-forty-five."

"Did they send the new car? Which car did they send?"

"They sent the new Mercédès, Lord Sharrow."

"Probably broken down."

None of the merciful dullness of mind often incident to great age had been granted to Alexander Sharrow. In the prison of his decaying faculties his mind, reduced in volume, but as keen as ever, struggled like a squirrel in its wheel.

He knew that he was old, and deaf, and half blind, and tied to his chair by his weakness. And for these things he despised himself, and raged at the powers that had created him to mock at him.

And Nurse Blake, with the sad serenity of her kind, went back to her chair, and began the second sleeve on the tiny garment she, in the rare moments of her freedom from the man who had so nearly ceased to be, was making for the man or woman who did not yet live.

After a while, Waters, now grey and old himself, came quietly in and mended the fire.

"The motor is coming up the drive, my lord," he said very loud.

"Damn you, speak up, can't you?"

"Give him his trumpet, Waters," suggested Nurse Blake.

"Mr. Sharrow won't be able to make him hear without it."

Waters again bellowed the news, and Lord Sharrow heard him.

"Good. Am I all right. Waters? Take away that medicine glass."

The man obeyed, switched on the electric light—installed in 1890—and left the room, the nurse following him quietly.

The clock ticked in the silence, and the old man waited. Sandy was coming. He had wronged Sandy, he had sent the boy whom he loved as much as he was capable of loving any human being, out into the wilderness, broken-hearted. And yet, on the extreme edge of the grave, he awaited the return of the man he had so dreadfully injured with a leap of the heart that brought a faint colour to his ancient cheeks.

When the door opened, and Sandy stood in it, his face

white, stern, yet in its very immobility showing how deeply he was shaken, the old man spoke :

" Well, come in, come in. I can't stand a draught."

Sandy closed the door.

Ten years ago, his old kinsman had been, though already ancient, yet a foeman worthy of his steel. There were things Sandy had wished to say on his return to the home of his fathers—things, the saying of which would have been a relief to his soul.

He had not forgiven his great-uncle, he had not forgiven Maggie Penrose ; he never would forgive them. This immutability of resentment was a part of his very being ; he had not created it, he was powerless, even had he so wished, to destroy it. It was like a rib of naked rock in his mental lands.

But unless this man who had destroyed him could be brought to know, even as his accomplice the woman knew, how his wrath would endure through all eternity, Sandy knew he would find no peace. He had come with words in his mouth, and the words fell back unspoken into his heart.

His enemy had, in his partial death, passed beyond his mark.

" How do you do, sir ? " he said.

" I am very well, Sandy, very well for a man of my age. Since Lord Balmarnock died, last spring," Lord Sharrow answered, with a *macabre* vanity, " I am the oldest peer of the realm ! But, come in—come in. Sit there, where I can see you. I—I have longed for you to come, Sandy." His voice broke.

The big man obeyed, sitting down in a little white chair he remembered well, and submitted, when his great-uncle had carefully fitted on his spectacles, to a prolonged scrutiny.

" Well, well, well. Just the same—just the same."

" No, sir, I am not the same."

" Hold your tongue ! I say you are. You are exactly," insisted the old gentleman with satisfaction, " what I was at your age ! "

Sandy was silent.

The interview seemed to him to be a mere painful travesty of the one he had expected. Another hope, and a very strong though not a very worthy one, was shattered—the hope of telling his great-uncle in plain English what he, his heir, thought of him. The phrases, appropriate to the

purpose, had been for weeks growing up in Sandy's mind, phrases bitter, curt and poignant—that one satisfaction, at least, should be his. And now, he knew, it never should.

Lord Sharrow had escaped his vengeance.

Presently the old man began to cry, beating his hands together with a little dry sound not unlike that of the scraping of autumn leaves.

"Oh," he moaned, "I am so old, so old!"

The nurse came in, and gave him a glass of port and water, crumbling bits of biscuit into his toothless old mouth.

"Your coming has excited him," she said to Sandy. "Now don't cry, Lord Sharrow. You must sleep now, and when you wake up, Mr. Sharrow will come back to you."

Sandy left the room without being noticed by the old man, and went downstairs. He was tired, mentally and physically. He felt as if he had been beaten all over.

Sharrow seemed to stand aloof, to frown at him. He was all unworthy to be even a leaf on its tree. It had come, as so many things in this sad world do come, too late.

CHAPTER XLVIII

ONE evening, a few days before Christmas, Mary Wymondham sat in her drawing-room in The Corner House making, with a great show of tissue paper, scarlet ribbon, and sprigs of holly, her Christmas packages.

It was a pleasant room, compounded of things given to her grandmother on the occasion of her wedding, seventy years before, and things bought by or given to her grandmother's son, Mary's father, when he married, in 1860 or thereabouts.

The carpet, a plain green one, was new ; but the chintz of the chairs and curtains had come from the Vicarage drawing-room, and had been much washed, and nearly as often mended.

Mary loved it, because she had known its absurd foliage diversified by parrots of tropical hue, ever since she could remember.

The room, which was rather large, had three windows, all looking on the lawn just within the green gate opening on to the road at the end of the village ; it was thus pleasantly light even in the winter, and now, at four o'clock, the red firelight from the big hearth was only just beginning to gain on its rival.

From a dark portrait opposite the fire-place, a lady in powder smiled down at the solitary woman as she worked with a big ivory paper-cutter and her scissors, folding the crisp white paper, cutting it with the paper-cutter into the desired size, then deftly making the packet, tying it with the ribbon, snipping the ribbon when she had made the bow, and with a deft touch inserting a sprig of holly under it.

"Six," she declared aloud, with satisfaction.

In her pleasant drawing-room, Mary Wymondham was a pleasant sight. She wore a very well-cut coat and skirt of

dark tweed, a silk shirt with a silk collar and a bright green tie, tied like a man's, the collar being held in place under the tie by a gold safety-pin—a thing not so usual then as it is now, and which gave her an air of peculiar neatness.

She had never, even as a young girl, been pretty, and now, at two-and-thirty, no one would have applied the word to her. Her dark face, with its alert brown eyes under heavy black brows, and its rather high cheek-bones, was too strong for prettiness, too irregular for beauty.

But as her natural impatience and high-handedness became softened by time, and the discipline that is the gift of Heaven to everyone who does not reject it, her face had gained something of gentleness that it had formerly lacked.

She was happy as she worked at her attractive little task ; and when, as happened once or twice, she smiled over one of her gifts, delightful dimples broke the surface of her smooth, brown cheeks.

" Eight ! "

The clock struck half-past four as she spoke, and at the same moment the garden gate clicked, and a man's footsteps came along past the window, crunching the gravel energetically.

Mary Wymondham glanced out, dropped a doll, whose legs showed an unregenerate desire for publicity, and going hastily to her writing-table, took a framed photograph from it, and was about to put it into the drawer. Then, as the door-bell rang, she shook her head, and set the picture back in its prominent place, and went back to the fire.

" Stuff and nonsense ! " she said, under her breath. " I'll do nothing of the sort. "

When her little parlourmaid ushered in her guest, Miss Wymondham held out both her hands to him with frank pleasure.

" How nice of you, Sandy ; I am delighted. Sally, let's have tea at once, please. "

The little maid, who was a Babbage of the " Sheep-shearers, " and a good friend of old Dingle's fat daughter, hurried away to Cook, full of importance. She knew all about Mr. Sandy, the new heir, and only the other day she had heard her great-uncle, John Dingle, singing his praises. They should, she decided, have muffins positively dripping with butter. And they did.

A plate, containing one of Sally Babbage's mute tributes to

his greatness, on his knee, Sandy sat by the fire, wishing with all his heart that he had not come.

He had been for weeks at Sharrow—he could not say “at home” even to himself—and for a fortnight had been trying to make up his mind to call on his old friend. And for a fortnight he had failed.

He had already seen Mary, once at the house when she came to see Lord Sharrow, who was devoted to her; and once in the village; and owing to her frank pleasure in seeing him, and her apparent forgetfulness of things that had gone before, the meetings had passed off in comparative comfort.

But in her own house, surrounded by the furniture from the Vicarage, he could hardly avoid speaking of old times; in common decency he must express regret for her father's death—and speaking of the father, who had always been a good friend to him, how could he avoid mentioning Viola?

Finally he had settled the problem in his own fashion; he would speak about the Vicar, and he would not speak about Viola. And if Mary didn't like it she must do the other thing.

So he had come.

Mary asked him questions in a way that suggested to him her potential excellency as a schoolmistress; questions clear, deliberate, to the point, about Lord Sharrow's health, about some cottages he had persuaded the old man to pull down, about some village tragedy.

And he answered her, his eyes fixed on his muffin which dripped, powerless to charm his appetite, in order to see as little as possible of the things that so called back to him the old days that were so much deader than Noah. He knew that the powdered lady was smiling at him with a slight divergence in her black eyes; in his boyhood he had called her the old girl with the squint.

On the table by Mary lay a pair of ancient silver snuffers that had held for him one of the strange inexplicable charms things sometimes hold for romantic children.

And beside Mary, a pile of books, dolls, stockings, shawl boxes of sweets, and other little gifts lay on a small bamboo chair covered with printed, pomegranate-coloured velvet, Vi's own chair it had been; a thousand times he had seen her, as a demure little girl, sitting on it.

“Have you seen the other Sandy?” Mary's voice awoke him with a start.

Yes. I went up to town on purpose last week. He is behaving splendidly, Mary, and so is his wife. It is awfully rough on them; they have twin boys, as I daresay you know."

"Yes. I had heard, of course. It's lucky she has money."

"Isn't it? Keith is all right in that way, too, Sandy tells me."

"Yes. It's a great pity he made that foolish marriage. Have you seen Paul?"

"No. What has become of him?"

Mary tied the ribbon round the package on her knees with a little jerk. "He is somewhere in Somersetshire. He is not married. I saw him once at a concert at St. James's Hall. He was quite very fat, although he's so young—and—his mouth was that queer. I never could bear Paul."

Mary laughed. "I thought you were too good to dislike anyone, Mary."

"And?" she retorted quickly, her brown eyes full of firelight. "I might be by a flash of temper as she looked up, slashing her scissors sharply together. "Am I such a bore as that?"

"Nonsense—you know what I meant. As to Paul, I quite agree with you. There was always something wrong about him." She bit his lip. What was he to do with a straggling little parson whose only real fault, so far as she knew, was that his mouth was too red?

And Mary felt that his own words had somehow had power to wound her. She said nothing, but her eyes softened as they bent over her work.

"Speaking of meeting people," she resumed presently, as she finally set his cup and untouched muffin on the tea-table, "I saw you, you know, at the Grand Prix this year."

"So Dingle told me."

"You were walking with—with some ladies; and I was in the Grand Stand, but I asked one of my party to take me down, and we looked for you for nearly an hour, but you had gone. I was so excited!"

"I remember. One of the ladies I was with fainted, and I had to take her home. Were you long in Paris?"

She hesitated. "About a fortnight."

And he knew that Viola had been there too.

Now Mary Wymondham, of course, knew quite well that there was some mystery connected with Sandy, and she had no intention of trying to solve it. But there was another matter which, as she lived in Sharrow, and he was in all probability to pass the rest of his days there, must, for the sake of the comfort of their future intercourse, be settled.

She pondered for a few minutes, and then, rising, went to the writing-table, and, bringing back the photograph that stood on it, handed it to Sandy.

"This is Viola's latest picture, Sandy. How do you like it?"

He was not a tyrant, nor a conceited man, but the tragedy of his life and Viola Wymondham was one and the same thing, and it came to him with a distinct shock that it could be touched upon. It seemed to him that her name should never have been mentioned to him; and here was Mary asking him what he thought of her latest photograph!

For a moment he did not speak because he could not, and Mary saw it. There was, to her, naturally enough, more than a little absurdity in his attitude, for she knew nothing of his life during the past ten years, and his grave face now wore none of the more obvious traces of dissipation. Fundamentally a very healthy man, the six weeks that had elapsed between the night when Dingle found him and the day of his return to Sharrow had changed him almost unbelievably.

He looked, now, a man older than his years, to be sure, and a man who had suffered—that was all.

But Mary, seeing this much, naturally did not attribute all the suffering, the traces of which she saw, to his boyish disappointment. Surely no man in his senses—she reasoned as she now waited for him to speak—could care for a woman, after ten years' separation, so much that he could not bear to look at her photograph!

To her healthy mind the idea was monstrous, and she was about to set Sandy down as a *poseur* when he rose, the photograph still in his hand.

"It is a beautiful picture," he said, stammering a little. "I hope Viola is well?"

As he said the words there flashed through her mind the scene in the Vicar's study when Lord Sharrow made his famous apology. "A beautiful woman, sir—a beautiful woman," the old man had said.

And Sandy had said : " A beautiful picture."

He laid the photograph down on the table.

" Well, I must be off," he added in his usual voice. " My great-uncle always wants to see me before he goes to bed——"

" How is he ? "

" Very feeble. Turner says he can't live for more than a few weeks. I hope with all my heart he doesn't, poor old man."

Mary nodded as they shook hands. " I hope so, too. He will die happy now that you have come home."

Sandy did not answer, and after a moment took his leave.

When he had gone, she cleared away her odds and ends of paper and ribbon, and set her room in order.

" I hope he will come often," she said aloud ; " but he won't."

CHAPTER XLIX

SYD came at Christmas, and to Sandy's great happiness the boy seemed to have taken Lis sermon on Sharrow to heart more than the older man had ventured to hope he would.

"I—I think I *almost* know what you mean by the Feeling, Sandy," the boy said, as they came downstairs after half an hour with the old lord. "Even the old boy upstairs—awful and rather sickening as he is, is—a leaf on the tree. And when he falls off—then there is you."

"And you."

"Yes, and me. When I came into the great hall this morning and saw the old armour that *they* used to wear, it—well, it gave me a queer kind of sensation down my spine. I hope," he added more thoughtfully than Sandy had ever heard him speak, "that it is not just because it is going to be mine some day—and my son's."

"No fear of that. It's—it's that you are growing older. You must read the books I used to love—and if you like," he continued a little shyly, "I'll tell you all I can remember about the house itself—"

But Rome had evidently developed a new strain of poetry in the boy; he showed a fondness for being alone, and as he wandered about the house, learning to know it, as he told his brother, his large eyes were dreamy. Sandy was more delighted than he would have believed himself capable of being about anything.

He gave Syd the Tower Room, in which hung his old cricket bat and his favourite pictures.

"Ben and I used to sit here and talk by the hour," he said on the occasion of his first visit to his brother in his new kingdom. "You remember Ben Frith?"

"Of course; how is he?"

"I don't know. I—I have lost him." On hearing his own words Sandy tried to laugh. "I mean to say that I have not seen him since that time at St. Hubert—neither seen nor written to him."

He could not tell Syd that on the occasion of Ben's coming out to see him *à l'improviste*, having got his address from Mrs. Sharrow, he had not welcomed the gentle intruder, and he had been so unlike his old self that Ben had gone away hurt and angry.

Later, Ben had written, but his letter came at a time when Sandy threw his post into the fire every day without opening it.

Sandy stood by the window from which he had pointed out to Ben the break in the trees under which the Wymondham girls must pass when they went for their walks. The past was so vivid to him at that minute that even Syd seemed a phantom.

With an effort he collected himself, and returned to the fire. It was five years since he had seen Ben, he would write to him, he said, sitting down and lighting a cigarette, and invite him to Sharrow.

And Ben came.

He seemed smaller than before, and he was very shabby, but he was still happy in his unclamorous way; London made him happy, and books, and a potted hyacinth, and a pair of new boots, and half a dozen oysters with a bottle of chablis.

He had made no career for himself; his book of London verses had never been written; he earned a very small pittance by doing research work under his father for the British Museum. His father had married again—a most surprising thing—and the three, and a little girl named Marygold, whom even now Ben, in his absent-mindedness, called his niece instead of his sister—still lived on in the old house.

"We are all going to pieces quite gently and noiselessly," he explained; "it is the only house in London where nothing is ever renewed. The bath-towels were the last thing to give out—we use ordinary towels for our baths now, and they serve us very well, only it takes one hours to dry oneself; when they go I daresay we'll have to put on our clothes without drying ourselves, and then we shall die of pneumonia, and that will be the end of us."

He rubbed his thin hands together, and seemed quite pleased with the prospect.

"But what's your stepmother like, Ben?"

"Beads. Beads all through."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"She's artistic, and wears one-piece frocks made of flannel, with silk embroidery at the throat and wrists. And she adorns herself with beads, long chains of 'em. You know the kind."

"But why don't she buy bath-towels and things?"

"Serena? Bless your heart, *she* has no money to buy bath-towels," elucidated Ben with the greatest calmness. "She's a Bhuddist."

Ben had forgiven Sandy without a word of reproach, without even a question, and Sandy was deeply grateful to him. Ben's life lay open as a book to his friend; it apparently never occurred to the little scholar that Sandy's book should not be closed to him.

And closed it was, and locked with a key, and the key was thrown away, Sandy thought, for ever.

Even had he been able, without pain to himself, to speak of the things he had done and seen during that last decade, he could not have mentioned them to Ben.

There was about the shy, rather ridiculous-looking little man a kind of purity that a worse man than Sandy would have spared.

Once, Sandy, in the middle of one of his bad nights, went into Ben's room and ruthlessly waked him.

"I say, Ben, get up and talk to me, for God's sake!"

Ben sprang out of bed as if the house had been on fire. He was an absurd sight, with his skinny, yellow legs, and his old-fashioned night-shirt trimmed with narrow red braiding—the work of the Bhuddistic Serena.

"All right, old chap," he returned, rubbing his eyes; "what's wrong? Anybody ill?"

"No; but—I can't sleep, and—and I don't want to be alone."

"Right." Ben pulled on his trousers, wrapped his yellow satin eiderdown round him, and, sitting cross-legged on his bed, waited.

To his surprise Sandy began talking very rapidly, with an unusual flow of words, about politics. He was, he declared, an out-and-out Unionist; he damned one minister,

laughed at another, predicted the immediate downfall of another.

Ben listened open-mouthed. He had never before known Sandy to show the slightest interest in politics.

Presently he ventured a remark that showed his utter ignorance as to whether the Prime Minister of the day was a Liberal or a Unionist, and Sandy laughed a nervous laugh that gradually turned to his normal one, and seemed to calm him.

"Poor old Ben—get back into bed, I was a brute to disturb you, but you don't mind, do you?"

"Of course I don't, and—I wish you'd give me a few more tips about these—these matters of public interest."

"No; to bed you go. I'm all right now—good-night."

But Ben lay a long time wondering what it had all meant.

The next morning at breakfast Syd looked up from his letters, and exclaimed suddenly:

"I say, Sandy, you *do* look seedy. Look as if you'd been on a terrific bust."

Sandy, who was pouring himself a cup of black coffee, knocked the silver coffee-pot against his cup with such force that the delicate porcelain shattered and the coffee splashed on the table-cloth.

"Don't talk rot, Syd—I have not been on a 'terrific bust'—you know quite well that I never drink a drop of any kind of spirits—and I wish you wouldn't make vulgar jokes—"

The boy stared. "Sorry, old man—you *do* look bad, though; doesn't he, Ben?"

"Very. If it were me I'd have a stiffish brandy-and-soda," prescribed Ben with a knowing air. "You must have got a chill, Sandy."

But Sandy declared himself to be perfectly well, and shortly afterwards went out for a long ride.

"Nervy," Syd explained, "awfully nervy, the dear old boy. My uncle is very trying, and I rather think Sandy hates him."

"Nonsense. He used to be very fond of him."

"I know," answered the boy with his new air of thoughtfulness; "but I've seen Sandy look at him *once* or twice as one looks at a rat in a trap—or—at someone who is behind bars, but who is safe from one *only* because of the bars—"

"I wonder! At all events, if it's his doing, it must soon cease—he can't possibly live much longer. And then—"

Syd nodded. "Yes. Then it'll be Sandy's turn. I say, Ben, did you know he was never going to marry?"

"No; who says he isn't?"

"He did. He told me that as he wasn't going to, I was his heir, and that—I must. Marry, I mean."

Ben puffed at his pipe, and ruffled his nearly impalpable hair into a kind of aureole.

"That's a pity. He ought to marry. Too good to waste."

"Yes, he is. But—as long as he *won't*—" The boy hesitated, blushing a little.

"As long as he won't," Ben agreed, eyeing him with grandfatherly solicitude, "you must. All right, Syd. You might marry my little ne—sister. She's four, and very pretty."

"Pooh!" returned Syd, feeling his moustache; "she's years too young."

CHAPTER L

ONE evening early in February, Syd asked Sandy to come to London with him for a concert that was to be given the next day at the Bechstein Hall by Señorita Maria Paz Suarez.

"Me? My dear boy, I can't tell 'God save the Queen' from the 'Marseillaise.'"

Syd laughed. "Well, as she isn't going to play either the one or the other, that doesn't much matter. Come along, Sandy; it will please her awfully."

Sandy, who lay almost invisible in a huge leather chair in the smoking-room, crossed his legs.

"I don't know that I care very much about pleasing Spanish pianists—do you, Ben?"

"Not a rap. Nothing is of profounder indifference to me," declared Ben, "except possibly Rooshians."

Syd, who stood on the hearthrug, shook his head impatiently.

"Nonsense! They are awfully poor, and she is doing it to help her father educate her two sisters; and I—well, I told Don Ramon I'd try to get some people to go."

"That's different," observed Sandy. "Ben shall go."

"All right, Kid," Ben agreed. "I will, I don't mind at all, and I'll take Serena and Marygold. They'll like it." After a moment he added: "I rather like piano-playing; but little concerts like this always make me want to cry. The many seats that are always empty; the day clothes of the audience, of whom many are obviously 'paper'; the gloom—for it invariably rains; the nervousness of the performer's mother and sisters and friends. The very piano looks lonely, as if it had wandered in under the impression that its pals, the drums and the fiddles, were to be there; and then, when the *débutante* comes on, her knees shaking, her hands, one

knows, as cold as ice—*my* knees shake, and I have to blow my fingers to keep 'em from freezing. Bah! it's a dreadful form of amusement."

"You won't see Maria Paz's knees shaking," Syd laughed, "nor her hands getting blue."

Out of the depths of his comfortable chair Sandy's head emerged, slowly, like a watchful snail from its shell.

"Why not?" he asked.

Syd laughed again. "Because you won't. You can't see what doesn't exist, you know, and she is as brave as a little lion. I never knew a gamer girl. Besides, she knows she *can* play. Her little thin hands are like a bird's claws, but they are strong"—he paused, with a thoughtful sip of his soda-water—"as a baboon's."

Sandy dropped comfortably back into the shadow. "Sounds a fascinating lady," he said, "with her claws as strong as a baboon's hands."

"Yes, Syd," joined in Ben, "better be careful; these languorous Spaniards, you know, are dangerous."

Syd smiled, a peculiar, thoughtful smile. "I think," he said slowly, "that Maria Paz Suarez is as ugly a woman as I ever saw in my life. She knows it, too."

"Poor girl!" said Sandy, striking a match whose light showed a power of sympathy on his face. "A dreadful handicap for a woman of her *métier*. I saw her in Rome, Syd; I remember her father, but didn't notice her."

"No—one wouldn't. Well, she is as thin as a rail; her skin is sallow, her eyes little and queer-set; her mouth is—oh, *very* ugly, though her teeth are good, and she has no more figure than a lead pencil."

"*Poor* thing!" Ben looked ready to weep as he polished his spectacles furiously with his handkerchief; "it's a shame that a girl should ever be so utterly without charm. Poor soul! she's doomed to failure in London, then. She'd stand a far better chance if she played rather badly, and had beautiful hair, or—or pretty eyes."

He was really painfully sorry for the girl he had never seen. Pity rose to a passion in him.

But Syd shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, she's not a monster, you know, Ben. And she plays like an angel, I think."

Sandy rose. "Well—now to bed; I'm dead with sleep. We can take the eleven-forty-five, have plenty of time for

lunch, and then we'll go and support the claw-handed gorilla."

"I'll send a wire to Serena," added Ben, "and I can get one or two men to go, if you like, Syd."

They went slowly upstairs, parting at Ben's door.

"It's awfully good of you two," Syd said; "poor Don Ramon will be awfully grateful."

When, the next afternoon, the three men watched the *débutante*, as she settled herself at the lonely-looking piano, Ben whispered:

"You're a slanderer, Syd; she isn't in the least like a gorilla."

"Shut up, Ben!" retorted the boy. "I never said she was."

A sallow-faced woman in a blue-white frock trimmed with cheap lace, her oily black hair arranged in the Japanese-looking aureole that in '95 was not so common as it is now, her flat, bony wrists boldly naked, the pianist was, in truth, very ugly, very unattractive.

When she was settled to her satisfaction, she swept her audience with a look that seemed to express a fierce loathing for every individual member of it, gave a little shrug, as if to herself she said: "Oh, well, I suppose I *must* play, little though you deserve it," and began the first number.

It was a Chopin *étude*, and she treated it as if it had been a mouse and she a cat; she positively tore its vitals out, with a malignance and a brilliancy that were strange. Her triumph, though Sandy and Ben were too ignorant to know it, lay in that the strangeness of her interpretation drew all attention away from her technique. One took for granted that her fierce little fingers were perfectly accurate, that her strength and her exactness were well balanced and unerring. One wondered only at the things the music meant, as she ripped it out of the patient ivory, holding up with malicious glee, it seemed to the interested audience, a rather unpleasant secret of the life of the late Frederic Chopin.

When she ceased playing, and sat immovable, her hands lying on her lap, Ben said under his breath: "Well, by Jove! she *can* play!"

Sandy said nothing, but sat with his brows pulled down until his eyes were nearly hidden.

The audience, which was of the entirely unappreciative

kind that so often falls to the lot of *débutantes*, clapped mechanically. At the back, some new-comers chattered about the rain, which, it appeared, was pelting.

"Well, Sandy," asked Syd anxiously, "wasn't I right?" Sandy turned, his face tender. "You were, Sydkin; I should say she is wonderful. And it's nice of you to take such an interest in the poor thing. I tell you what, we'll see what we can do to help her."

The boy's face glowed. "Thanks, Sandy. If you could know how they live, poor things! to keep the little sisters in a good convent school—I can't tell you how I respect Maria Paz."

Maria Paz, still with her air of fierce scorn of her hearers, now cast another pearl before them.

It was a pearl of exceeding delicacy and lustre this time, a thing so ethereal and whimsical that if the spirit that had inspired her rendering of the *étude* had still abided under her flat cashmere chest, it would have been trampled to pieces.

But the girl, apparently, had at her call a series of goblin controls, and this one was an elf of such exquisite cobweb lightness that even the wet people at the back stopped fidgeting and listened.

Her face had changed, too, and she seemed to be listening, with a sort of malicious mischief, to the whispered story her fingers were coaxing out of the piano.

It was thus with every number of her very well-chosen and varied programme.

And as her face changed, except in the one point of her settled scorn for the audience, with every number, Sandy watched her with interest.

She was unlike any woman he had ever seen; she was, as Ben had said, utterly without charm; she was ugly, and she was dressed as only a middle-class Spanish woman can dress.

But she had a strong personality, and it seemed to send out some tentacle or other which fastened on him.

There, too, was the knowledge that she sacrificed herself for the education of her sisters.

Sandy glanced at Syd; he understood and he sympathized strongly with the girl who had done, was doing, literally, those things which he would so gladly have done for his brother.

At the end of the concert, when two baskets of flowers had been handed up to Señorita Suarez, and the audience was leaving the room, Ben was stopped by a rather battered-looking man with a shining bald head and a reddish nose.

