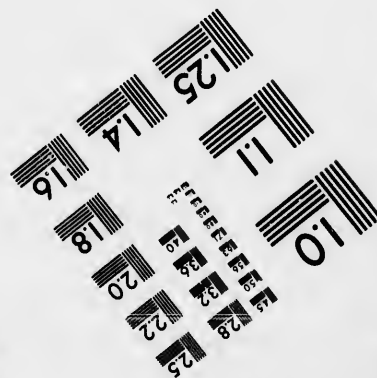
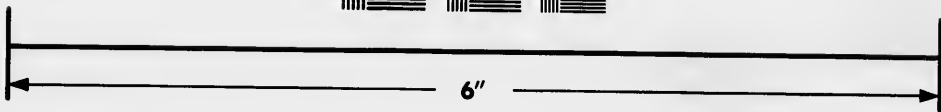
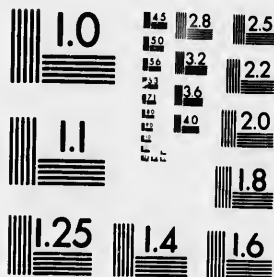


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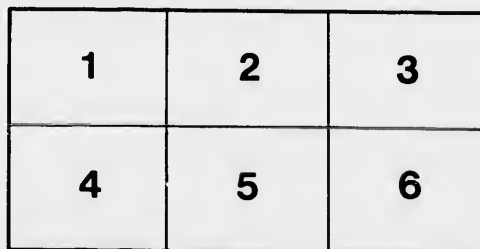
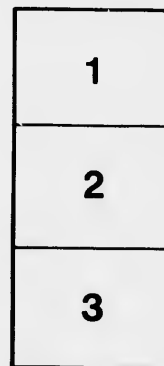
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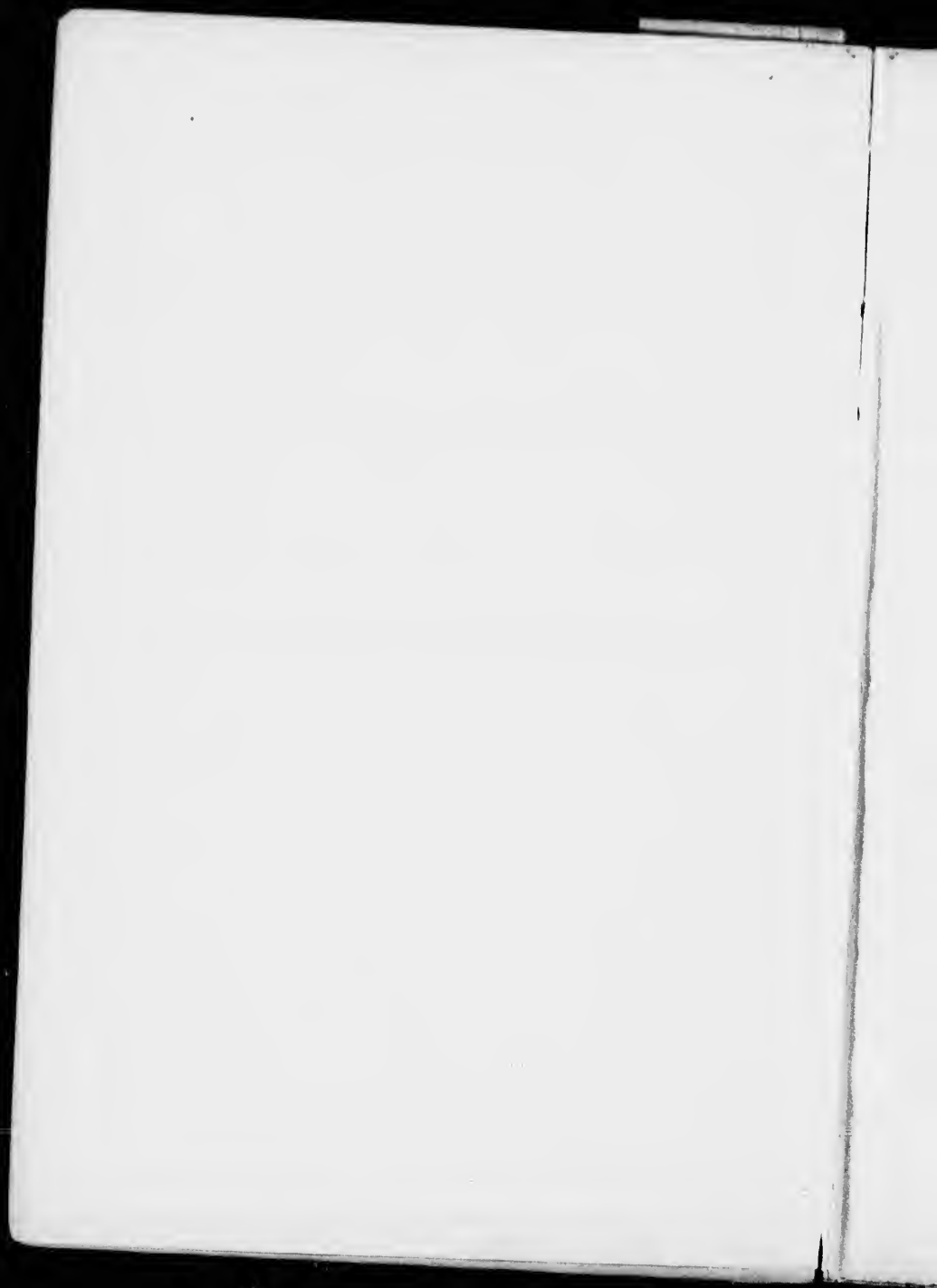


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THE ONE WHO CAME AFTER



THE ONE WHO CAME
AFTER

A STUDY OF A MODERN WOMAN

BY

DAVID LYALL

LONDON: HODDER AND STOUGHTON
TORONTO: HENRY FROWDE

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CHAPTER I

TO SET HIS HOUSE IN ORDER

OTTO BRECK was of a philosophical turn of mind, which had been of some service to him in the vicissitudes of an artist's career.

He had begun that career under difficulties on the Grampian Hills where, like Norval, he fed his father's flocks. Artists were not altogether unknown about Lochardle and the Glen of the Ford, but they were regarded by the natives as queer cattle, never at any time to be taken seriously.

It was one of these uncanny birds of passage that was Otto Breck's undoing, so far as his family was concerned.

Meeting the brown-faced, merry-eyed boy among the bracken and the sheep, attracted first by his beauty, then by his intelligent interest in the work of the easel, and finally by some quality that drew his heart, the man from the south was at some pains in three successive summers to foster Otto Breck's artistic tastes, until he created in him an overweening desire to become a painter like himself.

This, in the eyes of the Brecks of Thom Ardle, was not only a sore wrong, but a most bitter disgrace; and they forthwith turned their backs on the boy and bade the stranger take and keep him altogether since he had rendered him unfit for any honest calling. This the painter did.