"Hallo, Frith! you here? I've just been talking to Serena. She looks very happy."

"She is, she's always happy. I say, Copley, it's a bit of luck meeting you! What about this girl, eh? I mean the pianist? Good, isn't she?"

"Have you been losing your heart to the dreamy Spaniard? The first sight of her is something of a blow, isn't it?" said the man, who was the accredited musical critic of a popular morning paper.

"She's a friend of a friend of mine. How is her playing?"

Copley's face grew suddenly serious. "I'll tell you, Ben, in my humble opinion the girl'd be a very great artist, but for one thing."

Sandy and Syd stood listening, with rather disproportionately eager faces.

"But for *what* one thing?" Ben insisted.

"This. She *isn't*. A great artist, I mean. She's got a really extraordinary technique, like a man's, nearly—and she's as clever as the Old Nick. But she's—she's jeering all the time. I firmly believe," added the oracle, who really was a very conscientious man, and as he himself would have said, never lied about his own job, "that she knows *herself* that she's a—a kind of humbug, and she is laughing at herself and at everyone she can fool the whole time."

"I beg your pardon," Syd interrupted, coming nearer, "you are writing up the concert, aren't you?"

"I am."

Ben introduced them, and Syd went on: "Well, you see, I know her, and—you are wrong. She is most serious about the music, and does not *blaguer* it at all. It's—it's her whole life."

Copley, who looked, with his flattish nose and upturned moustache, rather like an unsuccessful satyr, studied the boy's ardent face in silence for a moment.

Then he said rather gently: "Ah, well—if you *know* her! And, as you do, here's a word of advice, Mr. Sharrow.

Whether the lady is in earnest or not has, of course, less than nothing to do with her success or failure as a pianist in London. Serious musicians have been known to fail," he added dryly. "But if she wants to make money, you get your mother or your sister to tell her how to dress, and to make her wash the oil out of her hair—a female Liszt would starve in London, if she was a frump."

When Sandy and Ben and Syd reached the door, it was pouring, and they waited while a poor wretch, far gone in consumption, fetched them a cab.

"That's very good advice of your friend's, Ben," Syd said, his brows knit thoughtfully. "Her clothes are appalling. She has to make 'em all herself, poor soul! but the Duchess says her bad taste is a real gift. I say, Ben, perhaps your stepmother could give her a tip."

Ben whistled. "You've never seen Serena! Ah!" he added, as a thin woman in a dark-green dressing-gown buttoned up the back, over which she wore a man's mackintosh coat, came vaguely towards them, as if not quite sure whether they were phantoms. With one hand she was twisting a chain of bright blue beads that hung round her neck.

The child with her was charming, and stood holding Ben's hand affectionately as he introduced Sandy and Syd.

Serena was delighted to meet them. Henry had lost his goloshes, and she was sure she didn't know on earth where he had left them. Her smile, though vague, was intensely sweet, and her eyes were like those of a very young girl.

"But," she went on, retrieving Marygold's hand, as the derelict returned with the cab, "he hadn't caught cold after all, so it didn't matter."

She refused Sandy's offer of a lift, not by saying she would not accept it, but by smiling, murmuring something, and disappearing in the crowd.

"Father thinks she is so practical," Ben said with a chuckle. "They are beautifully happy."

On their way to Sandy's club, Sandy asked Syd if he had sent Miss Saurez any flowers.

No; Syd had forgotten. "Better send her some now, it will please her. Tell the man to stop at Solomon's."

And when Syd had made his selection, Sandy ordered a second offering.

"No—I'll not send my card—no use in that," he explained to Syd, "as she doesn't know me; but it will please her, poor thing!"

"She will be," Ben added benevolently, "a much beflowered baboon."

CHAPTER LI

THE next morning Syd brought several newspapers into Sandy's room before the elder brother was up.

"I say, Sandy," cried the boy indignantly, "two of the papers don't even mention it, and the other one says——"

"Don't mention what?" yawned Sandy, who had had one of his bad nights, and was consequently sleepy and tired.

"The concert, of course. The *Standard* says: 'Miss Suarez possesses a fine technique, and we may hope to hear her again.' Now, isn't that beastly?"

"There are more than three morning papers in this town, my son. Tell Anderson to get the lot."

"Thanks, I will. But oh, they will be so disappointed. They had counted on a success, and it meant such a lot to them."

Sandy, partly because he had been really interested in the strange little Spaniard, and partly because it was one of his principles to try to turn his mind from brooding by applying it to a contemplation of the affairs of other people, roused himself and sat up in bed, his red hair ruffled, his eyes heavy with lack of sleep.

"Draw my bath, Anderson, will you? and then go out and get as many of the morning papers as you can."

The man did as he was bidden, and while Sandy splashed in the next room, Syd talked to him through the half-open door. The boy's sympathy pleased his brother.

Syd had always been a lovable boy, but he had been very difficult to stir; his imagination had seemed to refuse to kindle at any external torch; Sandy had never forgotten his vain efforts to make his brother love Sharrow as he did. And as Syd grew up, this indefinable aloofness had not left him. It could hardly be stigmatized as selfishness, for he

was warm-hearted and generous ; but he appeared to be of those people who must always act on an impulse from within their own souls, whose emotions no hand can stimulate into action.

Rome had done him good ; he was more sympathetic, made more of an effort to understand what other people were feeling ; he seemed to have lost a delicate shell he had hitherto worn, and to be more approachable. That he, a beauty-loving boy of twenty, should so champion the ugly woman he had likened to a baboon, seemed good to Sandy ; it showed real kindness.

Thus Sandy, as he shaved and dressed, and Syd, searching the papers in vain for any of the appreciation and praise he wanted for his friend.

" Poor Don Ramon ! " the boy mourned ; " he will be so sad."

" And she, too, of course."

" No, she will be very angry, and all the bones in her face will show," Syd said thoughtfully. " It's funny, Sandear, she is so ugly ; but her bones are really rather beautiful."

" Ben would say it's a pity she doesn't wear them outside, then. Eggs and bacon, Syd ? "

But presently, when they had finished breakfast, and gone out to visit Syd's tailor, their thoughts again went back to the poor foreigners whose welcome had been so meagre.

" Would she play in drawing-rooms ? " Sandy asked suddenly, to the surprise of the Alsatian tailor, who nearly swallowed a pin in his amazement over the totally irrelevant remark.

But Syd did not find the remark other than most *à propos*, for it nearly answered a thought of his own.

" I don't know. I should think she'd have to. They must live."

" I was wondering if Lady Hainault might engage her. She rather likes you, doesn't she ? "

Syd blushed a little. Lady Hainault was an old lady possessed of so many granddaughters and great-nieces, that any young man might blush at the thought of her.

Sandy, whom Ben had told what Syd had hinted about his matrimonial plans, laughed slyly. " The Freckled Barrington Twin is your favourite, isn't she ? "

" Shut up. Does that sleeve look all right to you, Sandy ? "

"Quite."

They went into the black, wet street, and stood looking at the gathering fog.

"I say, Sandy, I can't stand this! Think of those poor souls, who never even *saw* a fog before, sitting in rotten cheap lodgings reading those awful papers. I'm going to see them."

"Do. We'll lunch at the club at two, and then we can consult, and, if necessary (only if strictly unavoidable, mind), look up Lady Hainault. She is, I understand, visiting Sir John Barrington in Eccleston Square."

It did him good to chaff Syd; it did him more good to see the boy developing into a gentle-hearted man; and Sandy knew that his own future lay almost entirely in Syd's hands. When Syd married, his wife should be Sandy's daughter, his children Sandy's grandchildren. He saw nothing ridiculous in this idea; he felt very old, and Syd was far more like a son than a brother to him.

And the Freckled Barrington Twin, if the boy's fancy ever developed into anything more, would be very satisfactory as the wife of the heir to Sharrow; she was a tall, strong, ungainly child at present, barely seventeen, but she had beautiful shining eyes, and a mind like an open book. Her blood, too, was good.

His mind thus occupied with match-making, Sandy went back to his hotel for his umbrella.

On his table he found two letters, which had been sent on from Sharrow.

One was a bill, the other, which he read through with an unmoved face, was a wild appeal for forgiveness from Maggie Penrose.

"Can you *never* forgive me?" she wrote. "Is there no pity in you? Sandy, Sandy, I am punished enough. I don't ask for much—just write and say you forgive me, and will one day consent to seeing me sometimes as a friend. Send me just one word, 'yes,' that I may have some peace."

He tore it into many pieces, and dropped them into the waste-paper basket. Fool, to expect forgiveness from him!

And Syd, coming back, full of excitement, found his brother looking old and stern, as he had looked sometimes in Rome.

"Anything wrong, Sandy?" the boy asked. "No?"

Good. Well—it's just as I feared—the old man is in despair. They—they say such strange things in Latin tongues, don't they? I mean about God, and—the Madonna."

"Yes. And she—the girl?"

"*Furious.* Says all English are peeps—her English is so funny—and she will never play again. She will be a cook, or a crossing-sweeper, but never a pianist. I was so sorry! Their rooms are so *awful*, in an Italian hotel in Soho. And Spaniards are used to such beautiful cleanliness, you know; their little apartment in Rome was like a new pin. Ugh! it's awful." His young face was pale with sympathy. "I say, Sandy, I suppose you couldn't ask them to Sharrow for a few days? It seems to be the old man's pride that is so hurt, and that——"

Sandy hesitated. "I don't like asking people there. *He* is so very feeble."

"But he told you to treat the house as if it were yours, Sandear."

"I know." Sandy was silent a moment, then added: "All right, Syd, I will. You are right, it'll soothe the poor old man's pride; and they are quiet people."

The next day but one, Don Ramon Suarez and his daughter arrived at Sharrow.

"No?"

CHAPTER LII

SANDY, in spite of his interest in Maria Paz Suarez, saw but little of her during her stay. He was at that time extremely busy with various matters connected with the administration of the estate, his tasks being made the more difficult by the necessity of submitting each detail, as the work went on, to Lord Sharrow. The old man's mind, as his body grew more feeble, seemed to become clearer and stronger than it had been for some time past.

Every day, after working for several hours with the steward, Sandy was obliged to submit what he had planned to the old man for approval, and he was amazed at the nonagenarian's memory and tenacity of detail.

Wrapped in one or other of his gay dressing-gowns, Lord Sharrow sat in his great chair by the fire and listened as Sandy read aloud his notes. Then, extending a claw-like hand, the owner of the estate took the papers, put on his tortoise-shell spectacles, and with his eyes verified his ears, as if he mistrusted the absolute veracity of his ear-trumpet.

As a rule, Sandy's ideas pleased him, but occasionally he would take his huge blue pencil, and laboriously cross out a part of, or even everything he had read, and Sandy's work had to be done over again.

"I am not dead yet, you see," he used to say with his ancient chuckle. "It's marvellous what total abstinence and early hours will do for a man, eh, Sandy?"

And Sandy would bow gravely, and go his way. He had not forgiven his enemy, and made no pretence of having done so. Luckily, his great-uncle did not care a rush about his forgiveness.

Nurse Blake, remembering her patient's extreme impatience for his newly-discovered heir's arrival, once expressed

to that heir her surprise at Lord Sharrow's apparent indifference to him, now that he was there.

"He used to put himself into a fever, sir," she said once; "day after day it went on; where you were, why they couldn't find you, why you didn't come. Once he made himself very bad in the night, over the idea that you were dead. It was really quite painful—I was so sorry for him. And now that you are here——"

Sandy looked past her and out of the window, a little smile on his face.

"That's just it, Nurse; I *am* here. It was not the man he was fretting for, it was his heir."

And yet, as he walked an hour later, to Dingle's, to tell him that the morning's work had been in vain, and must be entirely done over again, he thought of his own words, and wondered.

Was it only that—that he was the heir?

He recalled a thousand things in the past that showed real affection for him on the old man's part; the ring he wore was a proof of this, the allowance that had been sent regularly to his banker's during the long years of his unbroken silence. And how many things had his great-uncle said to him, in his boyhood, that showed beyond a doubt how welcome he would have been, even then, as his heir.

"He *did* like me," Sandy declared under his breath, "even in spite of what he did. He was fond of me."

He had reached Dingle's beautiful little Georgian house, and as he rang the bell, he added, in silence, "Poor old man!"

Impersonally, through the medium of his brain, he could be sorry for his enemy in his weakness and extreme age, but, emotionally, he could never forgive what had been done to him.

And as the dull days slipped by like drops of rain-water on a window-pane, sliding almost unmarked in their similarity to each other into eternity, he began to wonder if the ancient man by the fire realized this

Sometimes, when their work was over, on the days when Lord Sharrow was, what he called "better," the two men would talk always about the thing that interested them so deeply: Sharrow.

There was a bit of meadow-land to the westward, close by

where Sandy had so long ago bought his first dog, and to the old and the young man the acquisition of these few acres was a matter of paramount importance.

"It would round it off, Sandy—just here it is, see?" Lord Sharrow said, bending over the coloured map that Sandy had spread before him, "round it off, and give us a clear forty thousand acres, we *must* have it."

Unfortunately, the owner of the coveted land was an enemy of the house. Many years ago there had been trouble connected with a right of way through a small wood belonging to his great neighbour, and he had not forgotten this.

Twice Sandy went to see him to try to persuade him to sell the meadows, and twice he failed. Farmer Murdoch would keep his meadows, because it pleased him so to do.

It was surprising to see how keen was Lord Sharrow's interest in these negotiations, and the vigour of his denunciations of the wrong-headed farmer.

But in spite of his mental alertness, the old man was failing fast, and gradually, Sandy saw, his mind began to give up its hold on every idea save the one that had, in spite of his badness, and through all his vicissitudes, been the ruling one of his life.

He failed to recognize Syd one day when the boy came in "to cheer the poor old dear up a bit"; and even Mary Wymondham, who had been a great favourite of his during the last few years, was met with a vacant nod.

Dr. Turner, old Gill's partner, told Sandy one day that the end could not be far off.

"The early spring days will do it," he said; "he will probably go out quite quietly, like a spent lamp. There's no more oil."

And yet the lamp occasionally flickered strongly for a moment, always at something connected with Sharrow.

Sandy was very gentle with the old man; his consciousness of his real relentlessness, his undying resentment for what the old man had done, made him a little ashamed, and lent to his manner a kindness that caused Mary Wymondham's fine dark eyes to look at him with a kindness even greater, for hers came from her heart.

She did not know why Sandy hated the old man whose name and honours he was to bear, and she asked no ques-

tions ; but in their slowly growing friendship there came to her the certain knowledge that it was so.

He greatly liked Mary.

Since the occasion of his first call, her sister's name had not been mentioned. This concession the strong-willed woman had seen to be necessary to the continuance of any sort of ultimate intercourse between them. To her, the necessity seemed absurd, almost an affectation, but, recognizing it, she accepted it, for to her the game was well worth the candle.

And he, relieved from his fear of hearing Viola spoken of, had gradually come to value the companionship of the lonely woman. She loved Sharrow, knew everyone, man, woman, and child, on the great estate, and was very helpful to him in his plans for the future. He could not, did not, attempt to tell her in what way he regarded his vast heritage ; he was prevented by a kind of shyness from even attempting to render articulate his deep feeling of responsibility, but he felt that she understood to a greater extent than anyone else. She was told of his continual disappointments, of how the old man would, at a stroke of his pencil, undo the work of hours. Her never interrupted friendship with the different tenants and villagers was invaluable to him. Very often he went to her to talk over his work.

Together they made plans for the new cottages Lord Sharrow had given him permission to build in place of those that had been torn down owing to sanitary deficiencies ; together they decided which of two farmers should be given the lease of a farm newly fallen vacant through a death. Her judgment, when unheated, was shrewd and just, and her personal knowledge of the people whose lives were so largely in his hands of the greatest help to him.

He asked her once why she had never married, and she told him, without embarrassment, her real reason.

" I suppose," she said, looking up from the map over which she was poring, " it is very great vanity, but—I have never met a man I could love."

He was not greatly surprised. There was in her a certain quality of fineness that set her apart from other women in his eyes ; she was obviously quite sufficient unto herself, although, so far as he knew, really full of the vanity she declared as her excuse for her celibacy. Her life, with its daily round of the small duties and small interests she loved,

seemed full enough for her, and the beautiful quiet of her old house at the edge of the village seemed a fitting atmosphere for her.

One day Doctor Turner mentioned Mary to him in a way which showed that everyone did not agree with him in his unquestioning acceptance of her old-maid-hood.

The two men were coming downstairs from the sick-room as Miss Wymondham went up to it, and as he reached the landing, the little doctor turned and watched her until she had disappeared.

"It's a great pity she won't marry the Vicar," he said, drawing on his shabby dog-skin gloves, which fastened with metal clips, and were troublesome in damp weather, owing to rust.

"The Vicar! Does Pendleton want to marry her?"

"Of course he does. Always has, ever since he or anyone else can remember."

Turner struggled into his brown greatcoat, and took up his hat. "But she won't; never will, I suppose. It's a pity. That woman," the little doctor added, "ought to be a mother."

"So ought every woman."

"Not a bit of it! That's just where you're wrong. Why, if two of 'em who have no right to, and persist in doing it as regular as clockwork every year, weren't waiting for me, I could prove the fallacy of that theory to you, Mr. Sharrow! Every woman, indeed! Take that narrow-hipped, flat-chested little foreign woman I saw a minute ago. They say she plays the piano like a witch, and I daresay she does. But a mother? Good Lord! She is a cerebral, that woman; all brain, no bowels. No motherhood in her. Probably lined with piano keys! I should be," he added, as he opened the door, and Sandy listened courteously, "sorry for the man who made her the mother of his children. Good morning, Mr. Sharrow, good morning."

Sandy had a queer little smile on his lips. Could it be possible that Turner was conveying an indirect warning to him? Could people be thinking that he was going to marry Miss Suarez? He was genuinely amused by the idea, for he had, as a matter of fact, seen so little of his guest that he feared she would think him rude, and was even now seeking Syd that the youth might convey to her an expression of Sandy's regret for the stress that forbade his more frequent association with her.

He opened the door of the Chinese Room, a room which it pleased his brother to use as a sitting-room, and went in.

It was raining hard, and a dark day. The fire was burnt low, and the windows were faint grey patches streaked with silver.

Sandy thought no one was there, and was about to go out when he saw Miss Suarez sitting—or, rather, lying—on the hearthrug.

Her attitude was such a queer one, she seemed so flat on the floor, that he thought at first that she must be crying, and was about to turn again to the door when, without moving, she raised her eyes to his.

He started; he had thought her face was hidden, that the back of her head was turned towards him; and now he saw her eyes. He felt as though he had waked a coiled-up snake.

"I am not crying," she said; "I am thinking——"

"Do you often think in that position?"

With a deliberate movement that again made him think of a snake, she uncoiled, and sat upright.

"Yes—why not? I am anæmic, and when my head is low the blood gets in and my brain works better."

She spoke slowly, carefully, and he observed that during the week she had been at Sharrow her accent had improved almost miraculously.

While he stood, looking very big and English, beside her dark little person, she went on: "Your brother has just told me of how he discovered in an old box the papers that—that give you all *this*."

"Yes. Strange, wasn't it? My great-uncle gave me the box—it was a medicine-chest—when I was a child—for years it stood in my room, and I used to play with it. Then I gave it to my brother, and he had it for years. If he hadn't chanced to drop it that day, the secret place in the lid would never have been discovered, and my cousin would have had everything."

Her eyes glinted in the firelight.

"And you? Where would you have been?"

He did not answer for a moment, and then with a shrug said: "God knows. Wandering about, I daresay." He went to the window, and stood looking out into the pouring rain.

Where would he have been but for the hazard of Syd's knocking the medicine-chest off its shelf? In Paris still, with Lise and the rest, sinking lower and lower, hopeless, doomed.

The thought attuned his spirits to their old misery for a moment; he was a very healthy man, but he had been a drunkard for years, and his nerves were of course affected.

Down, down sunk his heart. What was the use? What, now, was the use of anything? Sharrow was to be his, and he had lost the glory of it.

Maria Paz's voice roused him.

"Your brother said you are never going to marry," she said.

"Did he?"

Sandy turned, annoyed by her tactlessness, but when he saw her face he knew that she had spoken, not from a lack of tact, but because, knowing that he would think her words sprang from that lack, she had decided that his so thinking was over-balanced by the importance of her object in uttering them.

She had a good reason for being indiscreet.

"He says *he* is to marry and carry on the family."

"My brother seems to confide in you, Miss Suarez," Sandy looked like his great-uncle as he smiled at her, deliberately teasing her by withholding the information she wanted.

"He does. You confide in Miss Vindham, and your brother in me. So you are never to marry?"

He did not answer, and his smile grew more malicious. Presently, without having granted her the satisfaction of a statement of any kind, he left her. Was Turner right, after all?

Sandy was far from being a conceited man, but he knew quite well what a matrimonial prize he must appear to be. And this pathetic creature, could she have the vanity to think that her poor charms could win for her such things as those that apparently lay in his power to give a woman?

He smiled at the thought; but he was at bottom a chivalrous man, and his smile was kind and sad.

The girl was so plain, so badly dressed, so surly, so lacking in all the things of which sirens are made—could she be trying to set her poor cap at him?

He paused on the stair. He had not been agreeable; he had teased her. Should he go back and try to be pleasant to her.

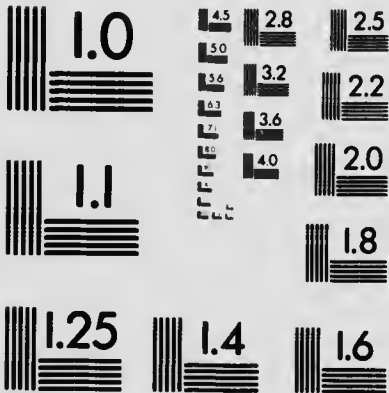
He did not go. It was not worth while. She was friendless in England ; he had taken her and her dull old father into his house ; he was trying, with old Lady Hainault's help, to arrange some drawing-room concerts for her ; he would lend her father money ; but he had work to do and could not spare the time for another talk with her.

As he closed his study door he said again, with his half shrug : " Poor soul ! "



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CHAPTER LIII

AT the end of a fortnight the Suarez' were still at Sharrow, and Sandy was amused to see that Turner was not the only person who considered that a word of warning to him might not come amiss.

He had had one or two walks with Miss Suarez, and in the way she had first interested him, she continued to do so. Her peculiar mind, her goblin-like interpretation of the music, which usually at all hours filled the Yellow Drawing-room, and a certain tenacity of purpose that distinguished her, these things gave her a real value in his eyes.

Her extreme adaptability, too, commanded his attention. One evening she appeared at dinner in a black frock which was so perfectly what, to a man's undiscerning eyes, a woman's should be, that he marvelled.

"Isn't she clever, Sandy?" Syd asked with the triumph his *protégée's* accomplishments invariably produced in him. "She's made it all herself out of that awful high thing with the orange bows."

"But how, Syd? It looks absolutely new—even the shape of the skirt, as far as I can see—"

Syd laughed delightedly. "That's just it—she has copied Mary's—the skirt is like Mary's sapphire velvet, and the body like Mary's white one, with the sleeves of that black one Lady Hainault wore at the Bazaar."

Lady Hainault, an old lady always ready to interest herself in new people, had been very kind about Miss Suarez. She had arranged for her a series of concerts in town, at the houses of people she had coaxed or bullied into compliance with her wishes.

"She makes my blood run cold with her music," the old lady told Syd, "and Isabel says she knows she rides about on a broomstick at night. Very interesting indeed."

Syd laughed, flushing. "It is good of you, Lady Hainault," he said; "you don't know how plucky she is——"

"Well, I don't know," the old lady returned, thoughtfully; "if I had had a face like that in my young days I should have drowned myself, so I think I *do* respect her pluck. Isabel says——"

Isabel was the Freckled Barrington Twin.

One day when Sandy was returning from a long tramp, he met Miss Suarez, and joined her.

"It was a very cold day early in March; the black ash buds were the only signs of spring, and an unrelenting east wind swept over the land.

"I fear you must feel the cold very much," he began, looking down at her. Her nose was nipped and red, her lips nearly blue.

The little creature smiled, showing her one beauty—her white teeth, which glinted like a dog's.

"I like cold weather," she said.

"Ah?" He repressed a smile at the obvious untruth; and she went on:

"Only in the morning do I—freeze. While it is yet dark, and the wind is black, and the road white——"

"While it is yet dark?"

"Yes. When I'm going to Mass," she answered simply, drawing her worn boa closer round her throat.

"Surely you don't go to Mass early in the mornings, Miss Suarez?"

"*Que si!* In Spain we all go to Mass. It is a country of Christians."

They walked on in silence for a moment, Sandy's footsteps ringing out on the frozen earth.

"Where do you go?" he asked presently.

"To Vite Shirley."

"But White Shirley is five miles away!" He was horrified at the idea of his guest walking there in the cold dawn. "My brother has been very careless. He should have known, and sent you in a carriage. I *do* beg your pardon, Miss Suarez—it shall not happen again."

But she waved his concern away with a quick gesture of her shabbily-gloved little hand.

"*Mais non*—your brother does know; and I wish no carriage. It is well to walk to Mass."

It was another queer twist in her mentality, and it in-

creased his interest in her. That she should go to Mass every day seem'd strange to him, but that she should vehemently and definitely refuse the carriage he urged her to have, puzzled even him more. She was so different from his preconceived ideas of a Spanish woman ; she was so slight, so lizard-like in her darting movements, so practical, and yet she was, apparently, as bigoted a Catholic as the languorous ladies of his imagination.

The spring was a very late, and a bitter cold one ; and an English spring, even of the mildest kind, must be a trial to the girl who had never before been in a northern country. Yet she not only went to Mass at dawn, in an unheated country church, but she persisted in going on foot.

While he was musing on these things, she began to speak of the concerts she was to give in London beginning the next week. She expressed her gratitude to him and to Lady Hainault in her pretty English, and then she added suddenly :

" But that is not the best of all. The best, that was in inviting my old poor father here. He was unhappy—very unhappy—he was hurted. And you asked us here, and he is happy in his soul. For this I thank you."

Stopping suddenly, she held out her hand to him. He took it because he could do nothing else. They had reached the end of the village nearest the great park gates, and stood within a stone's-throw of Mary Wymondham's house.

" I thank you," Maria Paz repeated ; and he saw that her odd black eyes, so unlustrous, so inexpressive, were wet with tears, and that her face, though set, was quivering.

" You have nothing to thank me for," he said kindly, for he knew that she was sincere ; " I was delighted to invite friends of my brother's——"

As he spoke the green garden gate of the Corner House opened, and Mary Wymondham, dressed for walking, came out.

Sandy started as guiltily as does every man caught in a ridiculous position.

" You—you really mustn't," he stammered to Maria Paz ; " I—it was nothing at all——"

Wheeling round, she saw Miss Wymondham, and her expression changed with lightning rapidity to one of knowing sympathy.

" Ah," she cried, " here is Miss Vindam ! "

And before Mary had reached them, she had darted up the slope and into a lane that led by a round-about way to the South Lodge.

"Ho, ho!" cried Mary, as Sandy took off his hat; "and why does she run away? Mine eyes have seen——"

"She was thanking me for—for inviting them here," Sandy explained, with the lameness of the thoroughly innocent.

"Indeed!"

He laughed ruefully. "Yes, she was, Mary. I know it was an odd place to choose to do it in, but that's not *my* fault, so you needn't sniff."

"I am not sniffing. I am sneering. Oh, Sandy, you poor simpleton, can it be true what they're all saying?"

"What *are* they all saying?"