But as this is not the story of Otto Breck's life, but of one who came after him, all we need concern ourselves

with is the fact that he achieved considerable success in his calling, and became in due course one of the best-known landscape-painters of his day. His life had been congenial though strenuous, and on the whole happy; for, though he had had the misfortune to lose the wife of his love after twenty brief months of married life, he had been singularly blessed in his friends as well as in the love and devotion of his only child, who at five-and-twenty was unaware what a hard and sometimes cruel place the world can be to women less sheltered than herself.

She occupied the whole horizon of Otto Breck's thoughts as he let himself out of the little house on the North Bank in Edinburgh, about half-past nine on a night in the late October, and turned his steps citywards.

He had been told that day that he was suffering from a mortal disease, which in the natural course would cut him off in less than two months' time. While not altogether unexpected, this verdict, which his inner consciousness as well as his physical state assured him was unimpeachable, filled him with a sudden panic and dismay. For he was not ready in any sense of the word, but least of all where Christine was concerned, and he could not face her until he had taken counsel with himself and with those who might be able to help him. She was dining happily at the house of a friend, and he had taken the opportunity of summoning the Clan to meet him at Hatley Noble's studio in Canaan Lane, Morningside. No surprise had been created in the minds of the Clan by such a summons, which was not of very rare occurrence and which would serve as an excuse to make another night of it. Of such nights surely there could never be too many.

Now, though Breck knew every short cut on the south side of Edinburgh and lost no time in getting to Canaan Lane, he was dead beat when he reached the familiar green door in the wall giving admission to a delectable garden, from which the studio could be entered by another private

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door. Each member of the Clan possessed a key to this door which they were welcome to use at any time. Ten o'clock rang as Breck entered the shady recesses of the garden, upon which the light from the studio shone with a welcoming gleam. There was a fountain with a group of marble fauns in the middle of the lawn, and some of the garden chairs had been left there. Breck was glad to sit down on one for a few minutes that he might recover himself before he faced the ordeal in front of him.

They knew that he had ailed more or less all the summer, and that he had not been able to put in one good day's work at the White Cottage at Lochardle, where in other years he had painted the picture or pictures that represented his year's work. But he likewise guessed that not one of them had any idea how seriously ill he was. He must make the painful announcement at once, and take counsel with them concerning Christine.

As he sat there in the garden, the dank dews of the autumn night falling unheeded about him, his thoughts reverted persistently to the past.

It is natural that a man should look back when he arrives at the last mile-stone, and he is a happy man that has nothing—or at least little—to regret. Otto Breck was by no means sure that he was in such comfortable case. He had worked hard and cheerfully, and, forgetting the harshness and injustice meted out to him by his parents in his sensitive youth, had provided them a home in their old age and surrounded them with an atmosphere of kindness and care. That, however, had only been his duty. Though somewhat reconciled to their son's way of life, Hamish Breck and his wife never professed to understand or to hold in respect the profession of painting, and had far more pride in their son Bob, who was an engineer at Glasgow and had cost them more in kind and in anxiety in one week than Otto had done in his whole life. They could not understand why strangers who came to the

Glen for the summer-time should desire to stand in front of the White Cottage and look at it because it belonged to Otto; and when, in the fulness of time yet without warning, he brought an English wife to them they felt it was the last straw, the crowning offence against all the order and traditions of their race.

But when they saw her they straightway fell down and worshipped before the sweetness of her flower-like face, the caressing gentleness of her ways, her exquisite ladyhood, which in itself was a thing they had never before seen, or dreamed could exist.

When she died they never lifted their heads again. Breck had often smiled over that—when he was able to smile again—and spoke of it to the Clan as one of the wonders of the world. All that was ancient history now, yet how near it seemed!—it might almost have been yesterday that Alice went away. The old folks were dead, and the large family of the Brecks scattered far and wide. The sole occupant of the White Cottage now was his youngest brother, David, who had always been a weakling—'a nateral' as they called him at the Glen of the Ford, who had never earned a penny for himself. But he was perfectly harmless and had a womanish cleverness with his hands which enabled him to keep the White Cottage as daintily as any serving-woman could have done, and at much less cost. He worked early and late among the bees and flowers and fruit, and, selling the proceeds, lived thriftily, costing Otto but little, while keeping the Cottage open all the year round for him and Christine whenever they chose to come. He loved Christine, but had no power of expression, and nobody knew except Christine herself, who loved him too. The rest were scattered—some of them 'ne'er-do-weels,' and all, with the exception of the eldest sister, Lizzie, a drain upon Breck's resources and his heart. Lizzie had done well for herself, having married a commercial traveller who had achieved great

success and was now the head of the firm that had employed him. But Otto had not seen her for more than twenty years, not being able to get on with his brother-in-law, Hedderwick. All these persons and their bearing on his life seemed to marshal themselves before Breck's vision, as he lingered by the fountain until his reverie was disturbed by the sudden opening of the studio door. When he saw Hately Noble on the step peering anxiously forth into the night, he rose and crossed the soft turf with a noiseless foot.

Then Noble started as if he had seen an apparition.

Noble was a splendid figure of a man, with a shock of fair hair, and an impetuous temper which had somewhat stood in the way of his success. But his warm, generous heart kept his few friends grappled to him with hooks of steel, and he had been fortunate in marrying a slow-going, easy-minded woman who did not heed his sudden tantrums, and was inclined to treat him as the largest and most difficult of the numerous brood which made the rafters of the old house in Canaan Lane ring with their merry voices.

'Otto, you appear out of the mists like the wraith of Lochardle!' he said rather grimly. 'Why this sudden marshalling of the forces at an untimely hour?'

'It's only ten o'clock. Have Maclure and Jimmy come?'

Something in Breck's voice arrested Noble, and as they passed under the brazier lamp which hung in the doorway he regarded him narrowly, then dropped a heavier hand than usual on his shoulder.

'What's up, Otto?'

'Come inside, Hately, and you'll hear.'

'You're tired, you beggar—and we could just as easily have come to the Eyrie. Where's Christine? Jeanie is expecting her.'

'I came out to get away from Christine, and I don't want to see any of the women-folk to-night, Hately.'

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Moreover, I won't keep you long. Shut the door, and don't let anybody else come in.'

He spoke with a kind of feverishness, which, however, left him as he stepped into the studio and gave a nod to Maclure, whose gaunt figure was outlined against the white wood of the mantelpiece, and then one to Jimmy Grant, the small, weary-faced creature who was the butt of the whole Clan, but who had perhaps achieved the most enduring success of any.

'Get me a mouthful of brandy, Hately, and don't be scrimpy with it. Often you've tempted me when I didn't need it; let me have it now.'

Noble opened the cupboard door and, taking a black bottle out, filled a generous glass. Breck did no more than touch it with his lips. The colour stole back to his wan cheeks after a little, and he glanced round with a smile on their strained and anxious faces. Maclure silently filled a pipe and put it in his hand, but nobody spoke. They realised that it was a solemn moment, and waited with what patience they could command for some enlightenment from Breck.

'I've seen Meiklejohn,' he said abruptly, 'and he gives me six weeks.'

'Six weeks of what?' inquired Noble, and the quick colour leaped in his fine face.

'Six weeks of life, man; and after that six feet of earth under the rowans at Lochardle.'

They stared at one another and at him, and a great horror seized them.

'I've come to speak about Christine, and I want none of you to say a word till I am done.'

He, usually so quiet, saying little but falling in with their more boisterous ways, was now in command, as it were, and they had no choice but to obey blankly, but with a tightening pressure about their hearts.

'There is a lot to say, and the time is short,' he went on.

'I want to get it all said to-night so that the next six weeks may take care of themselves. I'll tell you first, in black and white, how I stand. I have no money but forty pounds in the bank, which will wipe out the small debts. There are the pictures in the studio and in the other rooms. I've had Aitken up this afternoon and marked off what are to go and what to be kept. He'll put them in Saturday's sale if he can get the catalogues out in time, but this is only Monday night.

'But I was thinking as I daundered round that it might be better—in Christine's interest, I mean—if the sale were put off for seven weeks—that is assuming Meiklejohn to be an accurate time-keeper. They would fetch better prices, maybe, on account of the sentimental interest that attaches to the work of a man who has just shuffled off.'

'Shuffled off!' cried Noble impetuously while the others groaned. 'My God, Otto, is it yourself you're talking about, and we listening and taking it in as if it were gospel?'

'Take example by Maclure and Jimmy, Hately, and let me get to the end of the story,' Breck replied quite calmly. 'The pictures, say, will bring in a matter of two hundred pounds—or maybe three. Then there's the "Burnham Beeches." I sold that to Meiklejohn to-day for a thousand pounds, and he left the cheque on the table and took the picture away with him in the brougham. A long price, lads, was it not?'

'Christine will have it back, Otto, and it ought not to have been sold without asking her.'

'She must have bread to eat,' was the grim retort. 'Well, that brings us up to a matter of fifteen hundred. If it can be invested at 4 per cent. that would bring her sixty pounds. Christine—passing rich on sixty pounds a year!'

They stared at one another and at him with something

that was more than blank dismay. To hear Otto Breck, who had never been able to keep a half-penny in his pocket all his days, discussing the investment of money at 4 per cent. was convincing proof that he spoke the ghastly truth. Nothing but an ultimatum would have forced him to such consideration of the filthy lucre he despised.

'Sixty pounds a year!' he repeated, as he leaned back in the chair and clasped his lean, white, nervous hands together. 'Do you think she could live on that at the White Cottage with my brother David?'

'God forbid, Otto, and hold your tongue unless you want us to turn and rend you,' quoth Noble. 'The money you're talking about will do as a little nest-egg and Christine will come here. You know what Jeanie is.'

Breck smiled, but a little absently.

'What I want to know,' said Maclure in his thick, sepulchral voice, as he tugged for some unknown reason at the tails of his old velvet coat, 'is whether we're to bide content with Meiklejohn's verdict and whether he is the only man in Edinburgh that knows his business? He has made his mistakes, I doubt not, like the rest of us.'

'I want no other opinion in this world bar Meiklejohn's,' replied Breck. 'He is right, and I have known it now for the better part of a year.'

Staring fiercely at one another and at him, they then remembered signs and tokens that they had passed by unheeded no later than the long golden September days when they had all been together at the Glen of the Ford. The spirit seemed to have gone out of him then, and how loth he had been to head, or even to join, the expeditions which had made them familiar with every nook and cranny of that delightful region. For the first time in the annals of the Clan, Otto had been content to smoke his pipe—and even that with no great zest—at the gate of the White Cottage or just over the bridge by the Loch side.

'The better part of a year! Hear him, lads, and this the first of it to the Clan,' said Noble with a note of anguish in his voice which he would fain have hidden by a bit of bluff.

'Sit down—can't you, Hatley? for I'm not nearly done,' said Breck. 'Do you know where Christine is this evening?—dining at Emily Wickham's to meet a new woman from London, a Mrs. Prentice, who has come to speak about Women's Rights and flutter the dovescotes in Auld Reekie. She went to the meeting at Dowell's Rooms this afternoon. That was when I planned for Meiklejohn to come and get through his overhauling. What do you think she said when she came home, lads?—that she had been a bairn too long, and that she had witnessed a new dawn; also that it was the duty of the sheltered women to make covert for those fighting in the open. That's what Christine will be doing in six weeks' time, lads—fighting in the open, and with nobody to make covert for her.'

'He thinks but little of the Clan after all,' said Jimmy Grant, stroking his stubbly chin. 'But maybe we have deserved it.'

'She wants more than the Clan can do for her,' said Breck—and there was that in his eyes which awed them. 'She's twenty-five, but what does she know about life?—nothing. She has been happy among us, and has mothered and ruled us all, but in six weeks' time a mother for herself will be her one desperate need. The Almighty has a queer way of working things and cannot be disappointed that we poor humans whiles rise up in brute rebellion.'

'But if Christine comes here, Otto, Jeanie will mother her,' urged Noble emphatically.

Breck shook his head.

'A vision comes to me, lad. I see a long, weary road with a woman travelling on it by herself. There is little

shade upon it, and at one place the clouds are darkening down. I've made a mistake with the bairn. I would have laid down my life for her; and I've got to leave her now; God help her and me, in the fighting-line, without a bit of covert. In the place to which I'm going, that will hardly be counted to me for righteousness, I doubt.'

His laboured breathing indicated his distress. For a moment there was nothing said. The Clan had little experience in expressing feeling. Curiously enough it was Maclure, the silent, who had the first inspiration.

'Otto, will you tell us why you speak as if the whole Clan were to be annihilated? Surely Christine belongs to us. Have we not known her since we took our turns at walking her about in her long clothes through the Eyrie floor? There are three of us left, even supposing,' he added with a gulp, 'that Meiklejohn should be right. If among us we can't undertake to see that no harm comes to her the sooner we're wiped out the better.'

Breck smiled momentarily, but presently his head fell on his breast, and his eyes were hidden. He could not wound their warm hearts by telling them that the kind of covert a motherless girl needs, and must have, if she is to be kept from the world's hurt, is something very different from the haphazard comradeship of three Bohemians.

'I know you'll do what you can, that's why I'm here,' he said at last, but his tone lacked conviction. 'I have been thinking I have been wrong to be so thrawn with my brother-in-law Hedderwick, for my sister Lizzie's a good woman, and it might have been better for Christine to be friend and cousinly with them all. I'll see what can be done in that direction the morn. Now I think I'll be going. You understand—every one of you—where you're to lay me—under the big rowan in Strathardle kirkyard, and put my name—nothing else—under hers. But I'll tell Christine when I can. That's the

TO SET HIS HOUSE IN ORDER 11

last question I want to ask you all :—shall I tell her now, or let her find out ?’