He turned and went back with her, turning off presently into a lane leading to Linter's Farm.

"Well—what is it they are all saying?"

Mary was suddenly grave. "That you are going to marry Miss Suarez."

Sandy stood still. "Who is saying such an idiotic thing as that, Mary?"

"Well—Sally Dingle asked me about it, and the Vicar hinted that he had heard of it—I don't know, Sandy, just who has said it—but it is in the air. I do hope," she added, looking frankly at him, "that it isn't true."

"Of course it isn't true," he returned angrily. "You ought to know me better. Why in God's name *should* I marry that poor little thing?"

She did not speak for a moment, and then he went on in a changed voice: "Mary—I want to tell you something. I have told no one else, but you and I are friends. I am never going to marry."

"Why, Sandy?"

He hesitated. "Because—because—I couldn't. I can't explain, but the resolution—it's more than a resolution, it's just a plain fact—is the result of my whole life. I shall never marry. Syd must carry on the name. He knows."

"It seems a pity, Sandy," she said, thoughtfully, as they reached the top of the hill and stood looking back at the mist-dimmed view; "I am sorry."

And he knew that she was sorry, not because of his resolution, but for the causes that had led up to it.

After a few minutes, when they had been discussing other things, she returned to the subject.

"I hope you have told—what you have told me, to Miss Suarez?"

"No, I have not told her, but——"

"You ought to, then."

Something in her voice drew his attention from what he had been going to add—that Syd had already told Maria Paz of the family arrangement.

He saw by Mary's voice what was in her thoughts, and as he glanced at her he said: "Don't be unjust, Mary," a glint in his eyes that had always meant teasing.

"Unjust?"

"Yes. You know that in the depths of your heart you suspect poor Miss Suarez of—things!"

She flushed like a rose; the sudden glow of colour was perhaps her one real beauty.

"What do you mean, Sandy?"

"Ha, ha!"

But she persisted, almost angrily, and finally he had to explain. "You think black thoughts of the poor girl. You think she is plotting against my freedom."

Mary disliked the turn the conversation had taken, but she was too honest to deny what he said.

"Well, yes, I do. I think that whatever you have determined upon, she is trying to marry you."

"Exactly. And you are wrong." He forgot, in the vividness of his memory of Maria Paz's gratitude for his kindness to her father and her, his own slight suspicions of a few days before.

"Am I?" Miss Wymondham tossed her head, settling it again with a regal air in her black furs.

"You are." Sandy watched her, unmoved, except to a mild and slightly malicious amusement. "She has no more idea of marrying me than—than *you* have."

For a moment she did not answer him, while she spoke to old Bustard's successor, who was passing with his flock of sheep.

While they stood waiting for the little dingy, dainty-footed beasts to scurry by them, Sandy watched her. It always had amused him to see Mary cross; she was so very cocksure, as a rule, and so angry when proved to be in the wrong.

When at length the last nervous ewe had got out of their terrifying neighbourhood, she turned, a trace of red still in her cheeks.

"Men are, of course, *always* right in such matters," she said scathingly. "That's why no man has ever been married by surprise!"

"But, my dear girl, I am not a simpleton. I know quite well that I should be considered a great *parti*. I fully expect to be run after by mammas, and even by maidens, during the next year or two, until my immutable celibacy has become an understood fact. I know as well as you do that the woman who married me would not be marrying Sandy Sharrow; she'd be marrying great wealth, an ancient title, and one of the most beautiful houses in England. All that I grant you. What I say is, however, that this poor little bony Spaniard is not setting her cap for me. Of that I am sure, she is commendably guiltless."

Mary gave a little sound, which in a man might have been classified as a snort.

"All right. I'm glad you think so."

"No, you're not. You despise me for thinking so!"

They had reached the door of the farmhouse, and as she raised her stick to knock, she turned.

"You are a pig," she said, laughing, "and I am right, as I always am."

CHAPTER LIV

EARLY one evening, four or five days after Sandy's walk with Mary to Linter's arm, he had come in after a busy afternoon at Coulter's End, where the new cottages were in process of completion, and was sitting with a pipe over the fire in his dressing-room.

The Suarez' had gone to London the day before. Glancing at the clock, Sandy knew that at that very moment Maria Paz was probably finishing her concert in Lady Hainault's drawing-room.

They had gone, the Spaniards, full of gratitude, the old man again holding up his head, twenty pounds of Sandy's money in his pocket, to wrest from London society the success professional London had denied to them.

"By Jove! I hope they'll succeed, poor souls!" Sandy thought, comfortably stretching his tired feet in his old slippers.

In spite of the interest and curiosity he had felt in Maria Paz, he was glad they had gone, and he had no wish ever to see them again. He was glad to have been able to help them, and gladder still that Syd had been so kind to them; but the eternal sound of the piano had begun to bore him, and even Syd's generous enthusiasm was a little wearying.

Syd was, as Sandy sat by the fire, swelling the applause at Lady Hainault's. The Freckled Twin was to be there, and Sandy, when the whole party had a few nights before dined with her grandmother, had turned his hand at a little discreet match-making.

"You like him?" he asked, a little shyness in his voice that made the old lady wonder where he had been all these years, and why his face sometimes wore such a strange look, when his voice seemed so charmingly young.

"Like him? I love the boy," she returned promptly.

"Well—I wish your delightful granddaughter would."

"Which delightful granddaughter? I have fourteen."

Then Sandy had told her, very quietly, that Syd was his heir, and that it was his wish that the boy should marry young.

"Bell is only seventeen," the old lady returned hesitatingly, "and is a perfect baby as yet; but I should, of course, be delighted if they should really like each other later."

Then Sandy unfolded his plan, which had at least the virtue of great simplicity. The two young things should be "thrown together."

"Mary Wymondham will invite Miss Barrington to visit her," he said, "and Syd will see her every day. She will then learn to love the old place—I should like her to do that—and they will get to know each other well. That," he added, feeling very old indeed, but looking, with his earnest gaze, very young to the ancient lady who listened so kindly to him, "seems to me to be very important."

Then Lady Hainault had done a dreadful thing. She asked him outright why he himself didn't marry, and added that as he seemed to like her family, she could offer him a fine assortment of healthy young Hainaults, Barringtons, and Cresboroughs to choose from.

"No—I shall not marry," he said after a pause.

"But surely you were engaged, weren't you, when you were a youngster? I was in Egypt at the time, but Charlotte Cressborough or someone wrote me——"

"I was engaged, yes. But I shall never marry. Now let's settle on a pretty Isabel. May she come to visit Mary Wymondham? Look at them, they seem to like each other, don't they?"

Syd and the Freckled Twin were giggling over the last number of *Punch*, their heads close together. And the old lady promised that when Mary sent the invitation it should be accepted.

All these things went through Sandy's mind that evening, as he warmed his feet by the fire. The next Monday would bring the Freckled Twin to the Corner House, the first, Sandy hoped, of many visits. And in three years' time, if all went well, there would be a wedding in Eccleston Square, and then Syd and his wife would come home to Sharrow to live.

After all, Sandy thought, life held much that was good even for him.

His troubles seemed nearly over, in so far as 'hey ever could be over, while memory lasted. His struggle with his craving for spirits was nearly won, the bad times growing less and less frequent, his victories easier and easier. And little by little his love for Sharrow was regaining its place in his heart. Every brick that was added to the humble cottages at Coulter's End, for instance, gave him a keen pleasure; and only the day before, when Farmer Murdoch had finally promised to sell the meadows the old lord so longed for, in his joy Sandy thought for one blinding second that the Feeling was coming back to him. It had not come, the glory of sensation, but it had not been so near for years, and surely that was a hopeful sign.

Altogether he had not been so close to happiness for many years as he was as the clock struck half-past six, and someone knocked at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened, and, to his surprise, Mrs. Puddifant entered.

She had been the housekeeper at Sharrow since long before he could remember, and was now so old that she possessed a deputy, who took from her shoulders as much of her administrative burden as she could be prevailed upon to relinquish, even to her niece.

"Mrs. Pud!" Sandy rose courteously, but the old nickname came unconsciously to his lips.

"Yes, sir, it's me."

Her large white hands folded on her stomach, she stood respectfully before him, the gold cross that hung round her neck rising and falling more quickly than usual.

"I thought, sir, you wouldn't think I was takin' a liberty, after all these years——"

"Sit down, Mrs. Puddifant, do sit down. Of course, there can be no question of a liberty—has anything happened?"

"No, Mr. S—no, sir; I prefer to stand, if you don't mind. It's this. I thought you ought to know, sir, that 'is lordship 'as moved to the Blue Room."

"To the Blue Room?" Sandy stared, the pipe in his hand.

"Yes, sir—this afternoon. Not above an hour ago."

Her manner was extremely portentous, but to Sandy her meaning was a mystery.

"My great-uncle has changed his bedroom, is that it?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, but—why shouldn't he? I don't understand. If he has taken a fancy to another room—sick people often do——"

Mrs. Puddifant's respectful smile was not altogether devoid of superiority.

"Oh, it isn't *that*, sir."

Her fat chins were flushed, her cap a trifle awry—signs of deep agitation, he knew.

"Well, suppose you explain, then," he said good-humouredly.

Mrs. Puddifant cleared her throat and arranged her thumbs with great care.

"'Is lordship is going to die, sir."

"Why do you say that, Mrs. Puddifant?"

She pursed her lips solemnly.

"Because I know it, sir. And he knows it. That's why 'e 'as moved back into the Blue Room. It's the room in which you are all born, sir, and in which you all die."

Sandy was silent for a moment. "I see. And—he has had himself moved there to-day."

"An hour ago, sir. 'E never liked the Blue Room; 'e always said there wasn't room for all the ghosts there—but 'e wouldn't *die* anywhere else, sir—none of the Family would."

"I see."

Mrs. Puddifant rearranged her thumbs. "And oh, Mr. Sandy," she burst out suddenly, forgetting his age and his rapidly approaching dignities, "he sent for me, to tell me about 'is broth—and I can't tell you 'ow he looks! Quite different somehow, in that old bed with the blew curtains. 'E was born in it, and 'is father, and 'Eaven knows how many more of the Family. And my own grandmother saw the late lord lying there dead, a hundred and twenty years ago, with lilies on his breast, sir, and 'is 'air powdered!"

The Feeling, in the silence that followed the old woman's little outburst was very close to Sandy. He held his breath, and waited. It passed, but it had been so near, so near.

Presently, Mrs. Puddifant, perhaps with an artistic instinct against anti-climax, curtsied ponderously, and went out, leaving him alone.

It was very pathetic, the dying old peer having his feeble body carried to the bed in which he, like his forbears, must render up his last breath; there was in it a touch of the romance that Sandy, as a child, had felt to be in his terrible old relative.

He had told no one, not even Sandy, of his last move. His servants had been ordered to bear him thither, and there he now lay, awaiting death.

After a while Sandy went and knocked gently on the door of the Blue Room, and asked the Nurse whether he might see his great-uncle.

She went away, and presently returned. "No," she said, her pleasant face appearing in the light of the half-opened door, "he prefers to be quite alone to-night."

So Sandy went back to his own fireside. Quite alone! All his life Lord Sharrow had been in reality quite alone.

"If I were able to forgive him," the younger man thought sadly, "he would have me now, but I can't, and he knows that I can't."

CHAPTER LV

THE Freckled Twir came, and she and Syd walked and rode and drove together, and Mary and Sandy watched with a solicitude that was rather more maternal on his side than it was on hers.

The girl's skirts had been let down, a fact which greatly embittered her life, and her bright brown mane was rolled into an uncertain ball on the back of her head.

"Mother says I ought to be ashamed of it," she told Mary, "but it is so curly, and such a nuisance."

She was a charming young thing, her freckles, like patines of leaf gold, enhancing the beauty of her white skin, and in her rather gauche frankness and unromantic fearlessness she delighted Sandy's heart.

"I adore Sharrow," she said once, when Mary had brought her to dine at the House. "I'd rather own it than any house in England."

And Sandy, after an amused glance at Mary, was pleased to see Syd staring at his plate with a self-conscious tinge on his face.

Syd and the girl were the best of friends, and Sandy often heard his brother's rather throaty tenor voice in the Yellow Drawing-room, singing exercises to the vigorous, if not faultless, accompaniment of the Freckled Twin. It was not beautiful music that they made, but Sandy greatly preferred it to the brilliant performances of Maria Paz.

April passed, the shadows under the trees in the park were more decided, as the leaves thickened; the sky took on a deeper blue; cuckoos called to each other in the woods, and violets and primroses spangled the meadows.

Spring had come, and still Lord Sharrow lingered in the Blue Room, awaiting the summons which seemed unwilling to come to him.

The old man had never mentioned his change of room to

Sandy. As he grew weaker he seemed to grow more grim, more silent. Sandy knew that he loathed the weakness that chained him to his bed, that he cursed his great age, that he longed to have it all over. But neither of the two men ever mentioned death, until, one morning, very early, when April had just left the world, and May was only three hours old, Nurse Blake knocked on Sandy's door, and waked him.

"He is going very fast," she said, looking very tall and young in her grey dressing-gown, a long plait of dark hair hanging over each shoulder, "and he has asked for you."

Daylight came in at the windows of the Blue Room as Sandy went quietly in and sat down by the bed. Lord Sharrow, who had the curtains all drawn back, lay quite quiet, his eyes half shut. He looked very small in the big bed, his wizened face, but for the eyes, was like a crumpled bit of the linen, and the sheet and blanket lay almost flat over his wasted body.

To Sandy, it seemed that his body was already dead, only the eyes still lived.

"Sandy!" The dying man's voice was crisp, like an unexpected crackle of stiff paper.

"Yes, Great-uncle."

"Love the old place, won't you?"

"Yes, Great-uncle."

"About Maggie Penrose and me—what we did," went on the voice, which was still Lord Sharrow of Sharrow, the oldest peer in the realm, "I——"

Sandy frowned. He wished his great-uncle would not apologize at this late hour, or ask the forgiveness that he could not grant.

"I am sorry," pursued the voice, with an effort, "that you found out."

Sandy checked an involuntary smile. It was so thoroughly characteristic of the old man to regret, not his evil deed, but that his evil deed had been found out!

"Never mind that now, sir," he said, with an effort.

"But I *do* mind. It must have hurt you—it always hurts to lose faith in a woman—and I am sorry, Sandy. When I was alive, I used to love you." He paused, moved his head a little, and added with something that tried to be a laugh: "I have been dead for some years, you know."

The daylight was stronger now, and the pale yellow sky was

flecked with faintly rose-coloured clouds. The nurse came back, dressed now in her neat uniform, a glass containing some brown liquid, in her hand.

"Here is your beef-juice, Lord Sharrow," she said, bending over the pillow.

She gave the beef-juice to her patient too quickly, and he choked a little, and said "Damn!" in a very snappish voice; then he apologized to her, and she went away.

"A nice young woman, Sandy; she has been kind to me. I should like her to have fifty pounds as a little present."

"Very well, sir."

"Tell her I asked you to give it to her."

"Very well, Great-uncle."

Presently the invalid, whose eyes had been shut, opened them.

"Mind! I won't have Pendleton here—not till I'm dead, I mean; when I am, he can do what he likes."

"Very well, Great-uncle."

An hour passed. The rose had faded from the sky, and it was now of a beautiful even turquoise; somewhere not far away a gardener was whistling at his work; the clock struck seven.

Sandy opened his eyes with a start. He had been asleep. Lord Sharrow had moved a little, and lay watching his nephew.

"Tired, eh?" he said, as Sandy hid a yawn. "I am sorry." Then he added suddenly: "Well—I think there is no more to say, Sandy. Love the old place. I—I am glad"—he held out his little dry, cold hand, "good-bye."

The two men shook hands gravely. "Good-bye, Great-uncle."

"I suppose you can't forgive me, Sandy? Not even now?" Something like amusement stirred the old face as he spoke.

"You—it ruined my life, Great-uncle——"

"I know—ten years of it—but some people—could forgive even that."

Sandy felt that, notwithstanding the guest who hovered at the door, the old man was half-teasing him.

"I know, sir; but—not we Sharrows. You couldn't; I—I can't. But——"

"Well——" croaked the voice, more faintly. "Go on—hurry!"

" I was going to say : I shall never forget that you were good to me when I was a boy——"

Sandy's eyes were wet, and the old man smiled almost happily ; " I see a tear," he murmured ; " I see a tear——"

His fingers fell limply from Sandy's, and he lay back asleep.

An hour later, without waking, he died

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almost
back

CHAPTER LVI

ONE splendid June day, Mary Wymondham, a faded pink sunbonnet on her head, a pair of garden shears in her hands, was working among her roses.

Her garden, though not large, was a charming one, and its clipped yews, rich hedges and century-old lawns made of it a very restful place indeed.

At her back, as she advanced in her leisurely work, filling a battered old basket with fresh roses and snipping faded ones from the trees, was the house, and every step brought her nearer to the double hedge beyond which lay the bowling-green. Perfect order reigned in her small domain; on the mellow-coloured brick walls the newly-formed fruit lay sheltered by just the right number of leaves, just sufficiently exposed to the benevolent sun; the two great yews, one of which had lived at least its last hundred years in the shape of a vast umbrella, the other of which was a giant peacock, never looked either newly-shaven like a convict's head, or dishevelled, extremes not unknown to the yews of most people.

In a niche between two bow-windows, a great lavender bush spread itself luxuriously in the afternoon sun; and bees hummed in a big mignonette bed.

At the far end of the garden stood three old-fashioned straw bee-hives, their yellow sides glistening; and in the very centre of the velvet lawn, under the drawing-room windows, was an ancient sun-dial. The place looked the very embodiment of peace and modest comfort.

Mary loved it. She was very happy that afternoon, after her short stay in London, for various reasons, connected with the village, dull reasons that would sound very boring, and which yet, in her intimate knowledge of the people amongst whom she lived, were to her of great importance.

In her little world, things went well. Mr. Pendleton, the vicar, had promised not to propose to her again, a promise which was of great value to her, since she never meant to marry him, and hated telling him so; her gardener's little granddaughter was not going to die of her fall out of the apple-tree, after all; Coulter's End was a great success; the church had been successfully enlarged without being spoilt, and the new organ was quite delightful, even though Sandy had got it from London and not from the Norfolk builders she had recommended; and little Isabel Barrington had told her, two days before, when Mary bade her good-bye after a pleasant visit to Eccleston Square, that she would, of course, come again to Sharrow in July.

"I like it frightfully," the girl had added, looking really almost grown-up in her smart afternoon frock; "I'd rather be there than anywhere."

"Syd is a delightful young man, isn't he?" Mary had asked, feeling rather a fiend, but longing for some definite hope to take home to Sandy.

And the Freckled Twin had blushed, actually blushed, as she replied that Syd was really rather a dear.

Mary had observed in Lady Barrington, to whom had fallen the rather unfair lot of mothering nearly one-third of old Lady Hainault's fourteen granddaughters, a disposition to help Time in his dealings with her fourth girl. Isabel's skirts were down, and her hair up—rather early for a member of the old-fashioned Barrington tribe; and Emily Barrington, who never mentioned Syd, assured her guest that Bell really was wonderfully mature in some ways, though she looked such a baby.

And now Mary was back, with the story of Bell's blush already shaped as she would tell it to Sandy in her mind, and a blackbird was singing like an angel in a cherry-tree, and the roses were delicately baked in the sun, and gave out a kind of triumphal essence of their own scent to their mistress, as she lovingly beheaded them to decorate her dwelling.

Mary Wymondham detested Browning, or she would, as she worked in her garden that afternoon, undoubtedly have quoted "Pippa Passes."

The grandfather clock just within her house door struck half-past three.

In an hour's time Sandy would come, and she would tell

him, as she mentally expressed it in her country simplicity, "all about London."

She had heard Paderewski play, and seen Mr. Charles Wyndham's new comedy; she had dined at the "Carlton," and had been at a very grand dinner-party at Lady Hainault's. And then there was the story of the Blush.

Having reached the far end of the rose-garden, she came slowly back, her white muslin skirts dragging softly on the smooth grass, and sat down on the bench under the copper beech that was one of her glories.

It was delightfully cool here, and she would wait till her little maid, Sally, should pass the door or a window, and then she would call to the girl to bring her out a tray-full of vases; there was no reason on earth why she should not arrange her own roses in her own vases in her own garden if she wanted to!

But Sally did not come, and Mary sat lazily on.

Two very corpulent pigeons flew over the house, and settled on the grass near her. They belonged to her neighbour, Mr. Attley, the draper, whose shop was so luckily farther up the street. Pigeons are pleasant things to watch in a lazy mood.

Suddenly, in the utter quiet, there came a sound which disturbed the dreaming woman even before she realized what it was.

With a quick frown she raised her head to listen. Something seemed troubling her—what was it?

A horse.

Down the cobbled street it came, the disquieting galloping. It had reached the "Sheepshearers" now—she knew by the momentary slackening necessitated by the gutter that crossed the street there—now it came on and on—it was going past, no—she rose and stood waiting for she knew not what disaster; it was stopping; had stopped at her door.

The green gate opened, and Sandy, not dressed for riding but carrying a hunting-crop, came in.

He came straight down the path, then crossed over the grass towards her.

"Mary," he said hoarsely, "Syd's married."

"Syd——"

"Yes. To—to that Spaniard."

CHAPTER LVII

THE telegram lay on the grass, and one of the pigeons who, after a temporary retirement to their own garden, had come back, pecked at it tentatively.

It was very curt. "Was married to Maria Paz this morning.—SYD." That was all.

Over and over again it rang through Mary's brain as she sat silent beside Sandy, who had hidden his face in his hands. "Was married to Maria Paz this morning.—SYD."

It seemed hours before Sandy finally sat up and pushed his dishevelled hair off his forehead. His dry eyes were blood-shot, his face very white.

Mary leaned forward, and took his hand in hers. "Oh, Sandy," she said, inarticulate in the presence of what she knew was his despair.

He cleared his throat twice, and then spoke with an effort.

"When—when the thing came," he began slowly, "I—as soon as I *believed it*, I—cursed her. I—couldn't see, I was so angry. And then his deceit occurred to me—and"—he bit his bloodless lip fiercely—"I was afraid I'd curse him, so—I came here."

She said nothing, her hand closing more firmly on his.

"You are the only friend I have in the world, Mary," he resumed, again clearing his throat, "so I came to you."

It was at that moment, perhaps, that she first began to realize what he was going to be to her. Her face was beautifully gentle as she watched him, this man whose only friend she was.

"I am glad you came, Sandy—"

"Thanks. It's—there's no use being angry; it's done. I—I don't want to be angry"—his voice rose suddenly, and getting up he strode away from her towards the umbrella-shaped yew. "I don't want," he went on, his words

gathering volume, "to be angry with little Syd—God, help me!"

She was frightened, for the first time, perhaps, in her life, for his lower jaw stuck out as his great-uncle's had done, his teeth showed, and his eyes had a wild glare in them. His last words sounded like a blasphemy, and she knew that his anger towards his brother had forced them from the lips he was trying to keep mute.

"Mary"—he turned, beating his big brown hands helplessly together—"don't—don't let me be angry with Syd."

"You will not be angry with him, Sandy," she said very quietly, "because it would be unjust."

The dark-red colour that had been gaining in his face ever since he rose faded very slowly. "Unjust?" he repeated, stupidly.

"Yes. Syd is a child. He is not even of age. She has tricked him somehow."

His eyes softened with a natural expression. "You are right. He is not of age. It can be annulled—I'll go and see Bolsover at once——"

But she would not let him go to London that day. Syd had, of course, taken his bride away, nothing could be done without him, and Sandy was as weak as a man after a bad fainting-fit.

He sat silently in her quiet drawing-room while she made tea and gave it to him; he even drank his tea; his violent anger was over, but this stupor of misery was nearly as alarming. She had never before seen him angry, but the Sharrow temper was a tradition to her; she had heard many tales of it, and the mad things it had been known to cause its possessor to do, so she felt thankful, as she sat there by the stricken man, that matters had been no worse.

And presently, as the long summer afternoon changed to evening, Sandy began to talk.

He told of his lonely little-boyhood, of the old house in Bloomsbury; of Bean, and Cook, and the portraits; he told of his first visit to Sharrow, and how he came to love it; he described with the vividness of deep feeling his strange friendship with his old uncle, of their meeting-ground wherein all differences of age and circumstances were forgotten; he told of the books he had found and read, of the almost holy things that Sharrow had gradually come to mean to him, of the Feeling that used to lift him up into a kind of heaven.

And Mary listened without a word, almost without moving. On and on he talked, the velvety shadows crept over the grass, dew fell, the sky glowed, darkened, and stars came out. Sandy talked on, and suddenly, when she had grown so used to his voice that the silence seemed loud, he broke off. He had come to where he fell in love with Viola.

There was a long pause, and then Mary said quietly: "Then Viola came—I know, Sandy."

He looked up in the gloom, but her face was nearly invisible. "You know how—Viola came. Do you know how she—went?"

She hesitated; and then because to her it was not only the best, but the simplest thing to do, she told him the truth.

"I know that she saw you when you had been drinking."

He gave a dreary laugh. "Yes. . . . It was worse than that, Mary. She saw me when I was very drunk. And I put her on the piano and wouldn't let her get down. I had *le vin heureux*—in those days. Well—she wrote me a letter—she called me—things—and I knew she would never forgive me. So I went away. I took Maggie Penrose with me. You remember Maggie Penrose?"

Mary had given a little start at the name. "Yes!—and you took her with you?"

"Yes. Oh," he added, again with a dreary laugh, "I didn't seduce her. She wanted to come. She—cared for me. She was good to me, too, Mary. I—if you knew about those ten years, you wouldn't let me sit here!"

"Yes, Sandy, I would."

Her quiet voice had no hesitancy in it, and no mere consolation. It rang with the truth.

Sandy stirred in his chair. "Perhaps you would," he agreed, listlessly; "perhaps it's only love that makes women false and cruel—"

He spoke without bitterness, but so drearily, so hopelessly, that Mary rose, and, sitting down near him, laid her hand on his. "Go on, Sandy," she said; "tell me all there is. We are friends."

"So we went away," he began, obediently. He told his story in plain words, but without details. "I was a drunkard when they found me," he finished.

"You are no drunkard now."

"No. But—my brother has deserted me now; fooled

and deserted me, as your sister deserted, and that other woman fooled me. And he, too, loved me. That is, perhaps," he added, his voice dropping to a meditative tone, "my curse; to be hurt by people who love me."

Little Sally, who had twice come to the door to announce dinner, and twice been warned away by her mistress, told Cook that she was sure his lordship had come to ask Miss Mary to marry him. "He's talking about love," the little maiden added, importantly.

Sandy's talk about love was very sad hearing for his friend. When it was over he rose.

"Thank you, Mary," he said; "you have been very patient. I never thought I could tell my miserable story to anyone, but I am glad I have told you. You know how degraded I have been, how vile my life was until a hazard brought me home——"

"Yes. And I have seen," she answered, "how brave you have been these last six months. I know what your ambitions have been. They have not been for yourself——"

"No," he thundered suddenly, "they were for—Syd!"

"Not altogether. They have been for the people God has put more or less into your hands; whose happiness depends more or less on you; whose very health hangs more or less upon your will, according to the way you choose to house them——"

"More or less, more or less," he repeated dreamily.

"Yes. I don't know," she went on, striking a match and lighting the candles in a double-branched old silver candelabra as she spoke, "whether you believe in God, Sandy. I do."

He never forgot her expression, as the four little flames leapt into life at her bidding, while she declared her simple faith.

"I believe in God, and when I said more or less, I suppose I meant that your share of responsibility is the lesser because His is, of course, the greater. But yours is there, and would be if Syd married—half a dozen Spaniards," she added, with a sudden nervous little laugh that betrayed the tension she had been under.

After a pause, as the candle-light steadied, and shed its soft radiance over that part of the room, he answered her.

"Thank you again, Mary. I suppose I believe in God. Someone certainly made us—but if you had not been here

this afternoon, I—I don't know what I shouldn't have done!"

Mary took his hand as he held it out, and her dark face hardened suddenly.

"I *hate* that woman—I always did, from the first moment I saw her. And she must be ten years older than Syd. Oh, Sandy!"

Tears came to her eyes, and they were tears of helpless rage.

Sandy smiled. "Poor old Mary!" he said, "I am so glad you hate her! Well, good-bye. I will come tomorrow, and we will try to plan. I am sure the marriage of a minor can be set aside."

Mary listened to his footsteps on the gravel. Then she heard the gate bang.

Then she went to her room, knelt by her bed, and cried.

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CHAPTER LVIII

BUT Syd's marriage was not set aside. The next morning came a long letter from the boy, a letter so loving, so incoherent, so full of hot self-accusations and fiery self-defences, a letter so chivalrous and brave in his protection of his lady, that Sandy showed it to Mary with his eyes wet.

Syd loved Maria Paz. He had not meant to trick his old Sandy, for he had never known that it *was* love till the day of the concert at Lady Hainault's. Then she had played a thing that just sang it to him, and he saw her as she really was.

"Do you remember my telling you her bones were beautiful?" the boy wrote. "Well, it was her soul I saw, only I didn't know it."

Mary groaned.

"Go on," Sandy said.

The concert had been early in April. Syd had not said a word to Maria Paz until after the funeral. He had not dared, she was so superior to him. And he had on two occasions meant to tell Sandy, but somehow, remembering how plain he himself had used to think his love, he had not dared. Suppose Sandy had laughed!

Then, when Sandy was in town that fortnight after the funeral, he was always being with the solicitor and things, and Syd had not liked to interrupt. He had meant to tell Sandy before he spoke to Maria Paz, but a week before the writing of the letter, he had lost his head and blurted it all out to her, and found that the miracle had happened; she, too, loved him.

"And Don Ramon had to go to Spain on business, Sandear," the boy concluded, "and she wouldn't let him go alone. You know how she always takes care of him. They were going, and I—Sandear, I found I couldn't bear it. So I persuaded her. She didn't want to do it. She wanted

to wait, but I wouldn't. And I got a S. L. and we were married this morning."

Mary had read thus far in a rapid undertone, but she finished the letter in silence. Syd was so rapturous, so grateful for his overwhelming good luck, and sure that when Sandy came to know his beloved as he did that Sandy, too, would adore her, that the words did not bear repetition. It would, although she was convinced that he had been tricked, that his bride was a scheming, bad woman, be a kind of sacrilege. He ended by giving his address at Barcelona, where they were to arrive the next night but one after the writing of the letter, and where he knew Sandear would send him a wire of congratulation with a kind message of some sort for "Mrs. Syd."

There was a postscript which Mary did read aloud.

"It is so funny to think that I ever thought her ugly. Of course, she was badly dressed, but her face is so wonderful that I must have been mad to think she wasn't lovely. And now that she has learned our English way of dressing—oh, well, you'll see. I am sure you and she will get on famously. She admires you tremendously, does Mrs. Syd!"

The two friends sat in Mary's drawing-room all the morning. It was raining, a day of showers and spasmodic sunshine.

They discussed the marriage from every possible point of view, and, in every way, what step Sandy ought to take. One thing was certain. If Sandy proposed to the young husband that the marriage should be annulled, Syd would never forgive him.

"Whether she is worth it or no, and, after all, Sandy," Mary added, in the increased wisdom that the night had brought her, "she *may* be. All one really knew against her is her looks, and those she can't help, whether she is worth his love or no she has got it, and he is happy. Now, if you made a row, you'd not only fail to make him give her up, but you'd lose his love for you. And that mustn't be."

"I suppose you're right. But if I saw her now, I'd—I'd break her in two!"

Mary nodded. "I know. And I'd help you. Oh, Sandy, we are very unregenerate, both of us, aren't we? As it happens, though, they are in Barcelona, or will be to-night. And they *are* married. I can think of only one thing to do."

"And that is?"

His face was very old-looking, very haggard in the morning light.

"Grin and bear it. Unpoetic advice, but—I know no better. If she loves him, I should think," her voice softened a little, "that his love would bring out the best in her."

"Should you, indeed?" he interrupted, with a sudden sneer.

She raised her head, and looked at him in reproof.

"Yes. My sister was a child, Sandy, and a weak nature. This woman is nearly as old as I am now, and whatever else she may be, she is certainly a *strong* nature. Do not compare the two, for I love my sister, though I saw her fault towards you."

He held out his hand. "Forgive me. I beg your pardon. Well—what must I do, then?"

"I should wire him to this Hotel of Four Nations, and wish—happiness—to them both."

"Good God, Mary!"

"Well, I should. You can do as you like, of course, but you asked my advice, and I am giving it you. Then I should write to Syd. I should say that his marrying a woman who was not an Englishwoman has been a blow; that you wish he had not married a woman older than himself, that you are disappointed, but that—that—after all, it is his affair, and that when they come back you will do your best to be friends with her. Then—I'd send them a cheque, and tell them to take their honeymoon wherever they like, and ask them to come to Sharrow for a long visit—say, early in October."

"But why in October?"

She lost patience at his denseness. "Oh, you utter goose!" she cried. "Can't you see? By October you will have got a little used to it; you will be able to control your temper, and to behave in a way that will keep his love for you. Then she, having plenty of money, will refuse to spend another winter in this 'peeg' of a climate, and off she will take him to Egypt, or somewhere, and you will be at peace again."

Sandy saw her wisdom, but she did not see, he thought, what his loneliness would be. Syd was to have been with him; to work with him; Syd's name was to have been

associated with him in every kind of improvement he undertook on the estate.

And now Syd was to be in Egypt with his—wife. Poor Sandy groaned aloud.

However, he finally agreed to what Mary said, and they walked together to White Shirley to send the telegram to Barcelona.

Mrs. Pragholtm studied the words with friendly curiosity, which Mary saw.

"Isn't it a surprise, Mrs. Pragholtm?" she said, just touching Sandy's arm in warning. "Mr. Sydney is married! We none of us knew it was to be for some time."

"Dear me, miss. I do 'ope Mr. San—my lord, that your lordship is 'appy about it. 'E do seem young, Mr. Sydney!"

"He is very happy," Sandy replied, with a feeling of the deepest duplicity.

When they had gone their way, Mrs. Pragholtm rushed across to the "White Stag" to tell her crony, Miss Betsy Finn, that Mr. Syd was married, and 'is lordship 'eartbroken about it. The congratulations of the villagers and the servants were but poor, perfunctory words. No one had liked Maria Paz, and some of the peasants even inclined to the belief that she was not a white woman.

Mrs. Puddifant celebrated the occasion by giving notice.

"Surely you won't desert me, Pud," Sandy protested, "just because I have a sister-in-law?"

"No, my lord, oh, no!" the old woman replied, her hands high-folded; "but at my time of life, I don't feel able to undertake a new mistress."

"I am sure Mrs. Sharrow would never think of interfering."

"Are you, my lord? Well, I can only 'ope your lordship is right."

Sandy said no more.

Turner said that his opinion was of no value, but that, for his part, he didn't care for women with yellow faces.

As to poor old Dingle, he said nothing, but his eyes were eloquent of sympathy.

Sandy had a miserable week of attempted congratulations, and then the matter settled into the position of an unalterable, accepted fact, and no more was said about it.

Syd and his wife went to Norway and Sweden for the

summer, and Sandy and Mary worked very hard, saying but little about the young couple.

Sandy had grown older, and spoke less than before, but he tried hard to be as interested in his new duties as he had been before the news came, and Mary knew that his having the will even to try meant much.

It was a warm, dry summer, and almost imperceptibly it wore away into the autumn. One day, in late September, a wire came from Paris.

Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Sharrow were, it said, on their way home.

CHAPTER LIX

THE train was due at six in the evening, and at five minutes before six Sandy was at the station. He had come in the big motor, and there was a cart for the luggage. He greatly disliked his new sister, as he considered Maria Paz, but as she was his sister, all honour should be done to her.

It had rained all day; the evening might have been painted as a typical English October evening. The trees near the station were not draped with fog, but they were veiled with a delicate pearly mist that hid their angles, and lent them a grace unknown to their best summer days; the low hung sky was grey, too, but a lead grey, heavy and menacing as if heavy with unborn rain.

Sandy, as he marched up and down the little platform waiting for the train, noticed all these things, and the English soul of him rejoiced, as a Southerner's soul might rejoice in the blue of his native sky, the clarity of his home air. This was grey, and chill, and dull, but it was England, and for hundreds of years different men of the Sharrow stem had awaited the women who were God-bidden to carry on the name, in just such dull, characteristic weather. Sharrow brides had, of course, come in the glory of June, the grandeur of August, as well; but these evenings, like molten granite, were, of all English evenings, the most typical of the land. Maria Paz Suarez had been a Spaniard; Sandy disliked her; but now she was, by the virtue of the marriage sacrament of Syd's young love, the woman who was to carry on the old name; her son was to be Sharrow of Sharrow, and his sons were to replenish the land. And, as such, Sandy awaited her, with honour and respect in his heart.

The train was late. The station-master, a short, fussy man with a manner, explained that a minor mishap on the

line had occasioned the delay ; he was apologetic, humble, as is the way of English employés, yet he lost, through his manner, no dignity through his humility. Sandy understood, and gave him a cigar.

The clock struck. It was six o'clock.

A local train came in, with the fuss habitual to insignificant things. A woman, with a baby in her arms, and another on the way, had lost her ticket to Mendborough. Sandy, with his heart full of love for women who were bearing children, bought her a new ticket, and fetched her a glass of beer and a sandwich from the little bar in the station.

This, Mr. Clawson, the station-master, considered derogatory, but he dared not say so. So the commotion in his small sort made no stir on the surface of his manner, and Sandy never knew. Then the local train went its way ; Sandy looked at his watch, and, his hands in his pockets, began a regular tramp up and down the little platform. He had made up his mind to receive Maria Paz as his sister. He had disliked her ; even yet he could not divest himself of the idea that it was not from such as her that the race of Sharrow should be reinforced. But Syd had, out of all the world, chosen her to be his wife, and, as his wife, she was a woman full of honour, a woman to be liked and respected.

Therefore, as he walked there in the chill evening air, while the occasional light of a train blurred the grey air, he made up his mind that she should find in him a brother. He would give her all that he could of brotherly affection and understanding, and she would, in return, give to his house all the good that was in her.

There is much poetry in a railway station at all hours ; the meeting and parting of human beings contains all that there is of happiness and tragedy in the wide world. But at night, when a light is the symbol of the coming or going of a vast house full of lives, the drama and romance are inexpressible.

The very rails, like polished arrows shooting into the blackness, are pregnant with imaginative meaning, and, to the dreamer, full of poetry.

Our poor Sandy, though he did not know it, was a dreamer, and so this little country meeting-place of trains fascinated him, and gave his mind pause.

His whole life, he thought, was over, but Syd's young one,

as yet a mere blossom on a bare bough, was pregnant with life, and would bear fruit. He, Sandy, would be the gardener; his to shelter, to prune, to reap, for him must be the love of the gardener.

His brother had chosen this dark little lizard-like woman for his mate; to her he would give his children; through her he would continue his race. And Sandy, the sterile tree, would yet shadow the new root, and out of his strength help it to wax strong and firm. As he walked there, a commonplace enough figure in his long tweed coat, with its collar turned up round his ears against the cold, Sandy yet embodied poetry in himself, for the old Feeling had come back to him, and his love of his name, of his house, burned once more in his heart.

Up and down he walked, his fists clenched hard in his pockets, his rough brows drawn deep over his eyes. Syd was coming, and Syd's wife; possibly, even, Syd's son.

Sandy knew that he would not ask Maria Paz if this last possibility were a fact; but he wondered, and the wonder warmed his heart.

There are in the world many women whose primary functions are mother functions; there are few men who are, before anything else, fathers. Sandy was one of these few. His heart stirred physically as he thought of Syd's son, a little being he could hold in his arms, and give to Sharrow, as he was giving Sharrow to him, Syd's son!

It was nearly seven, and Sandy was in a deep dream about this hypothetical child when the train finally came panting through the fog, as if its arrested breathing powers had delayed its arrival.

"The train is coming, my lord."

And Sandy, quite forgetting that he was my lord, stared blankly at his informant, the solitary porter of Sharrow station; and then remembering, laughed, gave the man sixpence, and walked back to where a miniature bustle declared the London train to be more than the fabric of a dream.

Syd was out, and on the platform almost before the train had stopped.

"Sandy—dear old man!"

"Syd!"

The two men shook hands. Then Syd, turning, helped his wife to alight, and presently Sandy found himself shaking hands with Mrs. Sydney Sharrow. It is easy to say

that but for certain things one would not have known someone, but Sandy was vitally conscious as this little ceremony was gone through with that, literally, he would not have recognized in his sister-in-law the Maria Paz who had played, and betrayed the secret of Chopin, that day at the Bechstein Hall.

This thin little lady, who came out of her dark furs as a chestnut would come all shinily out of its burr, was very unlike the scrawny, red-armed girl of that day.

Maria Paz Suarez had had small, sulky black eyes, like currants in a bun, Ben had said; this lady, this Mrs. Sydney Sharrow, had small eyes, it is true, but they were dark and lustrous, and dwelt on her brother-in-law's face with a surety of purpose, and a certainty of welcome that the other could not have known.

"I am glad," she said, showing her pretty teeth, candidly, "to come home, dear Sandy——"

And it was, even to his prejudiced ears, quite charming, the way she said it.

She was coming home; she knew, and assumed in her little speech, that he was a sterile root; that to her was given the privilege of providing a new blossom for the ancient root; yet in her manner was no triumph. There was pride, but Sandy liked pride, and had no wish to quarrel with her for the sentiment. Her mission was, to him, a holy one; why, then, should she not feel and express her appreciation of its quality?

Gravely he shook hands with her.

"You are welcome," he said; adding, after a barely perceptible pause, "my sister."

Syd, his eyes shining with unshed tears, took his brother's arm, and gave it a very hard squeeze.

"Sandear, Sandear," he murmured, "she is an angel; you will love her, and she will love you——"

At dinner, Sandy wondered why Maria Paz, hitherto desolatingly flat-chested, should suddenly have become possessed of such pretty curves; how her thin arms, so thin, should seem merely lithe and slim; how her oily black hair should seem glossy and almost beautiful. And because he was Sandy, he told himself that it was all because Syd loved her and she loved Syd, that these miracles had come to pass.

He connected not the hairdresser, nor the Parisian man

dressmaker with the change ; for all his sad enlightenment he did not realize the means that had been used to the end—which is only one way of saying that he was a man, not a woman.

Maria Paz wore black, and in her hair was a gardenia. Few women after the age of twenty can wear natural flowers in their hair, but she could because she was Spanish, and because she had chosen her flower well. Of all flowers the gardenia is the least sincere, and it suited her evenly waved, carefully-dressed dark locks.

In her success she had blossomed ; she was no longer scrawny, and her forearms were not red as they had formerly been. She was illuminated by the softening fire of success, and as manners maketh the man, so, surely, clothes maketh the woman. Many lives must have been wrecked by a mistaken belief in the silly proverb about beauty unadorned.

Maria Paz Suarez, covered as decency required, and her national bad taste chose, was worse than ugly ; she was nearly grotesque. Maria Paz Sharrow, covered as slightly as decency required, and covered by a French artist, was, in her consciousness of looking almost better than her very best, nearly a good-looking woman.

Sandy ate his dinner in a state of bewilderment. Syd was so proud of his wife, so gloriously in love, so triumphantly a slave, that Sandy doubted his own senses.

Had he been mad about the Spanish girl ! Had she always been attractive, and he only a blind fool to doubt it ? Then he remembered her blue-white frock, and her red wrist-bones, and he bowed in the presence of a miracle.

" Well ? " Syd asked, when Maria Paz had slid from the room in her queer, almost imperceptible way, leaving the two men alone.

" How do you mean ' well ' ? "

" Isn't she—isn't she marvellous ? " Syd had grown a little heavier in the five months of his honeymoon ; his face was fuller ; his chest looked broader. His delicate look had gone, and he seemed older, but triumphantly, gloriously, older, as if he himself had willed the hastening of maturity.

Sandy's heart gave a little twist in his breast, a little twist that mothers know.

" She is—wonderful," he said seriously.

Syd leaned towards him over the table. "I say, Sandy, do you remember the concert? And—the absurd things I said to Ben? Well"—the boy's voice deepened—"I—I can't tell you how absurd it all seems now. I never knew such a—such a brain in my life. It's—it's a kind of miracle that she should care for a silly ass like me, and yet—she *does.*"

There was a long pause, and in the silence, broken only by the beautiful crackling sound of the fire, the sound that of all others best epitomizes "home" to homesick British ears, a question sprang into Sandy's mind.

It sprang, the question, into immediate maturity; there was no hesitation in it, no feeling of intrusion. It was his to know, his to ask.

"Syd, dear old boy," he said, holding out his thin hand and sliding into it Syd's smooth, young one, "you mustn't mind telling me; you've been married five months—and I—I want to know—is there going to be a baby?"

Syd's hand grasped his strongly.

"No, Sandy," the young husband answered, his dark eyes on his brother's; "not yet."

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CHAPTER LX

MARY WYMONDIAM, at this juncture, did not fail Sandy. He had, indeed, come to trust to her friendship, and co-operation, with an unquestioning kind of faith that would have surprised him had he noticed it. But he did not; he accepted her much as a man accepts a sister, except for the fact that his trust had grown slowly.

In his early youth he had not particularly liked her; she was inclined to be dominating, and her quick tongue had often embarrassed him to the point of exasperation, as often happens between a quick-witted girl and a rather slow-witted man.

Then, too, Mary was that tragic thing—the Plain Sister. Viola's loveliness had been so exquisite, so overwhelming that Mary's good looks of health, honesty, and vigorous young womanhood, had never received even the scant measure they deserved. She had been a kind of background to her sister, and such was her adoration for Viola that she did not mind this, nor ever raised a finger to point ever so gently to her own good points.

Money was scarce at the Vicarage, and all the fine feather that she could collect, Mary gave ungrudgingly to Viola.

And thus to Sandy, Mary had appeared merely a good sort with a rather sharp tongue, and he had hardly ever talked with her.

So when, on his return, he found her established in The Corner House, her good qualities, mellowed as they were by time and softened by trouble, came to him with a kind of surprise. Mary was gentle now, and understanding, and sympathetic; these things astonished him faintly, but his own liking for her did not astonish him, because he never envisaged it. In the amazement of his new position, the weight and splendour of his new responsibilities, the fact

that Mary Wymondham was his close friend escaped him; he believed her to be an unimportant factor in his life. Whereas she knew that she was of great value to the isolated, discouraged man whose heritage had come too late. His fine, careless rapture was gone, as the flush in the sky goes when once the sun is above the horizon; but the sun has to run its course, and perhaps it never remembers the flush that greeted it as it climbed over the edge of the world.

Mary Wymondham was not a detestable woman, therefore it need not be said that she was nearly free from vanity; but her sane, well-balanced mind possessed clear eyes, and with them she saw how greatly Sandy needed her, and she gave to him with both hands.

"You must help me, Mary," he said to her the morning after Syd's return with his wife. "I shall have a hardish row to hoe, for I do not like her, and I never shall, but——"

"But you just do your best; exactly, Sandy. No more do I like her, but—there must be something in her that you and I can't see, or Syd wouldn't love her, I suppose," she added, after a little pause, during which her well-shaped, brownish hands, with their polished nails, were busy with some hyacinth bulbs she was potting.

Sandy looked at her hands with the far-off look in his small, grey eyes that would have seemed so much more appropriate to Syd's lustrous brown ones. "Oh, no, there's no doubt about that. He certainly loves her. In fact—it's a strange thing, Mary, but the boy seems almost to idolize her. And even now, with all her improvements—her good clothes—her well-dressed hair—all the little things a man can't describe, but can only feel—she is so desolatingly ugly. She is like a lizard or something. Her eyes don't seem to look at things, they seem to *dart* at 'em. She has been playing the piano this morning, and he sat positively drinking it in. It—it was almost painful, Mary; that beautiful boy——"

Mary rubbed some loose earth from her hands. "It isn't really painful. You mustn't get hipped about it. After all, she seems to be a singularly gifted woman, and—Syd is *not* singularly gifted."

Sandy frowned. This was one of her old-time speeches that annoyed him. What she said was perfectly true, but it seemed to him that she need not have said it.

Syd was Syd, and to Sandy the one really perfect thing in the world.

Mary eyed him critically, her nose a little wrinkled, and was her way when anything caused her to feel scornful. Sandy was really rather idiotic about Syd, she thought, and her thought was writ large in her face.

"Don't care for that remark, do you?" she asked him, her nose resuming her customary smoothness as he did not speak. Then he laughed.

"I *am* an ass, just as you think," he said; "but—I feel exactly as though he were my son, you know——"

"H'm! Boys of fifteen don't generally have sons, do they? However, I know what you mean, and I mean only that—well, let's regard Maria Paz (detestable name as spilt milk, and waste no tears on her.)"

Sandy wasted no tears on his sister-in-law. His manner towards her was of a suavity so unusual in him that Syd marvelled openly:

"I say, Sandear, you *are* a blessed old courtier," the boy declared one day, as the two were on their way to the stables to inspect a new Irish mare that Sandy was giving Syd for a birthday present. "Maria Paz says your manners are as good as any Spaniard's, and that means a lot from her, I can tell you!"

"Thanks," Sandy returned a little dryly, for he knew what Syd had apparently never learned, that there were many kinds of Spaniards, and that his sister-in-law did not spring from the hidalgo class. He had been in Spain; he remembered that the vast majority of that country's male inhabitants went through life with a grave courtesy very much marred by ruthless and constant spitting, and some instances told him that Maria Paz's mankind were of the spitting kind.

"She says," continued Syd, as they reached the stable "that you are the only man in England who can bow."

Then Sandy used a rude monosyllable relative to the affair of the world, and told his young brother to tell his wife not to make idiotic remarks.

"My manners are beastly," he declared, "and if they weren't, she has no right to generalize about Englishmen, whom she knows only half a dozen at most. English gentlemen have the best manners in the world. Tell her so."

Syd laughed. He was never hurt by his brother's rough

ness, and he was too happy over Sandy's apparent liking for his wife to take exception to this minor outbreak.

The world was full of sun to Syd, he adored his wife, all of whose best qualities were brought out by prosperity, and her strange playing affected him almost as a charm might have done. She could be a goblin at the piano, but also she could be what seemed to him an angel. And he saw and heard only the angelic in her.

As the autumn days shortened into winter ones, Sandy, much as he disliked Maria Paz, found himself more and more bound to acknowledge that she had one great quality.

Maria Paz Sharrow could charm, and she could repel; she could not bore. She was never in the way, nor out of it when wanted. She seemed to possess a gift of being *à propos*; she never obtruded even the sight of herself. She was quiet, dark, very silent—one never felt, as Sandy put it to Mary, the "Oh, my God, is she being bored?" feeling. She was one of the very few women who could be let, and who let, alone.

"She is really not at all bad," Mary agreed, "and she makes the boy so happy that he shines. She has rubbed him with mental and moral phosphorus. And she played divinely last night."

Old Lady Hainault was, of all the people invited to meet the bride, the only one who did not more or less succumb to what seemed her unconscious charm. Maria Paz's charm was not that of other women; she neither smiled, nor flattered, and she was not over amiable about her music, for she played only and whenever the mood seized her.

Her black eyes looked steadfastly at people, but they had no softness, no sweetness. She seemed in a curious way to be saying mutely: "I won't raise a finger to make you like me; I will be passive; and if you all loathe me, then I'll loathe you."

But people did not loathe her.

Only Lady Hainault told Sandy that she could not stand the new Mrs. Sharrow.

"Of course, you'll say my nose is out of joint because of Isobel. And my nose is out of joint. I wanted him to marry her, because he was always a love of a boy; he is to be rich, and so on. But it isn't that. It's this. Er—shall I go on? I feel that I am about to become very rude."

"Become rude, then—only go on," Sandy urged her.

The old lady eyed him with an expression that in youth had been seraphic.

"She is such a horrible little cad, you know," she said.

"Now *ain't* I rude?"

"You are, very."

Sandy's own expression was so unmoved that an instinct of coquetry (which, like the worm, never dies), stirred her ancient heart.

"If I were twenty years younger," she declared, with an archness that would have been *macabre* were it not for the fact that she herself saw and laughed at its absurdity, "your freedom wouldn't be worth a day's purchase. I should *marry* you."

"That would be," Sandy returned laughing, "a case of crabbèd age and youth—I being crabbèd age. You are younger than your twin granddaughter at this very minute, Lady Hainault, and you know it."

So she liked Sandy very much.

And Maria Paz, always beautifully dressed, always followed by Syd's adoring eyes, began, at Sandy's request, to give dinner-parties at Sharrow, and at these parties, she learned—learned the manners and ways of the people amongst whom she had come to live.

She was adaptable as a clamberer, yet her manner seemed always to be saying: "I will not budge to suit you; if you don't like me as I am, you can hate me; I don't care."

Then, after a month of rain, during which she sat constantly over a fire, with a thick, soft shawl about her shoulders, came the birthday party, and the episode of the orange-coloured gown.

CHAPTER LXI

FROM the moment of his first arrival at Sharrow, the room that had made the greatest appeal to Syd had been the so-called Chinese Room. The faded colours on the satin walls—the ancient embroideries, not stretched, but hung in soft, smooth folds—had held for the boy some subtle charm, and for the man the charm was the same.

Then, too, the old porcelain vases, with their brave brightness of colours, their apple-green, their bullock-blood red, were of the refined, subtle art that Syd best understood. The grinning dragons were, to him, not curious, or repulsive, they possessed a real beauty.

Sandy, whose own associations with the room were not very pleasant, had remembered his brother's old love for it; and when the young married pair arrived, they found that the Chinese Room, to whose rather scant furniture had been added a beautiful little Bechstein grand piano, had been dedicated to their exclusive use.

Sandy being of the old-fashioned type of man, who have fixed ideas about the general needs of women, had set flowering plants about on the floor, and a couple of five-foot-high rose-glasses were continually replenished with what the really pleased Maria Paz called "long-legged" red roses.

"It is good of you, Sandy," she said, looking at him with a queer little light in her eyes; "thanks."

And Sandy knew that she knew of his deep-rooted distrust of her, and that she had made up her mind never to try to remove it. For this he respected her. In some ways they were alike: in their powers of silence; in their dogged passivity; and greatly as he hated Syd's having married her, he yet could not withhold from himself the knowledge that she puzzled and interested him more than ever.

And as rooms often take on something of the characteristics

of the women who live in them, so the queer Chinese Room with its faint embroideries, its vivid porcelains, its all but priceless bronzes, grew to look, in Sandy's eyes, like his inscrutable little sister-in-law.

One thing, ever since her arrival, had brought his mind to a halt. Her clothes; her beautiful black, white, grey, or mouse-coloured frocks, which suited her to perfection, yet he felt, somehow, in the depths of his unenlightened, masculine brain, that they did not express her.

"But they are beautiful," Mary Wymondham expostulated, when he confided this inarticulate conviction to her. "I never saw a better-dressed woman."