‘Wait! wait!’ cried Noble impatiently. ‘Anything might happen in six weeks, and none of us believe you’ll go to Lochardle in that time—no, nor in six years, either!’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Jimmy under his breath.

Breck rose with a sudden new restlessness which dismayed them more than any other symptom of change in him, though the wanness of his face was unmistakable.

‘I’ll go, I think. Christine will be home now, though by the time I get back to the Eyrie she’ll be sleeping, I hope. I couldn’t face her to-night. Gie me a Scotch convoy, lads. We canna tell but it might be the last. We’ve had many a royal night of it here and at the Eyrie, and many’s the convoy we’ve kept up till three o’clock in the morning.’

‘A cab would set you better, Otto Breck,’ said Noble. ‘Go out to the lane, Jimmy, and whistle for a cab.’

But Breck restrained them.

‘I am able to walk—and willing. Come.’

They passed out together into the quiet night, Maclure and Noble supporting their poor friend, and Jimmy bringing up the rear. There was very little said as they walked, and that had nothing to do with the matter of which all their minds were full. They took him by the short cuts to ‘The Pleasance,’ and at the narrow entrance to the North Bank, Breck stood still.

‘No farther, lads. Here we’ll say good-night. We’ll meet again to-morrow.’

He shook hands gravely with each one, standing bare-headed before them, which was no custom of the Clan. A careless word or a glance over the shoulder was sufficient greeting at any time among men who had little use for the embroideries of life.

They stood still and watched him out of sight, but he never once looked back. They could not know that he

left them with relief—that for the first time in the story of their clanship he wished to be alone. They stood together dumbly, like men that were stunned.

‘It’s my belief,’ said Jimmy at last with a gloomy gulp of the big breath that threatened to unman him, ‘it’s my belief that we’ve seen the last of Otto.’

Maclure gave him a great nudge in the ribs and savagely bade him shut up, while Noble strode on ahead in a grim silence.

Breck, pursuing his way alone, hugged his solitude with a passionate gladness. He had affairs to settle with which no man nor woman could intermeddle. He had come face to face with his Maker in the wilderness, and had to have it out with Him.

Such was his feeling and attitude. Never had he felt more clearly and definitely the solitariness of the human soul in the great deeps, than when he sat among his familiars listening to their voices and looking into their faces.

He had remembered sundry words his father used to read from the Book in the long-ago time on the shores of Loch Ardle—‘He treadeth the winepress alone.’

The North Bank was a *cul-de-sac*, and nobody except the policeman on his beat visited it in the silent watches of the night. Accustomed to the artist’s vagaries, he took no notice of him at the corner except to return his ‘Good-evening.’ The Eyrie was the last house on the Bank, built on the slope of the eminence—a small bare, ugly little house of blue whinstone with a big barn-like studio tacked on to the end, at which some few people came to look because it was the home of the successful painter of Highland scenery, of whose pictures, it was said, the Queen was passionately fond.

It was the first house that Breck had rented in Edinburgh, recommended to him by its cheapness and by the unique outlook from the front windows. The studio had been an after-thought, and all the Clan had

been at its planning and execution. Maclure had designed the fireplace, and Jimmy the north lights, and Noble's hand had painted the frescoes that covered the gable-end. Grotesque without, the Eyrie was a thing of beauty and simplicity within—the only home Otto Breck had ever known. There had passed the too brief epoch of his married life, there Alice had left him to wrestle with the problem of the girl-baby who had cost her her life. It was of that daughter he thought now—solely of Christine; and the burden upon his soul was almost more than he could bear.

He leaned upon the cold iron railing which barred the sheer declivity down to the Park, and looked across the dim spaces to the solemn dark buttresses of Samson's Ribs where they rose in massy rock, sheer and black against the sky which was the mysterious veil hiding the beyond from mortal ken. The foolish words of a little hymn he had learned at the Sunday School in his childhood beat on his brain :

'There's a home for little children
Above the bright blue sky.'

Breck was not a religious man in the accepted sense and had little part or lot in churches. But the soul that had so long communed with nature was necessarily reverent. He had never been a scoffer, he had simply lived his own life as seemed good in his sight.

Even at the White Cottage he had made himself conspicuous sometimes by sitting serenely under the old white painting umbrella while the hill-folks were trudging to Lochardle kirk.

And by example rather than precept he had taught Christine that it was better to be in the open, worshipping with the sun, than in any temple made with hands. It had been a mistake. Looking back and recalling his mother's austere joy in the kirk and all its ordinances,

and how, when his brother Willie had fallen into the loch and been drowned, she had found strange comfort in the words 'Whom He loveth He chasteneth,' he knew that to her, religion as taught in the churches had been an unassailable buttress. Christine had no such buttress. The day of trouble was at hand, and he had never taught her how to pray. He had heard or read somewhere that religion meant much to a woman, and in the brief and halcyon period of his married life he had often surprised Christine's mother on her knees. As he thought of these things the sky became darkened for the soul as well as for the eyes of Otto Breck, and he turned away from its contemplation and let himself in to the Eyrie, shivering as if with sudden cold.

At the opening of the door midnight chimed from all the city clocks. A new day was born. What had he to bring to it that was worthy—that would be helpful to the making of a man?—nothing but a growing weakness and the conviction that he was a done man.

He was glad to creep close to the still smouldering logs, and as he leaned his arm on the stone mantelpiece that was the masterpiece of Maclure, his attention was riveted by the serene and penetrating gaze of the picture let in to the wall. It was the only portrait of his wife in the house—his own work, which stood out from the ruck of common things and proclaimed him a master of his craft.

'Tell me what to do, Alice,' he said brokenly as he bent his head. It might be that he prayed.

Some certainty of decision seemed to come to him then, and pausing to trim the candle, he turned to the old bureau which was a mass of untidy papers, every pigeon-hole being crammed with bills, many of them unpaid.

There he wrote two letters, one of which he sealed and stamped. But the other, being his last message for Christine, required much consideration, and took him a longer time.

TO SET HIS HOUSE IN ORDER 15

When he had finished and signed it, even with tears, he went out again bearing the sealed letter and dropped it in the pillar-box with a sigh of relief. For at the last he had done something perhaps to make the way easier for the child of his love, all unknowing that it was the most disastrous step concerning her that he had ever taken in his life.

Very tired, but conscious of a lightened spirit, he ascended the creaking stairs to look once more upon Christine's face. For five-and-twenty years he had never omitted to go to her room the last thing at night to see that all was well with her. The blinds were drawn up in the wide, low attic with the storm-windows so near the sky, and a current of keen, sharp air swept through it. The full moon shone upon her where she lay with her arms folded above her head, bared to the elbows, their whiteness shaming the linen of the sheet. She was sound asleep, in that dreamless sleep which is the heritage of the pure in heart.