He nodded. "I know, of course, they are beautiful, but they—they aren't *her*, somehow. They don't speak for her as—well, as yours speak for you, for instance, Mary."

Mary blushed bravely, looking at him. "How dear of you to say that! But do you really think my tweeds and flannels express all of me, Sandy?"

There was in her voice a certain wistfulness, which he answered.

"And your beautiful soft velvets and your laces! Don't forget your fine feathers. Yes, I do think your clothes express you. I can't explain just what I mean, but I do."

And Mary, still blushing, laughed, and understood.

The day before Sandy's thirty-fourth and Syd's twenty-first birthday, a cousin of Maria Paz's came to Sharrow; a Señora Cristina Lopez.

The arrival of this unknown woman made Sandy very nervous. There was to be a birthday dinner and a dance, and somehow, with the desolating extra sense that was his, Sandy knew that Cristina Lopez would be what he mentally classified as dreadful.

"Maria Paz isn't dreadful," Mary suggested, "so why should her cousin be?"

"Every flock has its flower. I feel that Maria Paz is the flower of hers. Although," he added justly, "the old father wasn't bad."

Cristina Lopez *was* "bad." She was a short, full-bosomed Catalonian, with much bluish-white rice-powder on her dark face, and with a harsh, loud voice.

She was the wife of a Barcelonian doctor, and having been several times to Paris, and once to Rome, she had a delightful conviction that the world was hers.

As she drank her tea with an elegant curve of her little finger on which gleamed a large turquoise, Sandy watched her with a kind of impatient amusement. It was gall to him that Syd's wife should be looked down upon, but life had taught him its sad lesson of "after all, why not?" and in her portentousness Señora Lopez was really funny. Syd saw the portentousness, but he had not the sense of humour of his lean-jawed brother.

"I say, Sandy," he murmured, while the Barcelonian gave Maria Paz a voluminous and shrill account of the doings of their acquaintances at home, "I am sorry."

"Sorry for what, old child?" Sandy stretched his long legs, and looked at his shoes as he spoke. He had hoped Syd would not notice.

"This—this woman. She's *fearful!*"

"Rot!"

But Syd's face was flushed, and he was biting his lips nervously. "Isn't it funny how—how near relatives can differ."

Sandy was about to agree with all the warmth of acquiescence at his command, when Maria Paz rose with a little shriek, and darted across the firelight into the dark, which she at once destroyed by a twist of the electric-light button.

"He must come," she cried, more loudly than Sandy had ever heard her speak, as she sat down at a writing-table. "*Mi querido Miguel. N'est ce pas, Seed? My cousin Miguel Fons is in London. He must come, must he not, for the fiesta to-night?*"

Sandy rose. "If you know the name of his hotel, Maria Paz, you can get him on the telephone," he said quietly. "It is now five-and-twenty to six—he could easily be here in time for dinner."

She, too, rose, and stood facing him. Her small, fiery face, with its curious, subdued look, was turned steadily to his, yet she seemed to be melting away behind it; it was as if her spirit retired, leaving her eyes to guard its flight.

Sandy waited, and after what was really only a second or two, but which seemed a very long time to him, she thanked him conventionally, and he rang and gave the necessary order to the butler.

Syd was surprised, grateful, and ashamed of himself, and, as usual with him, gave vent to his confused feelings.

"You're a wonder, Sandear," he said, laying his hand on

Sandy's arm ; " you only like her, and I—you know what I feel ; yet you are so—so brave about her relations."

Sandy laughed. " Don't be a confounded young snob," he said. " It's very nice that she wants them to come. Maria Paz," he added, in a louder voice, " I cannot speak your beautiful language, but—remember that my house is your house, and all your friends are welcome to it."

He did not know why he said this, possibly it was to combat a certain horror of the Spanish woman's people that he could not conquer ; perhaps it was a fine feeling of loyalty to his brother ; perhaps, although this never occurred to him, it was an instinctive sentiment of loyalty to his own name, his own house. This woman was now a Sharrow, therefore her people must be, to a certain extent, his.

However this may be, it was with the determination to do his duty to the fullest extent that he met Miguel Fons just as the second dressing-bell went. A motor had been sent to the train, and Sandy heard it stop, and went across the court, where the great torches were burning steadily in the quiet winter air, to meet his sister-in-law's cousin.

" How do you do ? " he said gravely, as gravely as any Spaniard, holding out his hand.

And then his heart sank, for Miguel Fons was very loathsome to him. The man was small, delicate-looking, and his great wet black eyes swam, languorously, under heavy lids. He was clean-shaven, but needed the razor at that minute, and his mouth was subservient as he gave a warm hand for a second into Sandy's grasp.

It was plain that he was overawed by the gentleman whose brother his cousin had married.

As they went back across the courtyard, the dark eyes seemed to absorb its beauties in a way that was almost offensive to Sandy.

At the door, the Spaniard bowed, and urged his host to pass in before him. It was rather horrible, but Sandy, with something he knew to be perilously near a frown, insisted on his guest's preceding him, and his guest finally obeyed. The man was, and looked, a cad.

With all his heart, as he dressed, Sandy wished that Syd's sight might be blinded to this fact. Syd was so happy, so proud of his wife, it seemed a pity that he should have to blush for her relatives.

But a surprise was in store for Sandy.

CHAPTER LXII

MIGUEL, clean-shaven, and dressed in old, but well-cut clothes, had a quaint little success of his own.

Lady Hainault, who sat on Sandy's left, the Duke and Duchess being present, informed her host that the beautiful, velvet-eyed one had won her ancient heart.

"Very good-looking, isn't he? and so nice and foreign."

"Very foreign," Sandy agreed, dryly, inwardly marvelling at the lack of perception of stay-at-home English folk.

"It's a pity your sister-in-law hasn't his looks," pursued the old lady, greatly enjoying her aspic.

"There speaks your jealousy, Lady Hainault! Still bitter about your match-making schemes!"

"I am. Aren't you? Although," she added, suddenly serious, "I am sure she must be very nice, or Syd couldn't be so in love with her!"

Miguel's manners, which were none of the best, caused poor Syd acute misery, but the Spaniard made great progress with one of his neighbours, the pretty wife of a hard-riding squire. Mrs. Merridew was a flirt, and having flirted with every flirtable man of her acquaintance, felt that in flirting with a black-eyed Spaniard was—even though he had, before a quick glance at her own manner of disposing of them, eaten his peas with his knife—enlarging her outlook and increasing her knowledge of the world.

So the dinner went peacefully on, and towards the last of it, Miguel, warmed with success and wine, made the speech that brought about the episode of the orange-coloured frock.

His English was rather attractive. At home he was a dentist, and his degree implying a knowledge of American dental art, he had studied English for several years. The hesitation necessitated by his limited vocabulary lent to his words a grace unknown to the spate of his Spanish conversa-

tion; he borrowed from his ignorance a false modesty that lighted by his velvety, mournful eyes, was charming.

"Ah, yes," Sandy heard him say, as he eyed the spoonful of ice on their way to his mouth with a childish greed, "my cousin is mucha clever—very clever. And a great musician. 'Er father, *es muy sabio*, is a great scholar. A wise man; *un señor gludismo*. We are poor, but—" he shrugged his shoulders, and licked his spoon openly.

"He is rather a dear," Lady Hainault whispered. "And aren't his manners too quaint."

"But I like not her clothes—close—cloves—*como se llama*—clothes. I like splendid clo—clothes. Nice colours. Now it is all black."

Mrs. Merridew, who wore scarlet, was flattered.

"But black suits Mrs. Sharrow so well," she protested.

Miguel, having taken some cheese, cut it into dice, and popped one into his mouth with his knife with admirable dexterity.

"Black! For mornings—*para ir a misa*—to go to Mass, yes. But for her in Ingeland, no. You wear blue—I mean red. And how beautiful it is! My cousin should wear colours and be beautiful, too."

Señora Lopez leant forward. She was gorgeous, though tubby, in a frock covered with minute gold scales, and her ornaments were topazes.

"Miguel," she called, in her strident voice, and continuing for some seconds to speak in Spanish.

He raised his eyebrows. "*Ah sí? Bien, bien.* Good. My cousin tells me," he added, turning to Syd, "that she brought from Paris an isplendid robe for Maria Paz! It is well."

At this point, the Duchess, who was greatly bored by Miguel, began to talk to Sandy, so that he did not catch Syd's reply. That Syd was annoyed, however, could escape no one. Miguel had got on his nerves; there was, to him, no balm in the Spaniard's soft eyes, no fun in his atrocious manners. He was bitterly ashamed of his wife's relations. Turning to his wife, he said something that Sandy did not hear, but Sandy's eyes were fixed on his sister-in-law's face, while he politely responded to the Duchess's strictures on somebody's high notes at Covent Garden, and he saw that Maria Paz was furious. Her small face went white, as if somebody had blown out a light behind it.

Then he heard a strident voice saying in English: "My cousin is right; my husband has dressed me like an old woman. These black-and-white things are of his choice, not mine, and I like them not."

There was a short pause, at the end of which Syd was, judging from this expression, about to make some conciliatory remark, when she interrupted him.

"After dinner, Mrs. Merridew, I will put on a dress my cousin Cristina Lopez got for me in Paris. That will show you that, in matters of colour, your taste and mine agree."

Cristina Lopez smiled with a vast amiability at this speech.

Migucl smiled languorously; Syd had turned white, and now sat very erect, talking to his right-hand neighbour, who was Mary Wymondham.

"Of course," Sandy heard the peacemaker say, "your wife likes warm colours; all Southerners do. Personally, I agree with you that the greys and whites become her best. I have always so admired her clothes; I was telling Sandy so only the other day. But, after all, Syd dear, I do think you oughtn't to be cross with her for wishing to dress according to her own taste."

Syd groaned. "I know, Mary, you are quite right, only—you see, it's a most curious thing, for a woman so artistic, but——"

Mary gave a little giggle so unlike her usual laugh that he stopped short in his confidence, which was what she wanted, and stared at her.

"I do hope she will play for us to-night," she hastened to say; "the Duke is so fond of music, it will be a real treat for him——"

Syd's face was clearing now. "Oh, yes, she'll play—she's so awfully kind, you know——"

And Mary wondered how a youth so clear-witted could be so blind.

Sandy, who was watching his brother's conversation with his friend, saw with satisfaction that Mary was succeeding in smoothing the young husband's anger. Then he glanced at his sister-in-law, and his heart fell. Maria Paz was still angry, and it was a kind of malicious anger that half frightened him. There was, it seemed to him, real venom in her hard, high laugh. Her face had changed marvellously,

she looked now older and more common than he had hitherto thought her.

Instinctively his eyes sought Mary's, and by her glance he understood that she shared his uneasiness.

After the ladies left the dining-room, Sandy listened to a long ducal discourse, on the subject of the new Franz Hals bought by the Government for the National Gallery. Poor Sandy did not know whether a Franz Hals was a piece of sculpture or a picture, but he listened with his smooth red head bent politely to the old man's enthusiastic meanderings.

And when, presently, he conducted his male guests back to those of the feminine gender who were drinking coffee in the Chinese Room, he knew that, as he expressed it, they were in for a row. Maria Paz had, throughout the latter part of dinner, looked like a lurid cloud; she meant mischief.

"The hands, my dear Sharrow," the Duke was saying as the door was opened, "are perfectly marvellous. Extraordinary—amazing——" Breaking off suddenly, the old gentleman fumbled for his monocle and screwed it firmly into his ancient eye. "By Jove!" he repeated "amazing!"

In the middle of the room stood Maria Paz clad from toe to toe in bright orange-coloured velvet. The gown was extremely *décolleté*, and her thin, brown arms, on the lower part of which a soft brown fur was very visible, were bare to the shoulder, and separated from her neck only by a narrow strap that sparkled. Her hair was bunched out over her ears, and in it she had stuck a huge, loose-leaved, crimson artificial flower.

Her face was as white as paper, but her thin lips were scarlet and parted curiously over her white teeth. She was moving very slowly to the rhythm of a strange minor melody played by Miguel Fons, who sat sideways at the piano, his legs crossed, a cigarette between his lips.

Sandy hardly realized at first that she was dancing, so slow were her movements, but the Duke enlightened him.

"A—by Jove! And very well she does it! When I was at the Embassy, at Madrid, there was a woman at the Alhambra who"—he broke off short, for the lady of his reminiscence was hardly one to be compared to his host's sister-in-law.

Suddenly Maria Paz spoke to her cousin.

"*Toca mas airat, Miguel,*" she said sharply.

The scene would have been more dramatic if Maria Paz had burst into a wild and indecent *garrotin*, but she did nothing of the sort. Instead, she stood there, swaying, her willow wands of arms waving in the air, her eyes half closed. She made not one gesture that could be taken exception to; her self-control was perfect, and yet the picture she made was, in a subtle way, rather horrible.

Sandy glanced at his guests. The Duchess, her *lorgnon* close to her short-sighted eyes, was watching Maria Paz with exactly the interest she would have accorded to a dancer on the stage; little Mrs. Merridew did not count; Lady Hainault and Mary Wymondham sat together, talking in an undertone.

When the dancer saw Sandy, a little flicker seemed to stir her face for a moment, and after a few seconds of her extraordinary flexible movements, she stood still, stopped the music with a wave of her hand, and walked towards the men.

"You never saw me dance before, Sydney," she said, with fiercely held-back insolence, "did you?"

Syd drew a deep breath. "No," he answered.

"Well, I 'ope you like it?"

Before he could answer, Mary Wymondham came to her. "It was wonderful, Maria Paz," she said; "quite wonderful. I did not know you danced. It is very smart in town, you know, just now——"

Maria Paz did not like Mary Wymondham, Sandy knew, but something in the Englishwoman's measured tact touched the Spaniard. Her face softened, and she smiled.

"Thank you," she said; "we are not friends, but you mean to be kind, and I know it. Shall I play for you?"

She played for nearly an hour, and so angelically that everyone in the room listened in a kind of tremor. She played Beethoven, and bits of Mozart, and a little of Chopin in his simpler moods. Then she played Spanish Folk Songs; minor, wailing things with a pathetic fall at the end of every phrase, and queer Oriental changes.

"She is charming, Sharrow," the Duke declared, as he took his leave; "wonderfully gifted——"

Maria Paz had for once condescended to charm, and she had succeeded.

Only Sandy and Mary, as he walked with her down the

frozen path that led through the park to her house, were not pleased.

"Wasn't it awful, Mary?" Sandy asked.

"Yes, horrid! The dance itself was all right, though—well, you know what I mean; and the frock, though it made her look like a gifted witch in a fairy-tale—it was all right, too. But——"

They both looked up through the bare boughs to the stars that shone in the arabesque of delicate branches and twigs. Sandy finally spoke:

"I know what you mean; that what was all wrong was that she did it on purpose to annoy Syd."

She nodded.

"He was extremely angry at dinner, Mary; I saw you soothing him. And afterwards—while she was dancing I—I don't think I ever saw the boy so furious. Hitherto his share of the Family Temper has been a small one——"

They walked quickly on, for the night was cold, and talked a little, till they stood in Mary's quiet garden. Sandy had opened the house door with her latch-key, and as he did so a deep-voiced, deliberate clock in the hall struck twelve. They both counted the strokes.

"How late," Mary said, a little dreamily, giving him her hand. "I had no idea—when she plays the piano, she is a witch, an enchantress——"

"Yes, Mary—I'd rather have the boy die than suffer——"

She looked up into his gaunt face on which his own sufferings had furrowed such deep, firm lines.

"He will not suffer, Sandy."

"Why not? If he ever finds her out——"

"But he won't. He forgot it all to-night when she played. And she will always play to him."

Sandy sighed. "I dare say; but my nerves are wrong or late, and—I don't think," he added, "that I could bear *that*; to watch him suffer——"

Mary stood in her open door listening to his footsteps until they had died away. Then she went upstairs to her room and sat down in all her bravery of attire.

"Mary Wymondham," she said aloud to herself, "if you are not very careful, he will guess."

Then she went to bed.

CHAPTER LXIII

SEÑORA LOPEZ stayed only three days, but Miguel Fons lingered on.

He liked his new quarters, and having no misgivings on the score of his own charms, stayed on and on, and used his toothpick with the confidence and enthusiasm common to Spaniards of his class.

Sandy, who had been in Spain, tried to be properly grateful that the fellow did not spit on the floor, but this was a negative comfort, and did not greatly help him.

Syd, charmed again by his wife's music, had either forgiven or forgotten the episode of the orange-coloured frock, and so, externally at least, peace reigned supreme in the old house.

The winter was a mild one; the hunting excellent. Syd hunted three or four times a week, and while he was away Maria Paz sat in the Chinese Room. She had a nun-like instinct; she used the Chinese Room nearly as if it were a cloister. Some days Sandy never set eyes on her until dinner, and on Fridays and certain fast days she went without dinner, not even coming to the table.

There was no affectation in her attitude towards religion, but it nevertheless irritated Sandy extremely. Her daily drives to White Shirley he understood, and even liked, but her fasting annoyed him. He hated her face when it was white and drawn with hunger; he disliked her quiet voice of fast days; and his disquiet was increased a thousand-fold by his growing fear for Syd.

Why the boy did not see her as she appeared to Sandy, Sandy could not tell, but he dreaded what seemed to him to be the boy's inevitable day of enlightenment with a nervous terror that to Mary was absurd.

"I tell you I know Syd will never be unhappy," she said more than once.

"And I tell you that I know he would die, not only of grief but of mortification, if he ever came to see her as she really is——"

"As *you* think she really is, Sandy," she corrected. "Why should you be so sure?"

Mary was growing gentler and kinder every day; her quiet manner and brave eyes were the greatest comfort to him at a time when he needed comfort more sorely than he knew.

Syd's happiness was indubitable, but to Sandy it was the happiness of one who, all unawares, has pitched his tent on the slope of a volcano.

Sandy could not, try as he might, help watching for the first symptoms of the eruption that was to blow his brother's joy to atoms. And of all the weary watches in a world full of weary watches, the weariest is that of the one who knows that a great sorrow awaits an unsuspecting happy person.

Maria Paz, meantime, had subsided into the dull-coloured French frocks with a good grace; she did not dance again; she did nothing to disturb Syd.

By the hour she listened while Miguel discoursed to her in the ugly Catalanian dialect; she talked little, but listened to her cousin with a kind of hypnotized pleasure that Sandy one day remarked upon.

"What does Señor Fons talk about?" he asked. "It must be very interesting."

"Interesting? It is. It is of Barcelona that he talks—of the Rambla in the late afternoon when the sky is red; it is of the home of the *apéritif*—when the men go to the *cafés* to drink—and the women walk up and down under the big, ugly plane-trees and—wonder about things, those of us who do not yet know; he tells me of our friends, of those who marry and those who die; of the theatre, of our dear plays in our dear dialect; of our grave Señors, and our beautiful fat old ladies; and of the little fans that wave, wave, wave, just as the sea never ceases, so our little fans never cease—that is home, Sandy," she added fiercely, "and that is why I like to listen when my cousin Miguel speaks."

Sandy had never so greatly liked her; this phase of her mind corresponding closely to that of his which now ruled his life; individual life seemed for him to have stopped; henceforth Syd's life was to be his, and because Syd's lay in this woman's hands, so to a certain extent did Sandy's.

And as he, the well-born gentleman, loved his estate,

his name, his house, so did the common little Catalonian whom his brother had married, love Barcelona, her native town.

"I fear you must be very homesick sometimes, Maria Paz," he said kindly.

She was sitting by the fire; it was a bitterly cold day early in February, and the windows were whipped with sleet. Syd was in town, and Sandy had drifted into the Chinese Room solely because he was lonely.

Maria Paz sat bolt upright in a carved teak-wood chair that the last lord but two had brought back from Peking.

Sandy's mind realized with a kind of snap that his sister-in-law did everything with more intensity than did other people; if she loafed, her supple body was as apparently boneless as that of a young Spanish fisherman's—the most lissom thing in the world—and if it pleased her to set up straight, no stone Bhudda in the whole of the East could be more stonily erect.

When Sandy suggested that afternoon that she might be homesick, she moved slightly, and looked at him.

"Homesick? I? Do you not know that when I lived in Barcelona we were poor, poor, poor? We lived in the Calle S. Sebastiano, a street so narrow that by stretching out my hand I could have stolen the food on my opposite neighbour's table! And our clothes—I made my sister's clothes—everything—everything, but her stockings, and we lived on *arroz*—rice—and water-soup. We had meat on Sundays and *fiestas*. And all our pleasures we had through kind persons. It was Miguel who told us—my sisters and me—about the play. We went once or twice a year. And in winter, we went to bed early, to keep warm. And," she broke off with scorn, "and now you ask me if I am not lonely!"

"Yes," Sandy answered, "I do. For I know you are! You must miss the sun, and the colour, and the gaiety——"

She laughed. "No. But I miss the *noise*. That you cannot understand, but it is true. I miss the loud voices, the vivid words, the great laughs of Barcelona. At night, when we went to sleep, my sisters and I, with our window open (only in the summer, of course), we could hear the noise of the people, the life of the city below us—the clang of the electric trams—the vast view of a great Spanish city. Yes, that I miss. I like England well enough; I like the

grandeza of being your sister. But the quiet here kills me ; it is that. I want," she made an expressive gesture of her little bony hands, "the noise, the noise !"

And Sandy, for all the strength of his disagreeing with her, understood. It was his gift and his curse at once, the power of seeing both sides of every question.

"You must go to London for a few days," he said gently. "You can go to a big hotel, and see many people."

Maria Paz shrugged her shoulders. "Bah ! There is in London only a number of—carriages and waggons, there is no noise of people. It is that I want ; it is that that Miguel gives me. Ah—here he comes ! Miguel," she went on, as Sandy rose unobtrusively as if his sitting down at all had been merely a chance, "come and talk to me of—home."

Miguel, who was attired in a bright brown suit and a red silk waistcoat, approached with an offensive gaiety, all his own.

"*Bien, bien !*" he cried, in his vile French ; "I will tell you, but Lord Sharrow will be—*ennuyé*—"

His smile, which was honestly meant to be ingratiating, gave Sandy an almost irresistible longing to kick him.

"I shall not be *ennuyé* because—I am going for a walk."

Miguel bowed, and taking from his pocket a small book of cigarette-papers, proceeded to roll one of his cigarettes.

Maria Paz, of course, did not smoke, but she settled herself in her chair, and eyed the making of the cigarette with pleasure ; she loved the rank black tobacco.

Sandy went out into the chill, wet evening, and walked two hours up hill and down dale, as fast as he could go.

He could not turn his brother's wife's cousin out of his house, yet the man was making his house unbearable to him.

Some day, however, he reflected, some day sooner or later, Miguel must of necessity go back to his *clientèle* in Barcelona. It is to be feared that as Sandy pounded along over the wet roads he invoked a plague of toothache on the inhabitants of Barcelona.

CHAPTER LXIV

IT was raining; all day long the bare trees had been pearly with water, and the clouds looked like wads of cotton-wool that had been used to wipe up spilt ink.

Syd was hunting, and Sandy was at the Corner House discussing the plans of a cottage hospital he was building at the Brocket Wood end of the village.

Dr. Turner had come in during the afternoon, and his practical suggestions had been of great use to Sandy and Mary. The Vicar had likewise come, and his ideas were listened to with deference, for he was a good simple soul, and Sandy liked him.

Now Sandy and Mary sat alone over the fire, and talked, while Winker, who had added to his father's racial peculiarities a dash of dachshund, and was a very strange looking beast, slept on the rug.

"When do they go, Sandy?" Mary asked him, after a long silence, which they neither of them noticed.

"On Tuesday. Fons is going to-morrow—thank God!"

"Good. He is terrific. I hope he won't come again soon."

"I think not. Syd dislikes him."

"But Syd won't dare tell Maria Paz that he does!"

Sandy's almost white eyebrows contracted a little, and she added hastily: "I mean to say he would hate to hurt her."

"No, you don't; you mean that he is afraid of her, and he is."

"But, Sandy, that would be horrible!"

"It is. When he told her that she must get rid of old Catalina, she hardly spoke to him for a week. He was perfectly miserable about it—it made me," he added, with the sudden savage thrust of his jaw that made him so extraordinarily like his great-uncle, "sick."

Mary nodded. She was sitting idly, her hands folded on her lap.

"Catalina was a mischief-maker and it was necessary to get rid of her; I know from Mrs. Buddifant how she stirred up quarrels between the Protestant servants and John, and one of the kitchenmaids."

"Yes, a liar, too. However, she's gone. And so they're off on Tuesday. Poor Syd! I wonder how he'll like Barcelona."

"I don't know; I believe it's an awful place, and the Catalonians are the commonest of all Spaniards. She is a queer woman; her relations and friends are a nuisance, and yet—I must say I like her for sticking to them. She asked me to-day if she might invite another cousin, who is a priest, to Sharrow during the summer."

Mary sat up. "Oh, my goodness, Sandy!"

"Yes. But, of course, I said I should be delighted. What on earth *could* I say?"

"No. I should say 'No.'" Mary rose, and bending over the dying fire, struck it into momentary brightness. "I would not ruin my house by having it infested with a lot of low-class Spaniards."

Sandy stared, then he burst out laughing. "Well, upon my word! That's pretty strong language from a lady who continually urges me to patience, and who never fails publicly to take the chief Spaniard's part!"

"I don't care," Mary insisted stoutly, "I mean every word of it. That man Miguel is too horrible for words, I—I don't believe he is even *clean*—and now a priest is coming! If you died, she'd make Syd turn the old house into an R. C. seminary."

"If I died, Mary dear, Syd will find himself very restricted in his powers. The entail is strict. No matter how—how obedient he might become, he will not be able to do anything as horrible as what you suggest. I—I have seen how things are going; her power over him is appalling, and—I am making my will—I'm going up to see about it one day next week. Ben Frith is to be, in case of my death, one trustee for—for Syd's son—and Sandy Sharrow the other. He's a good sort, Sandy, and will, I know, agree."

"I see. And—if you and Syd died leaving no heirs—the other Sandy would come into everything?"

"Yes." Another silence fell. Sandy was glad that he

had spoken ; for some weeks he had wanted to take Mary into his confidence regarding Syd's subjection to Maria Paz's will, but he had hated to mention his brother's weakness.

Now it was done, and his mind was easier.

Mary understood ; she would never tell anyone of his precautions, and she would not love poor Syd the less for his weakness.

The rain pattered softly against the windows ; the fire died down again ; and the scraping of the bough of a big cedar against an angle of the roof over the drawing-room told them that the wind had come up.

" I must be going," Sandy said lazily, his head leaning against the back of his chair ; " it must be nearly seven."

But he did not move. They were both of them lapped in the luxury of idleness after hard work.

" I like that frock, Mary," he went on presently ; " blue is such a nice colour."

She made a little murmuring sound of gratified agreement, but did not speak.

It seemed to her that she had loved him all her life.

Again the cedar bough knocked softly against the roof ; the rain came down harder.

" Why don't you stay and dine with me ? "

" Wish I could, but as it's that beast's last evening—hallo ! what's that ? "

The garden gate opened and closed with a bang, followed by the sound of quick steps.

Mary's heart gave a great throb. It was thus that Sandy's feet had sounded when he came to tell her of Syd's marriage.

She half rose, and at the same instant she and Sandy both turned to the nearer window. The footsteps broke into a run.

Hatless, white, wild-looking, his hands beating feebly against the pane, Miguel Fons stood staring into the room, his mouth opening and shutting in apparent wordlessness. With one stride Sandy was at the window, and opened it.

" What's the matter ? " he asked sternly.

" It's—it's——" Miguel's tongue ran rapidly across his dry, loosely-opened lips, and his yellow-tipped fingers clutched upward in the firelight.

" What is it ? " Mary stood by Sandy.

" It's—it's—Seed—'e is dead ! "

Sandy drew back a step.

Mary stared a moment, and then said angrily: "Nonsense! it's impossible. Don't stand there like a drivelling idiot. Tell us *at once* what has happened!"

Then Miguel burst into tears, his hands pressed first against his eyes, then together.

"It is true," he wailed; "they 'ave brought 'im 'ome—'is—is 'ead is all—s-smashed to pieces!"

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CHAPTER LXV

THE weeks that followed were the most tragic of Mary Wymondham's life ; but if she had been forced to lose her memory of her whole life save that of a few weeks, she would have chosen to keep clear in her mind those dreadful ones immediately following Syd's death.

Things that happened later might seem to some women to be worthier of the value she silently set on those stormy spring days ; but, to her, the beauty and importance of her whole life dwindled to nothing in comparison with them.

The horror of the night of the accident, dread and blighting though it was, held for her a secret joy ; she it was to whom Sandy turned ; she it was who sat with him by the bed where lay that thing, its face covered with a cloth, that only a few hours before had been his brother and the hope of his whole existence.

"Don't leave us alone, Mary," Sandy had said to her, as they reached the house after a breathless run through the night, "stay with me."

And she stayed.

Only while Turner and Sandy were in the library together did she see anyone but him, and then she was so short and sharp

with Maria Paz, who was in hysterics, that to the end of her days the Spanish woman never forgave her.

"You mustn't scream," Mary said, her large strong hand holding Maria Paz firmly down on the sofa, where she had flung herself, and where she lay twisting and writhing like an epileptic. "You must be quiet. Sandy will hear you."

Maria Paz burst into a flood of Spanish that sounded too like vituperation greatly to impress Mary ; but the screams, which were of a wailing, shrill quality almost eastern in their regularity, ceased at once.

Then Mary sought Miguel.

He stood in the Chinese Room by the fire, and as she

entered he turned, his tobacco box in his hand, a rectangular bit of white paper caught by its extreme edge in his lips.

He had gone a strange greyish-yellow colour, and his red lips writhed a little, the cigarette paper trembling between them.

"'Ow is she?" he asked.

Mary looked at him. He was very repulsive to her, and she had come to send him away; but she was sorry for him, he was so disorganized, his black glossy eyes held such a look of terror.

"Maria Paz?" she returned, kindly enough, "she is quite all right."

Her ears were waiting for the sound of the library door, which sound would be the signal for her to return to Sandy; she sat down, and, looking up at the Spaniard, she began her task.

"Señor Fons," she said, "I have only a moment in which to talk to you, and a rather unpleasant thing to say. So I will say it at once."

He lit his beautifully rolled cigarette, and drew a deep puff of the acrid smoke of his contraband tobacco.

"Yes?"

"I think—that now that this terrible thing has happened, and Lord Sharrow is in such deep mourning, it would be better if—there were no guests in the house."

"You mean you wish me to go?" His voice was level, his eyes half closed.

"Yes. Do you not think it would be better?"

He smoked in silence for a moment, and then answered her with the dignity born even in underbred Spaniards.

"Perhaps. You may be right, Miss Wymondham; I will tell my cousin your words."

"Please do not do that. Maria Paz is in great grief, and——"

"And I am her only relation here; the only one of her own people. I cannot desert her unless she wishes me to go."

Mary felt the strength of his argument, and knew that there was only one way to smash it.

"You forget. It is not your cousin's house. It is Lord Sharrow's house, and he, I know, would prefer to be alone in it just now."

The cigarette that was being rolled between Miguel's lean fingers was quiet for a moment.

"'E asked you to tell me to go?"

She knew that if she said "Yes," he would go at once. She understood that, strange as his code was, it yet was a code, and that he would follow it.

"No," she answered, "he did not ask me, but I have known him all my life—ever since I was a little girl, and I know what he likes."

"You mean that he does not like me?"

"I did not mean that, but I believe it. I do not think he likes you very much."

The Spaniard bowed. "He has been kind to me. And I believe that you tell the truth. So I will go. But my poor cousin must not be alone without any of her own people *pour la consoler.*"

"I think it would be fitting if her father came."

"No. But this does not interest you, Miss Wymondham. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, and it was clammy and cold like a sick monkey's. In his eyes she read something akin to relief. He was glad to go; the horror of the dead man upstairs was too much for him. He really felt that he ought to stand by his cousin in her affliction, but every nerve in him shrieked to get away.

Mary understood. She ordered a closed carriage to take him to the station, knowing the Southerner's dread of night air, and it was she who bade him finally good-bye, and promised to write to him in London, to tell him about the funeral.

When he had gone, she sat for hours beside poor Syd's bed, Sandy by her, neither of them speaking.

She never forgot the hours as they passed away into eternity. Sandy's face, white, grim, stamped by a look of endurance as far removed from resignation as it was from resentment; the cheery ticking of Syd's little travelling clock on his dressing-table.

The horror of the whole thing sank deep into her soul, and she never forgot; but she loved Sandy, and now in his hour of need he had turned to her as naturally as a child turns to its mother, and to the lonely woman this was of an inexpressible sweetness.

When dawn came, she persuaded Sandy to drink some tea, which womanish remedy he took without much difficulty, seeming to find a certain comfort in its warmth.

She told him that Miguel Fons had gone, and he accepted the news with an indifferent nod, but she knew that he was glad.

The next day the rain began, the rain that, in Sandy and Mary's minds, was for ever to be associated with that terrible time.

It rained steadily, almost without an hour's relief, for quite three weeks, and when, at length, the heavy clouds parted sullenly, as if loath to do so, and a pale filmy blue appeared poor Syd had been over a fortnight in his grave, the turf on it had turned to a vivid emerald, and all the letters and telegrams relative to the disaster had been answered. The world went on just as before; another young man was dead, people forgot to exclaim at the pity of it. Syd was dead and there was an end of him and of the question.

And the little path behind the tall hedge was worn with Sandy's feet as he went to and from Mary's house.

He was a little older-looking, a little thinner, a little more silent, and to the average person of his acquaintance that was all the change the catastrophe had wrought in him. Only Mary knew that some spring within him had snapped; that he could never again be what he had been even since his return home.

Miguel had come to the funeral, and left immediately after, in a manner most correct.

He had seen Maria Paz only once alone, and she apparently had not suggested his staying on.

She, too, was absolutely correct. She wore very deep mourning, and a thick lace mantilla hid her hair when she was in the house. Every day she went to Mass, and every afternoon now she drove over to White Shirley at vespers.

Her piety had won favour for her in the eyes of the tenants and servants. Her small yellow face was wan, and round her eyes were black, sunken circles. Sandy told Mary that he was surprised at the force of her grief. "She cared more than I knew," he said.

Mary only nodded. There seemed something in that atmosphere that she could not understand. She distrusted something, she could not say what it was.

When Don Antonio came, Mary, by chance, was the one who met him.

She was walking home from church one Sunday afternoon

when she saw coming towards her in the rain, a tall figure, with kilted skirts and a long, full cloak.

At first she thought it was a woman, but as she came closer, she saw that it was a priest dressed in the manner of a Spanish country *curé*.

The brim of his silk felt hat was turned up at the sides flat against the low crown; his cloak was very long, and very full, and under his tucked-up *soutane* she caught a glimpse of grey woollen trousers. His steel shoe buckles glistened in the glancing light of a lantern he carried.

It was a strange figure to meet in an English country road, and Mary knew instantly, even before he spoke, that he was in some way linked with Maria Paz.

He greeted her as he passed, in the rural Spanish way, and she went on home, expectant of news from Sandy. In this she was not disappointed.

Sandy sat in his study half an hour later, when old Waters announced to him that a gentleman had come to see Mrs. Sharrow, and had also asked for his lordship.

"It's a—a priest, my lord, I fancy," the butler added, "a—a foreigner, sir."

Sandy rose. He had been writing cheques to settle some small outstanding accounts of Syd's, and his face was grim with misery.

"I'll come in at once. Where are they? In the Yellow Drawing-room?"

"No, my lord, in the Chinese Room."

Don Antonio sat by the fire, his large, muddy shoes steaming on the fender. His hair, which was intensely black, and close cropped, seemed to fit down over his brow like a tight cap.

He rose when Sandy entered, and Maria Paz introduced him as her uncle, Don Antonio Vila.

The priest's English was practically non-existent, and his manner unconciliatory in the extreme. In halting English and a little French, he explained to Sandy that he regarded Syd's death as a direct sign from Heaven that God was angry with Maria Paz for having married a heretic.

"I weep for his soul," he added, his long, unshaven upper lip pressing heavily on the under one, which was a little pendulous and looked moist, "but it is a punishment for my niece."

"Will you have some tea?" Sandy asked him, and Maria

Paz explained that her uncle was not a young man, and, moreover, he suffered from rheumatism, she had taken the liberty of asking him to spend the night at Sharrow.

Sandy bowed.

It really seemed to him to matter extremely little who spent the night at Sharrow, and he was too sorry for his sister-in-law to resent anything that she might find comfort in doing.

So Don Antonio spent the night in the room that had been Miguel's, and he spent thirty other nights in the same room.

Maria Paz seemed to like having him there, and Sandy's indifference to everything was too deep to be touched by such a trifle.

The man was quiet, he never tried to talk to his host, he gave no trouble to anyone. He was more like a tall, black ghost than anything else.

"At least," Sandy said one day to Mary, who was protesting with him for allowing the priest a foothold in the house, "he is better than Miguel. He doesn't spit any more than Miguel, and he does *not* use scent on his hair."

So the spring wore away, wearily enough, and the sweet sunny days were an added pain, like the throb in a wound, to Sandy in his loneliness. Every day he saw Mary, sometimes even twice in a day, and her kindness and understanding gentleness were his only comfort.

They talked together, and walked, but in one matter she could not move him; he had stopped all the work he had undertaken for the improvement of the estate, and he refused to have it resumed.

Mary tried begging him; she tried bullying; all in vain.

Then, at last, in July, something happened, which lifted him clean out of his drowsy rut, and nearly blinding him with its flash of revelation, set his mind working once more.

CHAPTER LXVI

IT was a blazing July day. Each leaf on the trees was at its fullest and its darkest green. Summer had reached its height, the promise of spring had come to fulfilment, and like most fulfilments, seemed imperfect.

The foliage was too dark, too dense; the veins in every leaf were traced in silver-coloured powder, while the lower boughs of the trees near the road were charged with layers of dust.

Rain was badly needed, and on that afternoon, for the first time, the bold blue of the sky was softened by slowly-gathering masses of thunderous-looking clouds.

Sandy was walking in the elm avenue with Don Antonio, and for over an hour the two men had paced up and down in the sun arabesqued shadows.

The old priest had taken off his hat, and over his head he had tied his handkerchief. It was a Friday, therefore his heavy jaw was covered with a thick, bluish crop of beard.

This was objectionable to Sandy, but not nearly so much so as the priest's left hand little finger-nail, which was quite a quarter of an inch long, and as white as if he had been a leper. This sign of gentility, in that its possessor could under no conditions be guilty of any kind of manual labour, is a common one in Latin countries, but it hardly ever fails rather to sicken men of other races.

His hands, with this elegant emblem carefully manifest, folded on his small but protuberant stomach, Don Antonio walked slowly, with a kind of pomp, every inch a Spanish *parecco*.

"God's ways," he was saying, as he and his host turned for the twentieth time by a group of dusty oleanders, "are beyond our understanding. It is, of course, to you,

incomprehensible why He should have removed your brother——”

Sandy made no reply. For some days the priest had been trying to induce him to talk about Syd, and this, courteous though he was forcing himself to be to the intruder, he would not do.

The old man was far more pervasive and dangerous than the frankly and vulgar Miguel, for although he was nearly a peasant, he was a reader, and had educated himself. He had made friends with the servants, many of whom seemed really to like him, and Sandy knew from Mrs. Puddifant's demeanour that she suspected him of proselytizing.

He had, Sandy knew, some definite reason for trying to lead the conversation to Syd, but the Englishman had made up his mind to keep his poor brother's name as much out of the Spaniard's mouth as possible.

So, looking up at the clouds, which were now rapidly assuming an ominous saffron hue, Sandy was silent.

Don Antonio glanced at him sharply. "To you, no doubt," he went on slowly, "it seems cruel that your brother——"

"I beg your pardon—I do not wish to be rude, Don Antonio, but I cannot possibly discuss my brother's death with you."

The Spaniard had the thick, slightly pock-marked skin so common in his country; underneath its opaqueness there now crept a faint dark-red flush.

"I see." He bowed suavely as he spoke, but the flush remained. "I—I had, however, a reason for wishing to bring your mind to what you will forgive me for describing as a more normal state."

Sandy looked at him with mild surprise.

"A reason?"

"Yes."

For a few minutes they walked on in silence, and then, as they came into full view of the house, the priest held up one of his white, fat hands in a way that claimed his host's attention.

"There is your house," he said in his curious, incorporeal but perfectly understandable French, "it is a most beautiful house; you are a very rich man—a millionaire, I dare say."

"I suppose I am," Sandy admitted reluctantly; "but——"

"Wait! Your home is of the oldest. You are what we in Spain would call a *Grandee*—am I not right?"

Sandy's idea of a *Grandee* of Spain formed a picture so remarkably unlike his own raw-boned, red-headed self, that but for the deep sadness which lay on his soul, as clouds lie against the mirth of a crimson sky, he would have laughed aloud. As it was, he smiled—a melancholy smile that in the bright sunlight plainly showed how much deeper the events of the past months had furrowed the lines in his face.

"You are, then, in effect," pursued the priest, his dark eyes fixed on his companion's face, "a man of much importance."

"I dare say you think so—it is very kind of you," murmured Sandy, "but still I don't see what——"

Whatever the faults of Don Antonio might have been, servility was not one of them. He made a stern gesture, frowned, and continued, as if disdainingly to regard such an interruption: "If you will have a little patience, I will explain, Lord Sharrow."

Lord Sharrow bowed. After all, the man was old; he was his guest, and he was Syd's uncle by marriage. For these reasons, then, Sandy owed him courtesy.

The wind had risen now—a hot wind that, in stirring the trees, dislodged little clouds of dust that had been resting on their leaves; the western sky was a mass of scarlet and gold, and against its glories of colour the storm clouds loomed blacker and blacker.

The storm was very near. Syd had loved what he called a rattling good storm, and the words suddenly floating into Sandy's mind hurt him like the turning of a knife in a wound.

He was not given to self-pity, but for a moment the tragedy of his life seemed to him to blot out the world.

Maria Paz, who loathed the dusk, had turned on the light in the Chinese Room, which faced that way; Sandy, gazing at the old house, saw the ruddy windows, and knew that the Spanish woman was there in the room his brother had loved. Then another light flashed out into the golden evening, and another.

It was almost day out of doors, but in the house evening had come; it was the hour when lights are lit and poor men hurry home to their wives, and children's faces are given a

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rub by the maternal apron to smarten them up for Daddy's coming—the hour when workers enter into their daily heritage of rest after labour—that rest which people who never work can never know; the hour when, in churches, quiet people pray at vespers; the hour when cows walk in the stately measure of stupidity back to the farm; the hour when factories release their crowds of girls anxious for life; the hour when trout go to sleep; the hour when youth awakes and mischief stalks abroad, to many people, not thinkers, no doubt, but imaginers, the best and fruitfulest hour of the twenty-four.

And there was Sharrow, after the somnolent afternoon waking up, preparing for the evening. Sandy stood still staring at it. It was his house, the house that he had for so long adored: the house that formerly had meant to him the romance of the world. When that had ceased to be, when he returned to it, a broken, world-hurt man, it still contained much, for its old walls were to shelter Syd—Syd then had become his romance.

Now Syd had gone, and only the walls remained, and they seemed to him an empty shell. He cared, it seemed to him, very little for it. With Syd, all the old magic had gone.

He had talked to no one, not even to Mary, of what he felt about Syd's death, but he himself knew. He knew quite well that Syd's death meant to him a kind of passive despair. There had been not one hour since that April evening, when Miguel brought the news, when he, Sandy, would not have died, could he have been given the choice.

Syd was gone; his life was over; what might come henceforth was something extraneous, not his fault, not his merit. His life was over, and his duties from now onward seemed to him to be of the passive order.

He had sat all through a long night by the dead body of Syd, now, knew; he knew, it seemed to Sandy, all the things that Sandy had missed. Syd was to die, not in his own young frame, but in that he was never to have a son. No little boy of Syd's was going to rise from the place. Sandy had planned these things, and they had turned to naught. Syd, and Syd's seed, were to be nothing. God, or the Prime Factor, had willed it so, and there was no appeal.

Sandy made no appeal, conscious or unconscious.

him, things were; God was; Fatality was. And now, while he awaited in the great hush of the coming storm, the old priest's words, he felt again, and of late he had many times felt the weight of the unavoidable. What was to come, was to come, and not his to protest.

"My son," Don Antonio's voice was heavy with solemnity, "your brother is dead; he will have no son."

Sandy nodded, his eyes fixed on the yellow spots of light that meant to his imagination the room where Maria Paz was sitting; he could see her, her strange withdrawn look; her extraordinary passivity of expression.

There she was, the woman who was to have carried on his race; the woman whom a bad tempered horse had thwarted in her life-work. Sandy knew the beautiful patience of Latin women in the matter of child-bearing. He knew that the protests of Protestant women against the illness, the suffering of child-raising was not the same; that they looked on each child as not in the idea of a gift, but as at least as a duty and that these duties were endured with dignity and grace.

Maria Paz, he knew, would have borne his brother a round dozen of sons without word of reproach. And now there was no one. She would bear, the woman was to bear no Sharrows. And he, in his blundering, tender, masculine way, pitied her.

The clouds, now black, were luminous with sudden lightning as the two men again approached the house.

"Poor soul!" he was thinking.

Then on his dreaming ears fell the old priest's words that at first failed to penetrate to his mind, but words that, when they did reach his brain, seemed for a moment to stop its working.

"My son—you must marry; your family must not be allowed to die out. You must seek a worthy wife, and you must have a son."

CHAPTER LXVII

AFTER the storm that night there followed a calm as beautiful as dawn. In a gentle Heaven shone stars so lovely as to seem comprehensible to the least imaginative of men.

And Sandy Sharrow, in his great house, felt, to the least fibre of his being, the wonder of this calm.

Shortly after twelve, he lighted a candle, and with it in his hand went all over his house.

Electric light could not have supplemented the amazing sweetness of the feeling that pervaded him, whereas the little yellow flicker of the candle seemed to help him to understand.

He went first to the room where he had first seen his great-uncle, years and years before. The old, white-panelled room, with the little dark paintings sunk into the panelling. He recalled the old man, with his sinister face, sitting by the fire; he seemed once more to hear his voice.

He remembered the words the old man had uttered, and his own half-angry awe as he looked round the room.

That was his first station.

Then he went down the shallow stairs, where each step was worn to a gentle hollow, to the Small Hall where had taken place the famous Sharrow-Burton Battle. He remembered the old lord's dramatic entrance, his amused laugh, his words.

He then went to visit the Great Hall, the Chinese Room, where the old man had so bitterly refused to listen to his love story; to his own room in the tower; to the vast, dusky, mysterious others; to the courtyard.

In the courtyard, towards four o'clock in the morning, the great torches still flickered in the iron rings.

Sandy remembered the night he had arrived; the first invasion of his boyish spirit, of the strange, enveloping

Feeling; how the torchlight had flickered and leapt until the old worn coat-of-arms, with its grimacing griffin, had blazed in the surrounding gloom.

He recalled, too, the evening when Maggie Penrose had waylaid him on this very spot, and influenced him to be gentle with his old uncle; how the pretty, blue-eyed governess had made him pause, and brought him back.

As he wandered about the silent house with his draught-blown candle, Lord Sharrow remembered many things, and of these his feeling for his little brother's governess was not the least distinct.

He had, he knew, never loved her, but she had been kind to him, and he seemed to have known from the very beginning of things that she loved him.

The poor Sandy of nearly four-and-thirty, looking back at the Sandy of twenty-three, did not wonder over much at what he had done.

No man, it seemed to him, could do without love. And Viola's love being what it was, weak and worthless, Maggie Penrose, even now when he knew her to have been an intriguer, and a liar, appeared to him to have been of better fibre, of stronger stuff. He did not, that long night through, knowing that he by no possibility could ever forgive Maggie for fooling him, blame that other Sandy, that disappointed, heartbroken boy, for taking what he could get—Maggie's love.

He was bitter, disillusioned, unhappy, but he was truthful still, and the mature man paid to the unhappy boy the tribute of acknowledging that, were history to repeat itself, he would again seize the tangible, long-suffering, understanding love of the governess, as some kind of compensation for the romantic, but not weather-proof affection of poor little Viola.

That night Lord Sharrow faced his past and his future. No man has yet justly and impartially faced his present.

Sandy knew that he had given his idealistic boy's love to poor, weak little Viola Wymondham; that he had given Maggie Penrose in return for a love strong enough to lead her very close to criminal things, a merely grateful mixture of physical attraction and despair.

He knew that in the succeeding years Maggie had poured on his unworthy head a love that, though rooted in dishonour, was yet worth a thousand times more than his

feeling for her. He appreciated her self-abnegation, her patience, her amazing long-suffering.

He knew that he had been unfaithful, selfish, and cruel in his indifference to her. Yet because his nature was fundamentally just, he did not exaggerate his faults nor her virtues.

She had won him by fraud; but she had won him, in a way, and he knew the game, pitiful as it was, had been to her well worth the candle.

And Viola?

For years Viola had been to him a phantom he dared not face.

That night, in the silence of his old house, he faced it, and he knew.

He knew that the Viola he knew had been, to a great extent, a creation of his own imagination. Behind her lovely young face he had built an edifice of mental and moral values of which the poor little thing had never even dreamed. The fault had largely been his. With groans of sheer sorrow, quite apart from repentance, he drew a picture of that evening in Guelph Square when he had come down to the drawing-room drunk, and frightened her out of her wits.

He regretted, with the real regret of a mature man who has lived and suffered, the silly deed of the boy he used to be. Most men have known this regret and its bitterness.

Then, sitting at dawn in the vast waste of the Yellow Drawing-room, a room he hated, Sandy faced his future.

Syd, the motive power of his recent new life, was dead.

If Syd was with God, or if he were a lump of reverting clay he did not know or ask.

Syd was gone. He would never again, whatever his soul might do, be Syd; the animate, warm, beautiful boy Sandy had adored. He was gone. He was no more.

Sandy would never again hear his laugh, see his eyes crinkle with mirth, or watch his adoring aspect while his wife played the piano. Syd had been; he was not.

And Sandy still was.

The old priest, the horrid old man with the unshaved blue chin, and the sly, quiet, black eyes, had told Sandy that he must marry, and by so doing perpetuate his race. The Sharrows must not die out.

At this point in his reverie the courtyard clock struck five

Sandy, his bony, harsh face white as paper, in the unbecoming light of dawn, went to the nearest window, and looked out. The little simple air that years ago the ploughboy had whistled sounded again in his ears. It had become a kind of sign to him. It had come back to him many times, but of late, always at times of crisis.

The night old Dingle had turned up in the Place of the Green Tree, it had haunted him as he drank his absinthe; it had come to him in Rome, as he talked to the Duchess, and, again, as he waited at the station for the arrival of Syd and his bride. The ploughboy had gone out of his life, without even having been seen, that morning when he and Keith had stolen out of the house and gone to Jasper's to buy Winker, but the strange little melody had never gone out of his life. It had stayed, because it had become a part of his mental fabric.

The old priest had said he must marry, and have a son. The old priest was right.

Poor Sandy! For all his sufferings, all his dumb resentments, all his bitterness, for all the thoughts that had drawn the deep lines in his face, there was in him, there would be as long as life remained in him, this much of the boy; he was romantic.

And in this age of practical people, perhaps a spirit of romance has a certain value.

Sandy felt, he did not see, but he felt certain things.

And so in the ugly yellow satin room, as the faint sunlight quietly spread, he felt these things; that he was still a man young enough to have children; to hold a little boy of his own in his arms; to hold it in his arms, at the quaint old stone font in the little church, while the priest gave it its name; that he was still young enough to be kind and good to a good woman who would trust him and give herself to him. That, having a son, he could care in a way for his son's mother. That of all the beautiful and romantic things in a beautiful and romantic world, Motherhood was the most beautiful, that a little boy in his arms might almost make up to him for Syd's going on before.

"I detest Maria Paz," he said slowly, aloud, as the sun came over the oaks at the edge of the park. "I don't like her, but I am glad her son is not to be Sharrow of Sharrow. But—I will be very good to her. Syd loved her, and I will be good to her."

The sun, when he had finally cleared himself of the beautiful shadows of the old trees, spread richly into the Yellow Drawing-room. He laid *patines* of clear gold on the old oak floor; caught sharp corners of the frames of old pictures; lurked with a laugh in mirrors, and on the piano on which Maria Paz had formerly played poor Syd's soul into madness; whitened the white keys, and blackened the black ones into a semblance of night.

The rising sun must be a merry soul; his mirror is hopeful. He must love cheery, lovely, riotous things. And if the sun ever laughs, surely he laughed that morning, for when he finally really swept past the windows, and filled the whole grand, ugly, Georgian room, there lay poor Sandy Sharrow, exhausted with emotion and thought, his head on a purple satin pillow on whose face was embroidered a golden dragon, sound asleep, peace on his hollow eyelids, his thin lips folded in a quiet smile.

Sandy had made up his mind.

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CHAPTER LXVIII

THERE is so much monotony in the life of any gentlewoman living in a quiet English village that one hesitates to inflict on the novel reader an exact account of her days.

And Mary Wymondham's life was so very still, so very peaceful, externally, that one hardly knows how to develop it verbally, without the great offence of boredom. Yet there she dwelt in her little Corner House, and there she lived and had her being.

The sunny summer days slid sweetly by. She could hardly distinguish Tuesday from Wednesday. She was often surprised to find that bedtime had come again ; and yet time was passing, and she knew it.

Thus several months slipped away. Mary marked the weeks and days, as they disappeared, in the simple way of simple folk. The Monday must have been the fourteenth, because Julia Barton's twins were born on the thirteenth, because the Vicar came to tea on the sixteenth.

The moon had been full the night she drove back from Lady Barstons, therefore, according to the almanac, old Jessaiby must have been buried on the Friday—and so on and so on.

Women who live vicarious lives, whose joys and sorrows are the joys and sorrows of others, will understand this ; there are in England many such.

And the accruing, greedy kind, those whose only interests are those strictly personal to themselves, will wonder. Let them.

Mary Wymondham, loving Sandy, was in a way divinely happy, although he did not love her, for she was ministering to him. All those long months after Syd's death, Mary's was the only hand whose touch could soothe Sandy. And for the old-fashioned, generous-hearted woman this was nearly

enough. Nearly, but not quite, for she was a hot-tempered woman, and the whole of anything, bad or good, was of a necessity bound to appeal more than the half of anything even of a thing in itself bitter.

As she sat there in her quiet drawing-room, surrounded by the things her mother and her beautiful high-spirited grandmother had loved, Mary Wymondham was not unhappy. There was at the root of her heart a dull ache, but there was no active discontent, no vital unrest. Sandy did not love her, and she had always loved him, but she was not modern enough for emotional resentment.

He was her friend, and she was his. He came to her for comfort, for that peace which was, in his blighted life, the thing nearest to happiness that he knew. She sympathized with him, scolded him, sometimes she even bullied him; and to her, her measure seemed to be, if not pressed down and overflowing, at least fairly well filled.