Purity, sweetness, and strength were the characteristics of Christine's face, but her hair was her crown. It fell in ruddy waves about the pillow—a frame for the clear pallor of the brow which it adorned.

How he loved her, and yet how little about that wonderful thing, a girl-child, he knew! Like a flower she had been permitted to grow, but even at five-and-twenty all the petals had not unfolded—they waited for some other sun than his. His heart went out to her in a passionate yearning, yet he dared not kiss her lest haply she should wake and ply him with unanswerable questions.

He stepped back softly, closed the door, and stole downstairs to try the pipe that had been the solace of so many solitary hours. But it too had lost its savour. At last in sheer abandonment he threw himself on the old settee and pulled up about him the old plaid-rug that Christine had long ago christened Joseph's coat.

Being very weary then, he shortly fell on sleep.

CHAPTER II

THE SUMMONS

It was the habit of the inmates of Locharde Manse to watch for the coming of Malcolm Macgregor with the post-gig, that being the chief event of their day.

The Manse stood at the head of the Loch by the side of which the white road stretched in an almost straight line to the Ardle Bridge, which was the beginning of the Glen of the Ford. It was possible therefore to watch Malcolm for at least half an hour before he reached the gate. He always drove at the same pace—a sort of easy amble which inconvenienced no one, least of all the fat piebald cob that had been driven between the shafts of the post-gig for nearly twenty years. Man and beast lived long and thrived well in these parts, because life was a leisurely thing.

In October there was a wonderful clear quality in the air of Locharde which rendered objects visible at a great distance. The minister, who in his quiet, unobtrusive way had an eye for nature, thought he had never seen the caps of the hills so definitely silhouetted against the crystal clearness of the sky. The glow of the heather was gone, but the yellowing tinge was still on the sparse woods, and the flame of the rowans made the kirkyard a place of beauty beyond its wont.

Alan Grier leaned over the topmost bar of the white gate and watched the fat pony ambling up the gentle slope. He was always interested in the arrival of the

post-gig, because he received a good many letters as well as pamphlets and books and newspapers from all parts. The minister of Lochardle was a bookish man. He had been a more than usually distinguished student at Aberdeen University, and several had been surprised at his acceptance of a living so remote as Lochardle, where the stipend left much to be desired. Its only recommendation was, that it gave a man time for study, which, it was understood, was precisely what Grier wanted.

He did not possess any of the popular gifts which send inferior men up like rockets; but he was a man of scholarly attainments, deeply versed in theology, and it was generally supposed that he would some day write a great book, after which he might emerge from seclusion and take his rightful place in the Church courts. He spoke French and German fluently, and had spent a year at the University of Göttingen. Those in authority had their eye on Grier, and he was often asked for his opinion on important matters; also his well-written articles on a large variety of subjects were always welcomed and given a prominent place in the different organs of the Church. Lochardle—with which was incorporated the Glen of the Ford—was a poor, sparsely populated parish, in which it was unreasonable to suppose that there could be any scope for a man of Grier's attainments. Nevertheless the simple folk seemed to like him, and in the summer-time, when all the big houses and the shooting-boxes were full, there was not an empty seat in the church.

Unmarried at thirty, he lived alone in the Manse with his mother, who from his boyhood up had placed him on a pedestal and kept him there, worshipping him from afar. Early widowed, she had made unheard-of sacrifices to equip him for the ministry, because she belonged to a ministerial family and the pride of it was in her blood. Alan was not her only child. There was a daughter,

Effie, whose interests had been made subordinate to the sole ambition of her mother's life—what Effie irreverently called the glorification of Alan. Effie had been apprenticed in Aberdeen as a pupil teacher, and being bright and alert of mind, had achieved considerable success in her profession, and was now in Lanarkshire occupying a very good post in which she was entirely self-supporting. She was a frank-spoken, fearless kind of person, much given to the delivery of unwelcome truths and, when she came to Lochardle in the long vacation, was rather dreaded by her mother, whose views regarding the glorification of the minister she did not share.

Her mother's slavish devotion, her humble waiting on Alan's slightest whim, her reverence for him in every capacity, did nothing but incense Effie, who quickly found herself an alien in the Manse.

'I'll tell you what, mother—you're ruining Alan. If you don't stop soon there will be no living with him. And as for work!—he'd need the Department at his tail, and the Government Inspector after him—that's what would make him sit up. Have you ever thought what will happen when he marries? The best thing for him would be to get a strong-minded woman who would tell him the truth about himself.'

'Effie, hold your tongue! You ought to have more respect for your brother. Is there a man more respected in the parish than he is? Answer me that.'

'He's well enough—just that, and no more, mother,' replied Effie imperturbably. 'But for selfishness he would be hard to beat, and it is you who have made him what he is. You're laying up a stick to break your own back. It's no business of mine, of course, but I live in the world, and I know.'

Effie's snub nose and wide mouth gave a singular piquancy to her sharp speech. It was no small part of her general grievance that all the looks of the family had

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THE SUMMONS

gone to Alan, leaving her appearance hopelessly commonplace. He was certainly very handsome in his big, slow way, but Effie always said that his stern features wanted galvanising into life.

Grier was secretly afraid of his sharp-tongued sister, who descended like a whirlwind on the quiet Manse, disturbing the even tenor of their lives; and he was always conscious of a sense of relief when the post-gig bore her away at the end of the holiday. She came home only once a year. She had other friends in various localities who seemed to be glad to have her for short holidays, but she never spoke of these friends to her mother or her brother, nor had she ever been asked to bring them with her to the Manse. She lived her own life and developed on her own lines, which were good lines so far as they went; but, had her nature been less wholesome, she might very easily have made cause of offence and have cherished a sense of bitter injustice. It was only occasionally that uncomfortable thoughts visited her; in the main she was a cheerful person who managed to extract a great deal of healthy amusement from life. She regarded the solemnity of existence at Lochardle Manse as an abnormal condition of things, and waited for the deluge to upset it.

That the deluge would come she had no manner of doubt.

Effie had just gone back to begin the winter's work, and as she had duly acquainted them with tidings of her safe arrival, no letter need be expected from her.

Malcolm passed the time of day to the minister, at the same time keeping his eye on the various packages he handed over with a laboured sense of his own importance. Grier recognised on the topmost envelope the handwriting of Otto Breck, which surprised him considerably. It was not two weeks since he had bidden him and his daughter good-bye at the White Cottage, not expecting to see or hear from them for several months. He forgot Malcolm

THE ONE WHO CAME AFTER

and his steady stare, and opened the letter with a haste which betrayed the eagerness as well as the depth of his interest.

Here is the letter which Otto Breck had written in the silent night-watches and had stolen out in the cold, grey dawn to post before he slept :—

NORTH BANK,
EDINBURGH, *October 23rd, 1904.*

DEAR GRIER,—Meiklejohn has just been here and given me my marching orders. He says six weeks will see me out, and indeed I am not surprised. I have been feeling like that for longer than anybody knows.