Thus the summer passed, and autumn came, a yellow and red autumn, full of fruit, warm colours, flowers, and ripeness. And with it came, to the quiet woman in the quiet house, a strange fulfilment of what seemed to her, life.

It was a mellow day early in September. Mary sat on the ground under the cedar tree, under which a year before she had learned the news of Syd's marriage. She wore a pale mauve muslin gown, with, at the neck and sleeves, a narrow edging of Irish crocheted lace.

Even in the soft, late afternoon sun, in the green dimness of the cedar, she did not look young. She looked precisely what she was—a mature, healthy Englishwoman. Beside her, on the close-cut grass, stood a great basket full of lavender, and another receptacle, a green-lined Spanish bowl, a gift of Maria Paz, held the winnowed, stemless flowers, ready for the little muslin bags into which they were being poured, and in which they were being tied with narrow purple ribbon by Mary.

It was a delightful piece of work, the sun-dried flowers dropped crisply off, between her fingers, into the bowl; their scent pervaded the air, and on the grass lay the little transparent bags that she had made that morning.

Perhaps, of all scents, lavender is the most romantic. Mary loved it, and its poesy had darkened her eyes, and lent a certain languor to her fingers.

She thought, as she worked, of her grandmother, Cyrilla,

and of the story of the lavender bags Cyrilla had made for Lord Sharrow. She wondered if her grandmother had loved Lord Sharrow as she, Mary, loved Sandy! And, of course, she could not answer her own question.

The backward years seemed so long. It was hardly possible that her grandmother could have cared for the old man with the protruding jaw, as she, Mary, cared for Sandy. Mary loved not only Sandy, but his griefs and his scars.

The sun, warm and yellow, waned; the shadow grew longer and blacker; evening was coming. And, pregnant sign of emotion amongst women, Mary Wymondham, busy with her lavender, forgot her tea!

There it stood on its silver tray, with its squat Georgian tea-pot, and its pretty Chelsea cup and saucer, neglected. If well-brewed tea can think, its thoughts must have been amusing.

Rooks cawed in the high trees, and the sun sank, as if bored to death, down the uninterestingly dull western sky.

Mary glanced upward, a little bunch of lavender in her hand. Her mind was vaguely full of Sandy, though she hardly knew that she was thinking of him. The thought of him was like the delicate, pervasive, though unobtrusive, smell of the drying flowers in her hands. It scented the air and made it pleasant, but it drew no attention to itself. And there in the quiet garden she sat, not realizing of what she dreamt, yet dreaming soft, sweet dreams of the man she loved, while the pale sky turned to a faint glory of colour.

If it could be explained, it would be full of romance, but it would be very difficult to draw the resemblance between this woman's soul and the scent of the old-fashioned flower she was shedding to sweeten her household linen.

And then, as the uppermost red rim of the sun disappeared between two cedar branches, and the emerald green of the lawn darkened to black, the wonderful thing happened.

The gate opened, and closed more softly.

"That you, Mary?"

At the sound of Sandy's voice she started. Her cool hands had lain for some time motionless in the bowl. More time had passed than she had realized.

"Yes—it's me, Sandy."

Sandy, very tall and gaunt, in his old grey flannel clothes, came towards her, a kind of half-smile stirring his thin lips.

"I've been away," he said, a little nervously.

"Yes—I know."

"London—with dear old Ben—he has another sma
sister—the professor is a marvellous old man—and I hav
been visiting the other Sandys."

"Yes."

Sandy sat down on the bench, and sniffed.

"I say, how good you smell! What is it—rosemary?"

"Lavender, goose! Mine is sure to be better than your
this year—I'm making little bags—want one?"

Sandy, to her surprise, did not answer for a moment.

Instead, he sat silent in the dusk, a handful of the sweet
herb held to his large, appreciative nose.

The upper windows of Mary's little house were lit now
the small maid was obviously at work.

A cart rattled by, its sound, in reality near, apparently
deadened by the high stone wall.

It was so quiet—so quiet!

Suddenly through the dense leaves of the apple-trees, to
the west, something appeared—a lovely soft light—that
drew each twig with a pencil of fire. It was the moon
rising.

"Look!" Mary said, laying her large, sweet-scented hand
on Sandy's arm.

She was so familiar with the idea of her own love for him,
so convinced that he not only did not, but never could know,
that she felt no embarrassment in touching him. "Look!"

Sandy grasped her hand firmly, and for a few minutes
they sat there in the quiet little garden, hand in hand,
watching the moon rise between the branches of the gnarled
apple-trees.

They neither of them ever forgot the scene, the darkening
garden, the thickly foliaged trees, the growing glow in the
sky.

And then, when at last the moon, free from the trees, rode
high, Sandy spoke.

"Mary," he said very gently, "I have something to say
to you."

"Yes."

She was mildly surprised, but only very mildly, and did
not even turn her eyes to his. Without turning, she could,
with her mind, see him, his pale, gaunt face, his clear, light
little eyes.

"Ever since Syd—died," Sandy went on, "I have been thinking. Or, rather—ever since that old priest suggested—but never mind that."

He paused. "I have been thinking. Can you not guess about what?"

Her hand lay quite quietly in his. "No, Sandy, I don't think I can."

Her little garden was so near to her, so close; she knew it so well. She was at home there, and her hand seemed at home in his. She felt no shyness, no self-consciousness.

There was a short pause, and then gathering her fingers closer into his, he went on: "I have been thinking—about the old place, Mary, since *his* death. I have no heir. If I died now, the other Sandy Sharrow would be——"

"The other Sandy!"

"Yes. The other Sandy. Poor old Great-uncle! And—well, I want to keep it closer than that. Mary—I suppose, as far as a woman can know a man, you know what there is to know about me."

For an almost imperceptible space of time she was silent. Then she agreed simply. "Yes, Sandy."

"And—you know that my life is just about over."

"Yes."

"I loved—Viola—with all my heart. I did, really. Then—there was Miss Penrose, and there were others. I have not been good, Mary; I have even been—indiscriminate. And—I never could love again, really, because—well, I suppose," he added, with a laugh, "because I am not worth it."

"Poor old Sandy!"

Even yet she did not understand, and the little squeeze she gave his hand was nearly as impersonal as that of some man-friend's might have been.

Sandy smiled, but she was looking at the sky and did not see.

"Mary," he asked very gently, "could you marry me?"

For a long time, it seemed to them both, there was silence.

"Me—marry you?" She had never stammered before, and she knew it.

"Yes—I—I don't love you in the way I loved Viola—but—I like you, Mary dear, more than I like anyone on earth. And—well"—suddenly he rose and stood before her. "If I am to have a son, I should rather he had your

qualities than the qualities of any woman I ever saw in my life. Will you marry me?"

And then it seemed to Mary Wymondham, for the first time in her life, that she must faint, that she must let her wits go, and sink in a kind of merciful sleep on the grass, that her nerves would bear no more, that she must rest and sleep and forget.

She clasped her hands in her lap, and looked bravely at Sandy, saying to herself that she would not faint.

"Will I marry you?"

"Yes. I am not a romantic lover, Mary," he returned, "but—I am very fond of you, and——"

"But, Sandy, you don't love me." She rose, and stood breast to breast with him, her brave eyes glowing in the moonlight.

And Sandy was as brave as she.

"Love you? No, I won't lie to you. When I was young and good, I loved Viola. But now—no, my dear, it isn't love. I know I don't deserve you, and I know you don't love me. But—as I said before, if I could have a son like you, I should thank God. I like you so much, Mary; and I admire you—and—it sounds very dull, dear, but I—respect you. You are my best, my only friend. Marry me, Mary."

He held out his hands, and she gave him hers. Poor soul, she loved him so that she could barely see or speak. But she kept her wits and said, as he took her hands:

"I understand, Sandy, and—yes—I will marry you."

And when he very gravely, very ceremoniously kissed her, she seemed as grave, as ceremonious as he.

"I'll do my best to be good to you, my dear," he said, releasing her.

"And I will do *my* best, Sandy——"

And the moon rose higher and higher, clearing the sky, and in the garden stood the man and the woman looking seriously at each other.

CHAPTER LXIX

WHEN a man has for years loved a woman in vain, and finally wins her, there must be, in the mixture of his feelings, a decided element of triumph.

Triumph may be a fine and uplifting sensation, but it can be nothing to the exquisite humility experienced by Mary Wymondham when Sandy asked her to be his wife.

She had loved him, it seemed to her, all her life. When he came back, and found her a mature woman, he grew gradually to regard her as a friend, but to her a miracle happened; she found that though, while she was a girl she had not recognized her own love, it had yet been there; that the feeling she experienced now was not a new one, but merely the continuance of an old one that time had ripened and absence never weakened.

During the time of Viola's engagement, Mary had in her heart always rebelled against her sister's passivity, and when Viola returned, unengaged, after her visit to Guelph Square, the elder girl's indignation against her had been not only strong, but strangely articulate.

"You are a coward," she told Viola, her dark cheeks ablaze, and Viola had wept.

But Mary, though a girl of strong partizanship, was not of the kind who takes active steps. She believed her feeling for Sandy to be one of simple friendship, yet she made no move to assure him, in his voluntary exile, of her sympathy. Viola, though, in her eyes, wrong to desert her lover, was her sister, and the family feeling, so strong in some people, so strangely absent in others, was, in Mary, very powerful. So Mary said nothing to anyone except to Viola, and when she found that her remonstrances only caused Viola to cry, and to repeat again each horrid episode of the night in Guelph Square, she relinquished them, and said no more.

But she had never, great as was her love for her sister, forgiven Viola for what she, Mary, stigmatized as her "lack of backbone," and in her heart she had, from the first, taken sides with Sandy.

And then when he came back, and she found that her feeling had, from the very beginning, been love, she was used to the feeling itself, though the word was new, though it hardly disturbed the smooth tenour of her life; she was not upset, nor frightened, nor ecstatic. The treasure had been hers all along, and her tardy recognition of it came better late than never.

She had given to Sandy exactly what he wanted, a sane, cool friendship, the love dwelt apart from him in her heart, and he knew not of its existence.

And now, as she sat alone by her little fire, she sat with closed eyes, given up to the wonder of his wanting her for his wife. The firelight played on her face with its strong, marked features, so free from any passion-marks, any lines of active pain; it warmed her soft, dark hair to gold, and dwelt, as if lovingly, on the new beauty of her expression.

Sandy wanted her to be his wife. It was in all the world the most wondrous thing, and its wonder made her beautiful. Her imagination gave no heed to the immediate future, but sprang ahead until she beheld herself the mother of his son, and saw him holding in his lonely arms the little creature who was to fill his heart.

She was so far from vanity that she made no determination, as most loving women would have done, to win his love. He had asked her to be his wife, and she was content, with heavenly content, unknown to the selfish.

The next afternoon Sandy came again. He kissed her gravely, and they sat for hours talking together. He talked as he had never done before about Viola, about Maggie Peterson, about his life during those ten years.

"But—you did love her?" she asked a little shyly.

"Maggie? No, dear—I never loved her." He spoke in a dry voice, but his mouth was a little set, and she knew that it hurt him so to envisage the past.

"I—I hoped you did, Sandy."

"Yes—it would have been better, but—she was very good to me, Mary, in her way. She was patient, and gentle—and—long-suffering——"

"You were bad to her?"

Sandy shook his head wearily. "No—not cruel, if you mean that. I was never faithful to her."

Mary had the curiosity of most innocent women. "But why?"

"Why wasn't I faithful to her? Well—it's hard to say. I suppose only a great love can keep an average man faithful. Women don't understand. And I never loved her at all—so you see——"

"And then when you found out about her—plot, poor soul! you left her, and never forgave her."

"Exactly. You know about my great-uncle. Well, I am the same. We do *not* forgive!"

She looked at him. "Perhaps you forgive without knowing it, Sandy."

"What do you mean?"

But Mary did not explain. There were many things she meant to tell him, but not just yet, and there was to her an exquisite luxury in the thought that she had before her all the time of their two lives. So much time in which to tell him her thoughts, so much leisure, so little need for haste.

And, indeed, there seemed little haste in anything those months. September was a glorious time of long, warm days, and quiet, pleasant occupation.

Mary went to Scotland for the latter fortnight to see Viola, who was home from Capetown on a visit to her husband's relations, but early in October she was back again in her dear house that she loved and once more saw Sandy every day.

Sandy himself was content, but he was not happy. His affection for Mary was great, but it was not great enough to blot out the real emptiness of his life. He missed Syd more and more, and more and more he disliked Maria Paz.

She, for her part, went her way enveloped in a curious apartness; she was, it seemed to her unwilling host, as much like a disembodied spirit as a flesh and blood being could be. He saw her every day, but she wore such a withdrawn look that, between his glimpses of her, he so nearly forgot her that their next meeting came on him with a kind of shock. And the time was coming when he must tell her his news. That the news would imply a wish that she should betake herself elsewhere, he knew, and he knew how bitter would

be her resentment. She had come to stay, and now her short tenure was up, and she must go.

Sandy dreaded his inevitable revelation, put it off for weeks, and then, one evening, as he walked home from Mary's in the rain, he made a sudden resolution to get it over.

It was a mild night in mid-October. Under low-hanging clouds, the sun had some time since disappeared, leaving a chill, yellow gleam in the sky.

Sandy walked quickly, his head bent. "If I tell her to-night, she'll surely be gone in a week," he told himself "and then——"

A faint glow of pleasure warmed his heart at the thought. For many months his house had been pervaded by a Spanish atmosphere; now it would clear away, and he would breathe better.

He and Mary would be married before Christmas, and he would try to begin his life over again. Ben Frith was coming in a day or two; old Ben, with his shabby clothes, his pipe, and his dear, shy ways. They would talk, and plan, and dream. Ben always brought to Sandy a faint sensation of youth, as if Time had for a moment really turned back in his flight.

Sandy stood for a minute or two in the courtyard, looking about him.

The Feeling had gone; he had felt not the slightest pulsation of it since Syd's death; with youth and hope it had disappeared for ever.

But Mary, his best friend, was coming to him as his wife. She was good, he liked her, he would be glad to have her as his son's mother.

He knew perfectly well that but for the necessity of having a son, he would never have dreamed of asking Mary to marry him. He had no delusions about the nature of his feeling for her; he knew that he did not love her. She was his friend, and she was to be his wife, and the fact gave him a certain comfortable sensation of satisfaction; but that was all.

And he never dreamed that her feelings for him might be of an intenser nature.

It was, so far as he knew, a simple arrangement that involved no emotion of any kind.

The torches burnt very quietly in the damp air, as he stood

reflecting in the courtyard. The old house was so beautiful, so romantic; he suddenly longed, with a fervour that hurt, to find again the feeling that used to cause him such an intense joy.

And then he realized that within a year there might be within the old walls a little being to whom the Feeling must be made everything.

He had planned his marriage expressly to have an heir, but to-night, for the first time, it came home to him that his heir was not to be an abstract part of the scheme of the universe, but a living, breathing baby; a little rosy bundle that laughed and cried; and, later, a boy—and a man. Sandy's red head glowed for a moment in the torchlight as he stood hat in hand. Then he went in.

CHAPTER LXX

MARIA PAZ was sitting stiffly in the teak-wood chair by the fire in the Chinese Room. She looked, as if she had not stirred for hours.

And she looked, he realized, as if she belonged to the room as much as did the porcelain dragons. She was alien in appearance to the rest of the house, but here she seemed to fit. For a moment, Sandy actually wondered if it would really be possible to dislodge her? Whether she had not taken such deep roots there that she could not be made to go.

Then he closed the door, and joined her.

"Good evening."

"Good evening, Sandy." She did not look at him, only stirred.

"It's raining again——"

"I know. I've been to White Shirley."

He was surprised. "This afternoon?"

"Yes. I have been to confession."

Sandy grinned a little, but tried to conceal it. What on earth, he wondered, could she have to confess at least once a week?

"It's a pretty drive there," he went on, repentant of his rudeness.

"Yes."

Of late she had grown more silent. She seemed never to wish to talk; she answered questions, but as curtly as possible, and never of her own accord started a conversation.

Then a long pause, during which Sandy studied her face intently. She was pale, and her strange little eyes seemed to have lost their lustre.

"Are you not well, Maria Paz?" he asked kindly.

"No. And I am a black woman; when we black women are ill we show it; we get uglier and uglier—as you were thinking just now about me."

She spoke unresentfully, but her guess had been correct, and he was again touched with pity for her.

"Nonsense! I thought you looked pale that was all——"

"How," interrupted Maria Paz, "is Mary Wymondham?"

"She is well. I have just been to see her."

"She is always well and you have always just been to see her."

In the firelight Sandy's lower teeth showed for a second in the angry movement his jaw made; but he did not answer.

Presently she went on, slowly and softly, but not at all casually, he knew:

"You are her very good friend."

"Yes, I have known her all my life."

Here was, of course, his opportunity, but for some reason he allowed Maria Paz to direct the conversation.

"She is a good woman, what you call very nice. But she is dull, so dull!"

"I don't agree with you. She is quiet, but not dull."

"You are dull yourself Sandy, that is why you do not feel it in her."

Rude as her words were, her manner was so simple as to be absolutely inoffensive. Sandy laughed. "I suppose I am," he returned; "but where are your Spanish manners that you tell me so?"

"You are good, Sandy. You are not unjust—you would never be unjust even to me, whom you do not like——"

Sandy looked at her. "I try to be just."

"Yes. It is a fine quality. And best of all is it to be just to one whose nature is all against one's own taste——"

"And you think I am just to you? I am glad, for I want to talk to you about business to-night."

"Yes. I know. About money."

"About money amongst other things; yes. I wish you to accept from me an income for your life. Syd, as you know, had no money of his own, but I wish you to have the income I gave him."

"Thank you."

"I will have my solicitor draw up the papers, so that no matter what happens to me your future will be assured."

"Thanks."

She sat perfectly immobile, her eyes half closed, but he knew that she was tinglingly alive; that every nerve of her was at its keenest. She seemed to be listening, listening, trying to hear the thoughts that lay behind his words.

"I suppose," he went on slowly, "that you will wish to go back to your own country——"

"No!" Maria Paz's monosyllable rang out almost like a shot, so decisive it was, so keen.

"You—prefer England?"

"I prefer my husband's country. I am an Englishwoman now. I love the things he loved; the place where he lived——"

"He 'lived,'" Sandy announced dryly, "in Bloomsbury."

"But I—he brought me here. Sandy," she turned suddenly and her eyes looked straight into his, "let me stay here."

"At Sharrow?"

"Yes. I will get well, I will take care of your house; I will look after you. You do not like me, but I am clever; I can make you comfortable—and I wish to stay here."

"But that can hardly be——" he spoke gently, for he was touched. He had not realized before that she was capable of sentiment.

"Why can it 'hardly be'? I am over thirty; I am not pretty; I am your sister. My uncle, a priest, would live here, too—there could be no scandal. And I love this place, I tell you, I—Sandy, I love Sharrow!"

Her voice had risen until she was now speaking in the rough high tones characteristic of Catalonia. Sandy's amazement grew. He knew that she was not acting. In some strange way she had acquired a love of Syd's home.

"Let me stay here, Sandy." Pleading seemed very alien to her, yet the very roughness of her voice seemed to accent its quality.

He rose.

"Listen, Maria Paz," he said. "I am glad you like Sharrow. It would, of course, have been yours one day, if my brother had lived. But—he has gone. And—this is what I wished to tell you—I am going to marry. I am going to marry Mary Wymondham."

Maria Paz stared at him until the stare had changed to a glare. Then, without a word, she went out of the room.

She closed the door so softly that he could hardly believe that she was, in truth, gone. But when he found that he was indeed alone, he sat down in the chair she had occupied.

At that moment he liked her. The intensity of her feeling for the home that had been her husband's, and was to have been hers, was so akin to passion for the place that he felt a thrill of real sympathy for her. It had all hung by such a slight thread. If Syd had lived and she had had a baby coming, the place would have been so strongly hers. He, Sandy, would, in that case, have seemed almost an outsider. And the accident of a shy horse had broken this woman's life; changed its whole current.

Sandy was deeply sorry for her.

If Syd had only lived; if the plan made to all intents and purposes by the gods had been allowed to hold good, then he would have been already the dry branch of the tree, and Maria Paz's son the heir.

If only Syd could come in, muddy and merry from a long walk; if only Syd's son was to be the heir.

Sandy suddenly felt himself so old, so old—too old to marry and carry on the family. He wanted, it seemed, to rest; to sit by the fire and watch Syd's boy playing on the rug. His own life was over; it was unfair that he should have to marry and begin a life-long farce of being a man of his own generation; he was, he felt, his own grandfather.

Poor Mary! As he sat there, he wished with all his heart that a baby was on its way to Maria Paz, the woman he did not love, because it would be Syd's baby, and its little life would relegate him again to the obscurity of old age that for the moment seemed the only thing worth having.

He dreaded marrying; he knew that he was not good enough for Mary; he knew that his life must be thenceforth one of effort. He must make her happy. And he did not know how to do it.

The Mary who was his familiar friend, whose quiet tastes he so well understood, left him; in her place, he beheld the woman, still young, suddenly raised to a great position; the new wife, the young mother. And he was too old.

Sighing deeply, he rose, and went upstairs.

He did not see Maria Paz again until the following night after dinner.

He had worked hard all day, not going to see Mary, for he was ashamed of his own thoughts, and he was very tired.

Dingle had bored him; a tenant had been troublesome, and the cottage hospital, the work on which had just, owing to Mary's pleading, been resumed, seemed at sixes and sevens. Sandy wished that there were no such things on the earth as cottage hospitals.

He had another worry, too. A letter from a nun in the Vosges, saying that Maggie Penrose was dying, and wished to see him.

"She bids me say," the nun wrote, "that she is *really* dying, or you will not believe her. Poor lady! it is indeed true. It is her heart. She is as a machine overworked. Our good doctor says three weeks or a month."

The letter had brought back many thoughts to him.

Poor pretty Maggie! who had lied and plotted, and broken his heart, but because she loved him.

It seemed to the upright man an uncommonly bad reason for doing what she had done, but he knew that she had really loved him. And she lay there in the cold mountain air, dying, and thinking of him.

He recalled her patience with him; her gentleness when he came back to her; her marvellous long-suffering.

"I wonder," he said aloud to himself, with a little smile, "if I am forgiving her, as Mary said, without knowing it."

Then his mind reverted to Viola. Mary had told him of her two children, both delicate—both had undergone slight operations—and she had had to leave them at home in Cape Town, whither she was to go back in a fortnight's time. Viola was more beautiful than ever, Mary had said, and so interested in Mary's engagement.

"Tell him I send him my love," the younger sister had said, "and if I ever hurt him, I am sorry."

If she had ever hurt him! Poor Sandy's grim smile was as he recalled the words, rather piteous. He was not of those happy men who regard their own sins through rose-coloured spectacles. He knew what he had originally been what he had become, and what he now was.

Poor little Viola!

He started. Was it he, Sharrow, who found himself pitying the two women who between them had ruined him?

What had happened to him? Was even his Hebraic sternness of hatred going from him?

If so, it was Mary's fault; Mary, with her sometimes rough manner, and her never-failing gentleness of heart. He resented her influence, and hated himself for his susceptibility to it.

How his old great-uncle would have despised him!

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CHAPTER LXXI

AND then the knock came to his door. He glanced at the clock; it was two minutes to eleven.
"Come in."

Maria Paz entered, a little sable figure, far more in mourning, it seemed to him, than a fair woman could ever be. Her very lips had lost their colour, so that she was all black and white.

"I have something to tell you, Sandy," she said.

"Sit down."

She did not obey him. Instead she came and stood by the chair from which he had risen. Her eyes were dropped. He could see only the purple-stained upper lids. Her hands were clasped before her, and on the left one he saw the faint glimmering of Syd's ring.

"I have come to tell you," she began, and then the clock struck eleven, slowly, ponderously, and she awaited it with a certain air of perfunctory politeness.

When it had ceased, she began again, and went on simply and without haste or hesitation: "I have come to tell you that I am going to have a baby."

"You——"

"Yes. It will be born in January."

Sandy leaned against the table. "Why did you not tell me before?" His voice sounded to his own ears as if he had acquired from her something of the Catalonian harshness.

"Because—it was my secret. Syd's and mine."

"Syd's? But—Syd knew?"

"No. *You* will say he died without knowing. *I* know that ever since he died he has known. And it has made for me a closeness to him."

Sandy's eyes roamed helplessly across her little figure.

To him she looked exactly the same as she had always done. But, then, he knew little about such things.

"He will be your heir," Maria Paz declared serenely, sitting down. "His name will be 'Sydney.'"

"His name must be Alexander, I am afraid. But—I—I congratulate you, Maria Paz. I—you must see Turner to-morrow."

"Why? I am not ill?"

She looked, however, desperately ill, and he rang and ordered for her some of the Vino Negro Syd had imported for her.

She drank a glass obediently, and then, holding it, empty, but still glowing a light pink in the firelight, she resumed:

"So now you will not marry Mary Wymondham."

Sandy started. The moment that she had made her announcement he had known that he need not marry. Syd's baby would, of course, be his heir, and he had no doubt whatever as to the child's sex. Poor Syd had, after all, provided the old house with a future owner, and Sandy was free.

But he resented Maria Paz's remark.

"We need not discuss my affairs," he said stiffly.

Then a curious thing happened. Maria Paz laughed aloud, and in the quiet room, in the night, there was something not only unpleasant, but, it seemed to Sandy's tense nerves, almost horrible in her laugh.

"You promised your brother that he and his sons were to be your heirs," she said.

Sandy did not answer.

"And—you will keep your word, Lord Sharrow. And I will stay here, for it would not be fitting that your heir should be born elsewhere."

"No, no—of course you must stay here!"

At the eagerness in his voice, she smiled.

"I will stay," she said slowly, "just as long as I wish."

Sandy's head seemed to spin round. What on earth was she driving at now? he asked himself.

At first she had begged to be allowed to stay, and now she was threatening to go.

"I will do all I can to make you comfortable," he stammered, enveloped in the baffling fog of non-comprehension that all men have felt at one time or another in dealing with woman

"Thank you. My cousin will come and look after me."

"Your cousin?"

"Yes, Pedro Fons. Miguel's brother. He is a doctor Catalonia."

"But——"

"No. I will have a Spanish doctor. I will have my own cousin. And I will have my sister-in-law, Carmelita, my nurse. And—Catalina, my maid, whom you sent away, she, too, will come back."

Sandy gasped at the sheer audacity of her.

"But Turner is an excellent doctor," he said, "and English nurses are the best in the world."

"No doubt. But I am a Spanish woman."

Her imperturbability quite unshaken, she continued to look at him from his own chair; she had ousted him from his chair and it seemed to him that she was bent on ousting him from his own house. Two more cousins and a man. The woman's family was as the sands of the sea.

"You forget, Maria Paz," he said sternly, "my heir is an Englishman."

"Possibly. But my son is a Spaniard."

Vague memories of words he had heard relative to the necessity for women carrying children having their way came to his mind. She was obstinate, and foreign, detestable, but she was carrying Syd's child, and she loved Sharrow.

"Listen, Maria Paz," taking her hand, and speaking gently, "we must not quarrel. We must both do all we can for Syd's child. Will you write to-morrow for—your relative to come? I will do all I can to make you happy, and I will not forget who your baby is."

She rose. "You are right. No. I will not forget, Sandy. And when my people are here I shall perhaps be—less lonely. It is bad for my baby when I am lonely."

She said good-night, with great dignity, and Sandy was alone. Alone physically, but still in a room so crowded with ghosts as to seem full of an inarticulate hum of voices. The first thing he did was to write a letter to Sister Mary Rose, enclosing a kind note for Maggie Penrose. In the letter he expressed his regret to hear of her illness, and the forgiveness she asked for. He added that he could not come owing to important family matters, and remained her friend Sharrow.

On re-reading his note he nearly burned it, its nail

seemed to him so absurd, so unlike himself. Then he remembered her kindness to him, and sealed and stamped the letter.

Maggie Penrose was gone, she no longer belonged to his life. She was to him as dead as his father and mother, the old Vicar, his Great-uncle, as Syd.

He had closed the episode with a few belated kind words. He need never give her another thought.

But a week later he found himself in a little white-washed room, high up near the snow-covered mountains of La Schlucht, sitting by a narrow bed whereupon lay all that was left of Maggie Penrose.

"But after writing that letter, Sandy," she asked him, her hot hands clasping his, "why did you come? Was it just my telegram of Saturday? Because—because you wanted a change of thought, is that it?"

Her hollow blue eyes sparkled for a minute in ghastly reminiscence of their old light flash.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"My dear, I love you. I know all about you. Besides," she added, laughing, "Mr. Dingle writes to me and tells me all the news!"

"Dingle!"

"Dingle. Now listen, Sandy. I am grateful to you, oh, so grateful to you for the letter. *That* meant real kindness. And you can never know how glad I am to see your dear, ugly face once more."

"Poor Maggie! do you care that much?"

"That much! And so, being a dying person, I am going to take the privilege of all dying persons, and be a perfect nuisance"—she broke off to cough, and he waited, in silence, until she could resume. "Your sister-in-law is clever, I am sure, but she is not good, for all her church-going, I know. Dingle has written things quite innocently, and I have pieced the whole thing together. Isn't this something like it?"

She raised herself a little, arranged the frills of her bed-jacket about her bony wrists, and went on with a cheery, piteous smile.

"You and dear nice Mary Wymondham—you are engaged, or nearly——"

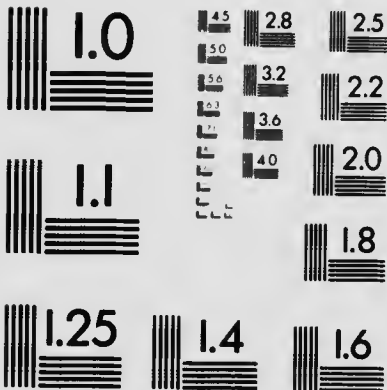
"If Dingle writes you that, he is an impertinent old——"

"Hush! He didn't. I have guessed it. Mary is good, but she is *also* a dear! And she always cared for you."



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Sandy rose impatiently. "Nonsense, Maggie; she never cared a rap about me."

"How cross you are! And how childish! However daresay you expected tears and moral regrets, and you got instead this—so I forgive you—oh, Alexander! Sit down," she added, suddenly fretful; "I am very weak, and I can waste the little breath I have. I tell you, Mary always loved you. And she was always worth a round dozen of Violas. Then you ask her to marry you. Poor soul! I can imagine her happiness. And I have been glad for it. She deserves even you, Sandy."

"Even me!"

"Don't be bitter. Oh, my dear, my poor love, you don't know yourself! Well, Madame Maria Paz doesn't like the engagement. After it, not before, she tells you her news. And—she's to have a Spanish doctor, a Spanish nurse, and a Spanish maid. H'm!"

"Who told you this?"

"Never mind you that. Or, yes, I'll tell you. Dear old Dingle! Puddifant told him, and one of the servants with a clear keyhole ear told her. Oh, it's all perfectly authentic. I assure you. Now I must ask you a question. Has she, your sister-in-law, asked you to stop seeing Mary?"

"No, of course she hasn't."

"Then she will. She has told you to break your engagement, of course—because *she* is providing you with an heir."

Sandy did not answer. He was very sorry for the woman who lay dying, but he was angry with her for interfering in his affairs.

"Have you broken your engagement?" persisted Maggie gently, coughing a little.

"I am sorry, Maggie, but I cannot discuss Miss Wymondham with you—or with anyone."

He rose and went to the window, where he stood looking out into a scurrying snow.

There was a long pause, and then Maggie said faintly, her eyes closed: "Very well, Sandy; I am sorry. But you are so blind, so blind. I fooled you as easily as I could have fooled a baby, so why should not this other woman?"

"Why should my brother's widow wish to fool me?"

A nun came in and put a stick or two into the hideous little iron stove in the corner. Then she lighted a lamp, on the

base of which were painted crude red flowers, and went quietly out.

"Why should your brother's wife wish to fool you? Because she likes Sharrow; the consequence of being Mrs. Sydney Sharrow of Sharrow; because she came of common people and prefers gentlefolks; because—oh, Sandy, don't be a perfect idiot!"

He laughed a little; the interview was so different from the one he had pictured to himself during his hurried journey. It seemed strange that a dying woman should jeer at him and call him names.

"If she wished to fool me, then," he returned, "in what way could she? I am giving her an allowance in any case, and——"

"In what way could she fool you? Well—I am getting very tired, Sandear—I beg your pardon for using Syd's name for you—it just came, somehow—I can't talk any longer. Say good-bye to me. Forgive me. I loved you! I love you!"

"Good-bye, Maggie. Poor little Maggie——"

She kissed his hand, and looked up, her eyes swimming in tears. "Sandy—make her see Turner. Don't believe in anything until she—has seen an English doctor——"

She said no more, and after looking at her very sadly for several minutes, he left the room and the hospital, and drove back through the snow to his train.

"Make her see Turner—don't believe in anything till she has seen an English doctor."

The suggestion was monstrous, absurd! the prompting of a fevered mind. He hated Maria Paz, and the arrival of her cousins and old Catalina, two days before his departure, had not diminished his loathing of everything connected with her. Pedro, the doctor, was even worse than Miguel, and his use of a toothpick never seemed to cease. Carmelita, Maria Paz's sister-in-law, was a common, inquisitive little woman with no teeth, and Catalina he had detested before.

They were all horrible, and all horribly inappropriate to Sharrow; but they did not make of Maria Paz a cheat and liar of the lowest description. He would forget poor Maggie's suspicions.

CHAPTER LXXII

MARY had ordered dinner, the night of Sandy's return for eight, but Sandy was late, and it was nearly half past nine before they had finished dinner and sat again in the pleasant, old-fashioned drawing-room.

Mary was wearing, womanwise, a new frock, in honour of what, to her, was distinctly an occasion. It was a dark blue frock of softest crêpe, and over it she wore a fichu of ancient, cobwebby lace that had belonged to Cyrilla—her grandmother.

Mary had anticipated admiration from Sandy that never had come, and her story of the gift of the lace to her grandmother by his great-uncle, during the period of their betrothal engagement, remained, through lack of query, untold.

Sandy was distraught and rather silent. He looked a little older, a little more tired than he had looked the last time she saw him; there was a weary expression in his eyes. Mary, of course, wondered what had happened, but she said nothing. He had told her that he had gone to France to see a friend who was dying, but she knew no more, and she asked no question.

After dinner he built up the fire, and arranged her comfortably in an arm-chair.

The night was stormy, but without rain, and the wind howled dismally in the cedar-trees. By her little fire Mary Wymondham sat, her quiet, capable hands folded, her eyes resting comfortably on her guest's face.

She was glad to see him; so glad to have him there with her; and having given him the best dinner she could, she waited for him to say what he had to say to her. Well, it was she had no idea, but she knew that it was there in his mind. If, she decided, he was going to ask her to marry him soon, she would do so. She saw no reason for doing otherwise, and coyly she hated.

"Mary—something has happened."

"What is it?"

The wind ground the cedar bough against the roof and skirled in the chimney.

Sandy, who sat with an unlit cigarette between his fingers, listened for a minute. Then, as comparative silence fell on the little house, he went on:

"It's this. Maria Paz is—going to have a child."

"To have a child?" Mary spoke rather stupidly, it was as if he was telling her that some unmarried woman was going to have a child. Syd had been dead for what seemed to her a long time; a so long time that his quality of husband, and possible father, had gone from her mind.

"But, Sandy——" she began, and then understanding came to her

"Poor Syd!" she exclaimed. "What a pity he did not live to see it!"

"Yes, it is a pity. She told me only a day or two before I went abroad. It is to be in January."

Mary raised her eyes and looked at him in obvious absent-mindedness. Plainly, she was counting.

"I am surprised," she said presently, without affectation.

"So was I—although I know very little of such matters."

"And then this is why the new cousin and the rest have come?"

"Yes. She wanted them—and, of course, I could not say 'No,' now."

Mary smiled at his wisdom. "I see. I hope it will be a boy, Sandy——"

He lighted his cigarette, and then, leaning back in his chair, began to talk quietly. The fire and lamplight fell full on his thin face, filling its hollows with shadows, accentuating all its lines, until it looked almost like a mask.

Mary watched it pitifully while he settled himself. Then the meaning of his words began to reach her, and her eyes stopped seeing.

"I promised Syd, as you know," he began, "that his son should be my heir; I had no intention of ever marrying, and I thought it only right to let the boy know. You will remember this, Mary."

"Yes, I remember," she murmured.

"I was glad that Syd had married—you will also remember

our plans about the Barrington girl. My life has been such that I preferred to remain a bachelor, to let myself seem a little old"—he paused, seeking for correct expression—"as old as I really was. Syd was learning all about the place; he was growing to love it; I think his love for his wife was broadening him, and teaching him."

"I think so, too——"

"And he would, I know, have brought up his son in the way fitting to his position."

There was a long pause, after which he threw his cigarette end into the fire and lit another.

"Syd was so young, such a child himself, that I daresay he didn't think much about his heir; but—I did, Mary. I thought about the little chap a lot. I used to dream about him. I always liked babies," he added, with a touch of shyness, "and—well, it seemed to me better that Syd's son should have the old place than that—that mine should. Syd's boy seemed bound to be—right, and I am so old——"

"You are four-and-thirty, Sandy."

"Yes. Well—then Syd died. You know what his death meant to me. There was little enough of youth left in me already, God knows, but with him the rest went. For months nothing mattered to me; nothing. I didn't even really mind having Don Antonio in the house. It didn't seem the same house, or the same place, at all."

"I know; I saw."

"If you had not been here, and so good to me, dear Mary, he went on, looking at her with a grave affection that hurt her horribly, "I could hardly have stayed here. I should have cleared out—gone very far away somewhere—it's an instinct some people have."

"I know that, too, Sandy. I've got it myself. In fact she added with a smile, "I seem to know all that you have said, and—possibly all that you are going to."

Sandy shook his head. "No you don't. I am going to do an abominable thing; I couldn't do it to any other woman in the world but you, and that is because you are my friend. Mary, now that Syd's boy is coming, I do want to marry. I—I don't think I could."

The boldness of his words was merciful to her; any excuse for any signs that he believed her to need pity, or even consideration, would have been too much for her.

As it was, her way was clear.

She took from her finger the ring he had given her and held it out to him.

Her hand was quite steady in the lamplight, and she smiled, a kind, almost motherly smile.

"My dear Sandy, I quite understand, and I quite agree with you. You must not break your word to Syd; his boy must be your heir, and you must bring him up yourself. Let's forget all about our—engagement—and just go back to our dear old friendship."

Sandy took the ring mechanically, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Thanks, Mary. I knew you wouldn't mind, of course, but——"

"Of course I don't mind. Let's say no more about it."

He was conscious, in the midst of his relief, of a faint pang of disappointment. He had never thought she loved him, and he was glad that she seemed to have no vanity for him to hurt, but he seemed to have lost something. It occurred to him that it was rather absurd to be missing something he had never possessed, and yet he did miss it.

If he had loved Mary, the chances were, he knew, that he would have married her in spite of Maria Paz's revelation; he knew that he was not of the self-abnegating kind. And he knew that he would never have dreamt of marrying Mary but for the necessity of providing himself with an heir.

He was not guilty of that extremely foolish thing, retrospectively sentimentality, but—he was a little disappointed by Mary's bland acquiescence in his change of plan.

When, a few minutes later, he took himself off to the station to meet Ben Frith, she shook hands with him quite calmly and told him with a smile to come soon again. "I shall be glad to see Ben, too," she added; "bring him to lunch one day."

What happened when the key had turned in the lock of her bedroom door, no one but Mary herself ever knew.

The next day she was much the same as usual, and when Ben, whose visit was a short one, came to lunch, he said he found no difference in her except that her face was a little thinner.

A week later Mary dined at the House, and at dinner made an announcement. "I have a bit of news for you all," she said. "And I hope you will be sorry. Guess where I am going?"

No one answered for a moment; and then Maria Paz looked up. "To Cape Town."

Mary started. "How on earth——" she began, her face full of rather comical amazement; but Ben saw, also suddenly pale.

"Your sister wrote to someone," Ben said, rudely interrupting Maria Paz in her projected reply. "I forget who, but I think Mrs. Puddifant—or was it Mrs. Dingle who told me—however, I do envy you. It will be a delightful trip. Will you stay long?"

Mary looked at him steadily. "Oh, no, only for about six months. My sister's children are not well enough to come back on this visit, but she couldn't let her husband come alone, as he is very delicate. So she is, of course, anxious to get back at once, and I have been with her only a fortnight. So——"

"So you, who have funk'd going out alone, are seizing the opportunity to go with her! I see. I envy you, it will be ripping, getting away from our English winter."

Sandy watched the two speakers curiously. There was something strange in their manner. They seemed to have drawn mentally close together, to be facing some enemy their backs to a wall. He could not understand.

Then he glanced at Maria Paz, and saw in her face a look of amused malice almost amounting to malignancy. As he watched her she spoke.

"I did not hear from anyone that you were going away. Mr. Frith was—favoured. But I *knew*." Again Sandy wondered.

He hated the idea of Mary's going, and after dinner he told her so.

"You are deserting me, Mary," he began abruptly, she and Ben and he sat in the small hall. "Why are you going just when I shall need you so?"

She smiled. "You will not need me, Sandy; you will be busy, and—in January you will be less lonely, remember!"

"But to-morrow these Spanish brutes are coming back—it's far worse than loneliness—and I have got to depend on you"—he went on with the frank avowal of dependence that it rather pleases strong people to make. He felt injured and showed it plainly.

Again she smiled, "Nonsense! Well—I have a b

head and think I'll be off home—along. Ben, be a dear and walk back with me, will you?"

Sandy stared. Again he had the feeling that they were joining forces against some enemy; but this time it seemed that he himself was the enemy. He sat by the fire when they had gone, miserably lonely.

Meantime, at her house door, Mary said suddenly to Ben: "Thanks, Ben. It was good of you."

Ben blinked up at her. "I'm always good—but I don't know what you mean this time——"

"Yes, you do. You know perfectly well. He, of course, told you that—that our engagement is at an end, and you saw that I am going away because I am hurt. Well—I don't mind your knowing, old Ben. He hasn't the slightest idea, bless him, but—I am hurt, badly."

They clasped each other's hand and stood in silence for a minute. Then Mary added, simply: "I have always loved him, and I always shall. But for the moment I am done; I *must* go away."

Ben walked slowly back to the House, to find Sandy mute and a trifle surly.

"What's wrong?" the little man asked with an air of good cheer very vexing to his host, as he meant it to be.

"Matter? Nothing. What should be?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I thought perhaps you were cross with Mary for going away. It *does* look rather like deserting the ship, you know."

"Rot," Sandy growled with a frown. "Mary never does anything in her life. And I have no right to be cross with her."

Ben indulged in a grimace of delight, unseen by his friend. "Of course, you have no *right* of any kind over her now; but oh, well, never mind, I was mistaken, that's all."

CHAPTER LXXIII

MARY was to sail the sixteenth of October, and the twelfth had come.

It was a cold, clear day, and Mary Wymondham, who had been making some good-bye calls among her poorer friends in the village, was coming home when, just outside the "Sheephearers' Arms" she met Sandy.

"Mary," he called, before he had quite come up to her, "I have news for you; the most wonderful news."

"What is it?"

They shook hands, and he turned back with her.

"Maria Paz is going to Barcelona the seventeenth. Until—until her illness is over!"

Mary stood still. "To Barcelona! But why?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since. I heard. She is at White Shirley this afternoon, and I have only just heard. It seems that old Catalina got into a temper with Jarvis and blurted out to him how glad she would be to get away—Jarvis told Mrs. Puddifant, and she told me."

"But Sandy—ought the baby not to be born here?"

He drew a deep breath. "I don't know. I suppose so but for the minute I can feel nothing but relief. Think of having the house clear of the lot of 'em, Mary!"

They walked rapidly on through the gathering darkness. Mary was annoyed.

"I can't understand it at all—unless it's just a—a kind of freak."

"It must be that. Of course, I might insist on her staying here, but—well," he burst out, with sudden vehemence, "I simply can't. I shall be so glad when they have gone."

"They'll be back soon, remember."

"I know. But—well, you can't ever know how I have been dreading the winter; without you, too; that made it much worse."

"Did it, Sandy?" She could not keep a certain dryness out of her voice, and he turned.

"Of course. Didn't you know it? Did you think I liked your going away? I say—there's the car—and it's stopping at your house."

They hurried on, and reached the gate just as Maria Paz, very bulky in a big fur coat, was going in.

"How do you do?" she said politely. "I was coming to say *bon voyage* to you."

It was only the fourth or fifth time she had ever called on Mary. Mary led the way to the drawing-room, and ordered tea, while she explained the latest developments of her plans; how she was to meet her sister in town the next day but one.

"How glad you must be!" Maria Paz said, sitting very close to the fire; "it will be a delightful journey."

"Yes, I think I shall like travelling."

"When I am well I shall go somewhere." Maria Paz's eyes were lowered as she spoke, and her face was its stillest.

"When you are well? But you are going to Barcelona at once!"

Mary set down the tea-pot and stared as she spoke.

The Spaniard did not move, but she slowly raised her eyes. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I said—only that I understood you were going away now, at once."

"Ah," Maria Paz drew a deep breath. "Who told you that—lie?"

"I did," answered Sandy.

"And who told you?"

He stood with his arms folded, watching her. He had a keen conviction that some plot was to be unravelled as he stood there; that a crisis had come.

"One of my servants told me. Your maid, Catalina, told her. You are going to Barcelona on Friday. And you are going to have your baby there."

Maria Paz rose. "Good. It is true. I am. And as soon as I am able to travel I will bring my son back to you, Sandy. I was too lonely. I tried to stay, but—I couldn't. Sandy, you do not much mind?"

Her voice was very gentle, her eyes seemed larger than he had ever seen them as she looked imploringly at him.

"No—I don't mind," he said. "There is no harm in your going to your own country for your illness."

Mary rose suddenly, and switched on all the electricity, changing the light from a soft one to a glare.

"As soon as you are well enough to travel," she said slowly, looking full into the other woman's face, "you will bring back your son here. What if it happened to be a daughter?"

Maria Paz's face gave one convulsive movement, and then was as still as if frozen.

"I can understand your hoping that," she answered, "but it will not happen. I am lucky."

"If it is a daughter, it will not be Sandy's heir; his cousin, Alexander Sharrow, the present heir-at-law, will have everything on Sandy's death; or if he dies first, then his son."

"My baby is a son."

Sandy drew back from the hearthrug. He felt that he was a spectator only, that he had no place on the stage of the strange, tense little scene that was being enacted before him.

Mary, her furred hat still on her head, had taken off her coat and stood, her well-built frame clearly defined in the blaze of light. Her face was a little set, and red patches glowed on her cheeks. She was very angry, and it occurred to Sandy that he had not seen her angry for years.

Opposite her, her small, white face smaller and whiter than ever amongst her dark furs, Maria Paz stood, shapeless in her big coat. The two women eyed each other as duellists might. And Sandy watched.

"What you say is dramatic," Mary answered her antagonist, "but it is nonsense. No one on earth can be sure about a child's sex until it is born."

"I am not dramatic. It will be a boy."

Maria Paz's voice grew in monotony as Mary's temper coloured hers.

"You think I am going to Barcelona, and that if I have a girl I can sell it, and buy a boy to bring back."

Sandy shrank from the cold contempt in the Spaniard's voice.

Mary made a long pause.

Then she said very slowly: "Yes. I did think that at first. But now I don't. Now I know that I was wrong."

They had both forgotten Sandy's presence. There was

in their battle something so intensely feminine, so beyond his ken, that he himself felt nearly as if he were not there because he ought not to be.

"Oh—you know you were wrong. Well—let me tell you this, Mary Wymondham, good, honourable, perfect Mary—that I am right in what I know about you. You are going away because, when Sandy broke his engagement, when he found he no longer needed you—you have not forgotten his reason, you could not bear to stay here. It is because you love him. You love him who does not, never did, love you. You love a man who asked you to marry him solely because you are healthy."

Suddenly, before Sandy could speak, Mary had laid her strong hands on Maria Paz's shoulders and stripped her loose sable cloak from her. It lay like a vast soft shell on the floor at her feet, and out of it rose her small figure, thin and straight, almost boyish.

"Do not struggle, you impostor," Mary said in a hoarse undertone. "You can't move until I allow you to. This is the twelfth of October; you say your baby is coming in January. It is a lie. You are not going to have either a boy or a girl. As long as you live you cannot have a Sharrow child. Now go!"

Releasing her prisoner, Mary drew back, and as she did so her eyes fell on Sandy.

"You see?" she cried to him. "You understand? At home she wore—clothes that hid her, but going out with her big cloak on she thought she was safe! Do you see?"

"Yes, I see. Maria Paz——"

Maria Paz looked at him. "She is a fool," she said, "a fool, and an old maid." Then suddenly she had seized the old silver candle snuffers that Sandy had known ever since she was a child and struck Mary repeatedly on the face with them. Even after Sandy had caught her she managed, with marvellous strength, to give Mary another blow. And as she struck she screamed and cursed in Spanish, biting at Sandy's hands, and kicking him.

It took all his strength to master her, and when finally he did so, and turned to Mary, whose face was streaming with blood, Maria Paz again beat him by going off into a kind of hideous convulsion.

Together he and Mary worked over her; they gave her water, bathed her face, forced a little sherry down her throat,

and when at last she was still, Sandy carried her to the car, explaining to the chauffeur that she had fainted, but was now better, saw the car disappear, and went back into the house.

Mary's right eye was badly swollen, and her face was cut in several places. She was pale, but she smiled when Sandy entered.

"Oh, Sandy!"

"Mary—I am so ashamed——"

"No. I am only thankful that we found out in time; she'd have fooled you."

"Of course she would."

He stood in silence for a moment. Then he said: "Mary, don't go to Cape Town."

She sat down, holding a wet compress to her eye.

"Nonsense—of course I must go. Did you think it your duty because of what she said, to ask me again to marry you?"

"No."

"Oh, yes, you did. Well, it isn't. She—lied."

Then suddenly she lowered the handkerchief, and forgetting her cuts and bruises, looked up at him.

"No, she didn't, Sandy, not in that—and I won't either. I do love you, my dear, I always have. But I won't marry you, and I am going to the Cape."

"Mary—dear Mary—there is no one in the whole world of whom I am so fond as I am of you."

"I am sure of that. But I won't marry you. I couldn't try that experiment again. It—it hurt too much. But we'll always be friends. Now you must go, for I must try to patch up my wounds. Good-bye. I'll see you before I leave, I suppose."

They shook hands, and he left her.

He walked to the house, entered by the moat garden door and went straight to his own rooms. He did not come down again that night. And Mary Wymondham sailed for Cape Town on the sixteenth.

CHAPTER LXXIV

IT was raining and snowing at once, the roads were a porridge of thick brown mud, the trees looked piteously wet and neglected in their nakedness.

Sandy stood at the library window, looking out into the darkness. An hour before his son had come into the world. He had already seen him, already felt the strange feeling, as if his bones were turning to water, experienced by some men at the first sight of their first-born.

Mary, his wife, was well; she had refused to be treated as an invalid; she had smiled and given her baby from her own arms into its father's. And now Lord Sharrow was alone, trying to realize his great happiness.

He was very happy; to-night was Christmas Eve. He had been married for over a year. Mary had come back after what seemed to him an endless absence of six months, and quite simply he had told her of his grand discovery.

"I love you, dear," he said. "Will you marry me?" And he did love her with a deep, quiet affection that satisfied him completely.

And it had grown, this affection, as affection will, when it is based on respect, and a community of interests.

In the light, as he stood by the window, Sandy's face looked a very different one from the face we knew. The lines were there for ever, of course, but there was a new softness about his ugly mouth, a new look in his eyes.

He rarely brooded now; he never did so deliberately, and his remembrances of the sad things in his past were softened by his present peace. So there he stood, looking out into the night, while his new-born son lay sleeping upstairs in the room in which his great-uncle had been born and died.

And presently the rain ceased, the clouds broke, letting a very faint glow of moonlight through.

Sandy smiled. He was too happy to form articulate

thoughts, but it was good to him that the clouds should have parted just then. From where he stood, he looked across the lawn towards the west side of the park. And, presently, there came a sound of distant voices, and from the darkness of the trees issued forth a little crowd of people.

There were about twenty of them, and of these two or three were women. They came, talking in undertones, across the lawn in the pale moonlight, and were about to turn off towards the servants' quarters, when Sandy called softly.

"Is that you, Dingle?"

"Yes, Mr. Sandy," came the old man's voice, and he forgot to correct his mistake.

"Come this way, will you?"

There was Dingle and his fat daughter Sally; there were a Puddifant, two Linters, and old Buzzard, the village patriarch.

They came and stood under the window, and Dingle made a speech.

"We have been waiting for news at the 'Sheepshearers,'" he said, tears standing on his cheeks, his voice shaking, "and it came half an hour ago—one of the stable-boys brought it—and—we drank his health, my lord, and yours, and then my girl Sally suggested we should come and—and tell you——" He broke off and Sally went on, her arm through his, for he was failing of late:

"We knew, my lord, that you would not take offence—that you don't mind our having the feeling of friends as well as of—tenants——"

Sandy cleared his throat.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I will fetch him."

Five minutes later the little band had trooped quietly into the study, the window was shut, and Sandy stood before them with his son in his arms.

Tears stood in his lined cheeks, as he bent over the little bundle.

"My friends," he said, "here is my son."

Then they all tiptoed towards him, and looked at the queer little crumpled face of their future lord.

"Yes, he is beautiful, isn't he?" Sandy agreed proudly "he weighs over eight pounds. He is a particularly fine boy."

After a pause he went on: "I don't know how to tell you

how I feel about him and about Sharrow—but—I shall try to make him a very good man, my friends, so that when his time comes he may be a good friend to your children and their children."

Old Buzzard, who had not yet spoken, suddenly put his knotted hand to his eyes and began to weep.

"God bless 'im," he quavered, "and you, your lordship, and 'er ladyship too. God bless the lot of ye. I'm ninety, I am, and 'e'll never be a friend to my grand-children, 'cause I 'aven't got any, but I'm glad my old eyes 'as seen 'im."

Sandy bent again over his son, and, as he did so, Sally Dingle stepped forward, and, with her hand, protected the baby's face.

"Mr. Sandy! Mr. Sandy!" she exclaimed quickly, "don't let tears fall on a baby's face. Every tear means a grief for him."

"Oh, Sally!"

The fat widow, with her pretty smile, turned her palm uppermost, and in it something glistened.

"I caught them," she declared; "it's all right."

"Thank you, Sally."

Then Sandy bade his friends good-bye, and carried his son back upstairs.

As he came down again, he stood suddenly still on the stairs, and caught at the balustrade. He felt suddenly giddy.

And as suddenly as he stood there in the perfect silence of the night, his face changed.

The Feeling had come back.

THE END

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