I meant to tell Christine to-night, but I think I'll leave it. It is about her I write to you. I have not forgotten our talk that August night on the Ardle Bridge, and, if you are of the same mind still, I wish you would come down to Edinburgh whenever you get this. I would be glad to see you, and I expect and hope that Christine will be too. Anyhow we could talk things over, for I am too spent to-night to go into details of my affairs.

Suffice it to say that the future of Christine causes me no little anxiety, for, though I have made a good deal of money in my time, with me it has never had the sticking quality, and there is very little left.

It would please me well to think of her at Lochardle Manse in your care. If Christine should incline that way—and I know she likes you—you will remember how she has grown up just like a flower and that she knows nothing about the world or of life. It is a heart of gold, but it needs the sun. Christine must have room to live, and the bonds of convention would irk her beyond endurance.

Yet with a little forbearance on both sides you would, I am sure, be happy together. I know what you are. Simple goodness such as yours is, next to love, the greatest power in the world. I like to think that you and Christine and perhaps your little bairns would sometimes look under the rowans in Lochardle kirkyard at the grave to which I am hastening. Come—come soon to your friend,

OTTO BRECK.

Grier's hand visibly shook as he read the letter through,

and Malcolm Macgregor, affecting to be very busy about the harness of old Jess, noticed it.

'It'll not be from Miss Effie, whatefer,' he said insinuatingly. 'She wass lookin' so well and bonnie when she went away.'

'No—it is not from my sister, Malcolm. When will you be down again, for I must be ready to go to Edinburgh by the three o'clock train?'

The eagerness in Malcolm's eyes got the better of his prudence.

'It iss not pad news, I hope, whatefer?' he said, his curiosity regarding the affairs of the Glen, of which he was in part custodian, only tempered by the fear of God and the more material fear of man.

'When will you be down from the Little Glen, Malcolm?' said the minister quietly. 'Tell me that.'

Malcolm took out his big turnip watch and studied it critically, though he knew to the very moment when he should pass the Manse gate again.

'About half-past one, I suppose,' said the minister a trifle hastily for him, and he turned away towards the house, the postman gazing after him with hunger in his eyes.

Mrs. Grier had by this time come to the door, and her figure, limned against the clear October sky, seemed abnormally tall and gaunt. She always wore black, unrelieved and unadorned, and a long black apron trimmed with lace to protect the front of her dress. She had no cap, and her iron-grey hair, so tightly brushed back, seemed to accentuate the long, lean, ascetic line of her face. She had a pair of very hard grey eyes, rather closely set together, and her lips were thin and gave the idea of perpetual self-repression.

'There's no letter for you, mother,' said the minister, 'and I have only one that is of any importance to-day. It is from Otto Breck, and I'll have to go to Edinburgh this afternoon in answer to it.'

'Can I see the letter?' she asked, and though her voice was quietly steadied her eyes gleamed restlessly as if she were inwardly perturbed.

A furtive anxiety seemed to steal upon her like a thief in the night—not a new anxiety, but one that had been present with her during the whole time the Brecks had sojourned at the White Cottage. For it seemed to her that they had absorbed Alan, and that he was never off their track, as she expressed it to herself, though she had never dared to voice her discontent.

'It's a private letter, mother, and very short. I'm sorry,' he answered absently, quite unaware of the trend of her thoughts. 'But he's ill—very ill. You remember that he did not seem like himself in the summer, and Meiklejohn says he has only six weeks to live.'

'Meiklejohn—that's the big doctor from Edinburgh who was stopping with them when they came first.'

'Yes. I must be ready to go down with Malcolm after one o'clock, and if you can get me a bit of dinner before I go I'll be glad.'

'Down with Malcolm this very day! But what for, Alan? Surely if it is a minister he wants, there is the minister of his own parish.'

'It's not that. Mr. Breck wants to see me as a friend, mother.'

'It's a long journey, but Mr. Breck is one that never minds about inconveniencing folk. What about Sunday, for this is Wednesday, and your sermon's not begun? Would you get back by Saturday?'

'That's not likely. I might and I might not, but I've an hour in Aberdeen and I can see Macandrew and arrange about supply.'

The colour rose in his mother's cheek, but he, so possessed by the contents of the letter and all it might mean, had no eyes for her. When he passed absent-mindedly into the house before her she shut her lips with a sudden snap.

She was unhappy and filled with a thousand vague forebodings. There never had been, nor ever could be any kinship between the austere soul of Marian Grier and the happy Bohemian household at the Glen of the Ford. She did not approve of that household, but Christine herself was the head and front of offence.

There is not on earth a more unerring instinct than that of the widowed mother of one son concerning other women who might take him from her. Poor Christine was entirely innocent, and had often made fun of the minister and his solemn ways, being altogether unaware in what light he regarded her. For his mother she was always sorry, because nothing in all the world seemed potent enough to make her smile.

Mrs. Grier would have indignantly repudiated the idea that her son would never marry, or that she would stand in his way when he desired to take a wife; but she would have liked to choose the wife—some placid, old-fashioned girl who would not be above taking a word of counsel from her, and who would have a proper respect for the minister and the greatness of his office. Perhaps she would live with them at the Manse, or at least very near, so that she could still keep an eye on Manse affairs. Such was the cherished dream of Marian Grier, though it had never been put into words.

'I wish you would let me see Mr. Breck's letter,' she repeated, as she followed him into the house. He turned back at the stair foot, being on his way to pack his bag, and regarded her with surprise.

'I have said it is a private letter, and indeed I have given you the gist of it. I shall tell you all about it when I come back,' he said, and so dismissed the matter from his mind.

He had no idea of the deeps of his mother's nature, of the narrow channel into which all the passions of a strong nature were pent; and the idea of trouble with her did not occur to him. His mother would adjust herself, as

she had always done, to whatever condition of life he ordained for her. Such was the pinnacle at which Alan Grier had arrived where his mother was concerned, and she had nobody but herself to blame.

He thought her 'Good-bye' a little strained, but attributed it to her dislike of strange supply in the Manse, and by the time he had reached the White Cottage he had entirely forgotten her. He asked Malcolm to stop there a minute, while he ran in to have a word with David Breck—commonly called Davie—about the Glen of the Ford.

'You'll no mak' muckle o' him,' said Malcolm with a grunt. 'He's very daft the day. He wass workin' in the gairden as I cam' by, an' spiered if I wad be in time for the funeral.'

The minister did not answer, but strode up the garden path to the door which he pushed open. Davie was sitting huddled before the fire and seemed to be asleep till the minister called to him.

'I'm off to Edinburgh, Davie,' he cried cheerfully, 'and I'll see your brother. Have you any message for him?'

Davie lifted his head from his breast and the minister saw that his eye was very dull and dazed.

'To Edinburgh, and ye'll see Otto?' No ye winna—he's awa', he said stolidly.

'Away from the Glen—yes, many weeks ago, Davie; but I'll see him at his house in Edinburgh. Shall I tell him you're all right?'

'Ye canna—I say he's awa', repeated the poor creature fixedly.

In spite of himself the minister felt a cold shiver go through him.

'Have you heard from him, Davie? I had a letter myself this morning.'

'No, I hinna heard. At least there wass nae letter, and there never will pe any more letters, minister. Will ye pe pack in time for the funeral?'

The minister, pressed for time as he was, could not stop to unravel the mysterious workings of the weakling's mind, but he was haunted all the way in the train by a portent of evil.

The vision of Christine sometimes banished it for a brief space, and as he pictured her alone in the world, turning to him for protection and care, the austere blood coursed through his veins with unaccustomed warmth. The thoughts emanating from the vision were so enthralling and so sweet that the tedium of his journey was entirely beguiled, and he was even surprised when he reached Edinburgh so soon.

Familiar with the city from end to end, he took a car at once to Rankeillor Street, whence it was but a few steps to the North Bank.

On the way, however, he had to pass through a very poor area where there was plenty to do for both missioner and philanthropist. Christine was very familiar with the poor streets behind the North Bank, and all the little bairns knew her. She had a singing-class for them in an empty room, and delighted in her *protégés*, often coaxing them with bribes to the studio so that her father might see the types.

Alan Grier knew very little about the poor as they are found in cities. The decent poverty of the country was familiar enough, and never an insolvable problem. He was inclined to think the problems of city life exaggerated.

It was quite dark when he reached the familiar gate of the Eyrie, and he was relieved to see lights in the front windows. Perhaps he would be in time to join them at their evening meal, and he suddenly remembered that he had eaten nothing since the hasty bite his mother had set before him at one o'clock. His handling of the old knocker brought an immediate response, but he did not know the lady who appeared at the open door—a middle-aged woman with a kind, somewhat careworn, motherly face expressing a somewhat sorrowful composure.

'Can I see Mr. Breck?' asked Grier in the abrupt manner characteristic of him.

She shook her head.

'You've come some distance?' she said, glancing at the bag he carried.

'Yes—from Lochardle. My name is Grier. I am here in consequence of a letter I received from Mr. Breck this morning.'

'The last he wrote, I believe,' she said, as she motioned him in. 'Mr. Breck is dead.'

Alan almost staggered into the hall, growing pale with the tidings of woe.

'Dead! It's impossible!' he said, beginning to fumble in his inner pocket. 'Here is his letter, posted the night before last.'

'The same night he died. The policeman saw him post that letter about two o'clock in the morning. He was found dead in the studio where he had evidently died in his sleep. You don't know me—I am Mrs. Noble. You have met my husband, I think, at the Glen of the Ford. He has gone there to-day to arrange for the funeral to-morrow or next day. It has all been so sudden that we seem paralysed.'

Still Grier did not speak. It was of Christine he thought, and he feared to ask a single question.

'You won't mind coming into the kitchen? There's no servant in the house. They had not been fortunate in getting one after they came back, and the woman who comes in by the day has just left. I'm staying with Christine. Poor girl, she does not seem to realise her loss yet!'

Grier put down his bag and followed Mrs. Noble dumbly into the dingy little kitchen where some preparations for a meal were going forward.

Mrs. Noble sat down by the table and lifted her calm, quiet eyes to the minister's face.

'Christine is expecting her uncle from London—Mr. Hedderwick. He telegraphed this morning to say he would arrive at eleven to-night. That will be a help.'

'How is Miss Breck?' Grier managed to ask in a voice strangely unlike his usual measured tones.

'She's very quiet. She has said very little at all, and has spent the most of the day in the studio. He is in there. We just left him where we found him on the old settee. Christine is in the dining-room now, writing a letter. I had better tell her you have come.'

'In a moment, Mrs. Noble. Tell me first, what did Meiklejohn say when he came? I suppose you sent for Meiklejohn, since he had the case in hand.'

'He said that the heart was broken. Hately told me. I was struck by the expression.'

Grier was struck too, but he looked—as he felt—relieved.

'There was no suggestion that he had taken any drug to make him sleep—an overdose, perhaps? Forgive me for asking the question, Mrs. Noble, but Mr. Breck told me at the Glen of the Ford about six weeks ago, that he had to take constant doses to stop the pain.'

'Dr. Meiklejohn did not say, and anyhow it is of no consequence now. He is gone, and his poor girl is left. She doesn't realise it yet. I am glad Mr. Hedderwick is coming. He's a practical man and will be a great help.'

'Mr. Breck was not very fond of Hedderwick?' suggested Grier.

'Wasn't he? Ah well, it doesn't matter now. Death is a wonderful softener even of family differences. And the Hedderwicks are very well off. Christine might do worse than try to be happy among them.'

Here spoke the practical woman whose life had been a long combat with the vagaries of the artistic temperament, and who in the last twenty years had consistently borne the burden of two. It had not hardened her kind heart,

but it had sharpened in her that eye to the main chance, a quality which Hately Noble so sadly lacked.

'Christine will be pleased to see you. I had better tell her.'

'Don't—I'll just go in. The dining-room, I think you said? I know the way.'

He crossed the little hall and opened the door, but though the gas was lighted the room was empty. Then he went to the end of the passage and softly opened the studio door. A solitary candle burned at the far end on the mantelpiece, showing in relief the exquisite picture of Alice Breck at the back. On the old settee under the north light there was something white spread, and Christine was sitting on a low stool at the head with her elbows on her knees, her eyes fixed on the sleeping face. So natural and lifelike did Otto Breck look that he might but have been asleep, and Christine found it hard to realise that the lips that had never spoken to her but in the accents of love would open nevermore.

Very softly did Grier steal up the long dim spaces of the room, and Christine turning her head saw him and, rising, ran blindly to him, holding out her hands.

He never forgot the uplifting ecstasy of that moment. It often came back to him in the dark days when hope and love had departed from him for ever. A very passion of tenderness welled in his heart and, but for some inward modesty, some compelling shyness, he must then and there have clasped her to his heart.

'Oh, Mr. Grier, I am so glad you have come! Now, perhaps, I shall know what this means.'

She did not speak incoherently, but in a quiet, even voice, and her dry eyes clave to his face. His hands clasped hers, and he felt them very cold.

'It is a mystery, and there never has been any mystery in my life. Come and tell me why my father should have died.'

She released one hand, and with the other drew him towards the old settee.

'Look at him—surely he is asleep. He will speak presently. So he has looked all day. If it is God who has done this, what have you to say for Him? For see—I am only a girl, and he was all I had.'

Grier was dumb before the intensity of her voice, the compelling questioning of her eyes. Commonplace words would not avail here, and he was still casting about for something to say when she spoke again.

'In all his life he never harmed a human being, nor have I—at least willingly; and we did not ask very much—only a few more years of life together. Out there in "The Pleasance" where life is often hideous, old men and women do not die though their relations want them to die so badly, and would even help them away! What is the meaning of it? That is what I have been asking myself all day—what I am waiting to hear now. You are a religious man and you have made a study of these things,' she went on when he did not answer. 'Why is life so full of injustice? Why is my father dead?'

'It was God's time, dear Christine,' he answered slowly, but she only laughed.

'But it was not my time! I shall never forgive Him for it. Is that some one else at the door?—there seems to be an endless ringing of bells.'

She pressed her hands to her head, and Grier saw that she was distraught. He put his arm about her and tried to draw her away from the old settee, soothing her as if she had been a child. For the moment his own personal feelings were merged in a diviner sympathy, of so rare a quality that it began to penetrate to Christine's heart, and even to comfort her.

'You are very good, and he loved you,' she murmured. 'I shall always remember that.'

Before Grier could speak further, Mrs. Noble somewhat

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hastily opened the door, her face betraying a passing excitement.

'Your uncle has arrived, Christine—Mr. Hedderwick, from London. He was able to catch an earlier train. Come, my dear, he is waiting for you.'

Christine's face hardened. She drew herself from Grier's clasp, not, however, before Mrs. Noble had noticed their attitude.

Grier lingered after the door was shut and, standing over the body of his friend, took upon himself a fresh and solemn vow.

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CHAPTER III

UNDER THE ROWANS

'UNCLE HEDDERWICK enjoyed himself to-day—yes, very much,' observed Christine with a small dry smile. 'He makes an excellent stage-manager.'

She was walking slowly along with the minister by the side of Loch Ardlie, their faces turned to the Glen of the Ford. The funeral was over, the Clan had gone back to Edinburgh, and Hedderwick, detained at the Inn of the Ford by the quiet obstinacy of his niece, who simply said that she was not ready to go, was smoking a pipe in the common room of that interesting hostel, which had that day witnessed his lavish hospitality.

Otto Breck's funeral baked-meats would indeed furnish food for talk in the Glen long after their consumption, and the reckless expenditure of the man from London in the matter of coaches and horses and other appurtenances had created a feeling of awe and respect in all save Christine, who had accepted it without comment—either in the way of praise or of demur.

An absolute autocrat in his own home, controller and arbiter of destinies, Hedderwick was completely non-plussed by the calm-faced, clear-eyed young woman who seemed so very little impressed by his lordly ways. Yet she interested and drew him. She had an air of dignity, a particular charm which his own showy daughters lacked. And she feared nothing in heaven or earth. Such was the conclusion to which he had come. He would still

carry out his original plan—conceived in one of those moments of extreme generosity which so ill balanced his other moods—and take her back to London on a visit, the length of which would depend wholly on her behaviour.

Hedderwick's motive was not completely disinterested. Never at any time a *persona grata* in his wife's family, he had seized the first opportunity of making an impression in the place where the name was so well known.

Breck had paid one visit to London after his sister's marriage, and, not liking sundry things he saw in the household, had spoken out with great frankness to his brother-in-law, and they had parted after some very bitter words.

Breck was very poor then, and Hedderwick had not hesitated to cast in his teeth certain 'benefits forgot' in the shape of pictures that he had taken off his hands and paid for with good money. It was an insult which Breck had never forgotten or forgiven, and to mark his sense of it, after his reputation was made he had sent other pictures to the house at Sydenham Hill which were of more value. In this way he had tried to heal the hurt to his pride made by Hedderwick's ungenerous words.

Christine knew nothing of this, and her Uncle Hedderwick amused her—as her remark to Grier indicated. He was unlike any other man that had ever come within her ken.

'But he has been very kind,' Grier reminded her, realising what practical help had been rendered that day and how smoothly everything had gone off.

'I suppose he means to be, but he is a drum-major. We know some people in Trinity—the wife and daughters of Admiral Du Cane. Mrs. Du Cane says the Admiral behaves exactly as if the house were the deck of a ship and shouts orders everywhere. I told her I should learn to shout back. I can imagine Uncle George being quite at home on a ship's deck.'

Grier smiled only faintly.

'Why did Davie disappear, do you think? Nobody has seen him all day, and Jimmy told me it was because he saw Uncle Hedderwick in the first coach. So you see I am not alone in my opinion of him.'

The tone distressed Grier. It was hard. Her face too was hard, and all through that most trying day she had never shed a tear. When reminded that it was not usual for women to attend in the churchyard she had acquiesced, but had sat at an open window in the gable-end of the inn and watched the proceedings through the thinning branches of the trees. Mrs. Grier who, at her son's request, had come to sit with her, was affronted—as she expressed it.

'The man may have been what he liked—I never thought much of him myself—but at the last she ought to have shown him proper respect.'

Grier had no answer ready then, and he could not find any for Christine now; but he surmised that underneath this strange exterior there were unprobed depths. He also fancied that had the whole ordering of Otto Breck's burying been left in Christine's hands it would have been different. He was not therefore much surprised at her next words.

'Father will never forgive me, I am afraid, for letting them do all this. We ought to have brought him ourselves—the Clan, and you and I, Mr. Grier—and laid him away in the gloaming when there were no strangers by. I felt so helpless this morning when we left Edinburgh in the cold dawn, and it seemed easy to leave everything to Uncle Hedderwick when he was so anxious to undertake it. I now see that we ought not always to choose the easy things.'

'Christine,' said Grier in a low voice, 'will you go back to London with your uncle?'

'Yes, I suppose so. He seems to wish it, and besides, father in his letter said I must get to know Aunt Lizzie. I

will carry about his letter with me always. It is full of love.'

Grier stood still on the road.

'May I show you a letter I got from him, Christine, only yesterday morning? It must have been written at the same time as yours.'

'Yes, if you like.'

She stood still expectantly in the road, and he took out his pocket-book and gave her the letter, turning away and leaning over the fence while she read it.

She gave it back to him in a moment or two quite quietly, without a flush on her cheek or the flutter of an eyelid.

'That was in my letter too. I suppose we shall have to think about it, but I should not like to marry just yet.'

'But you might one day. Oh, Christine!' he said, and it astonished Christine very much to see the big man tremble and to observe the variations of feeling on his face. She herself was perfectly calm. The thought of marrying him or any other man had not the power to cause the faintest flutter at her heart.

'Why should you look so desperate about it?' she asked simply. 'I should like to live here, close to the loch and the kirkyard. Everything would seem easier.'

'And you know how I would love and cherish you, Christine?' he said out of the fulness of his heart. 'You know how I loved your father, and I think that at least he trusted me?'

'Oh yes; he did. I dare say we shall get on well enough together if you did not expect me to go every Sunday to the kirk.'

'As to that you would please yourself, Christine; though I think you would come to hear the sermons you helped to inspire.'

To Christine there was nothing incongruous in the remark which Marian Grier would have called irreverent,

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perhaps indecent. She was watching them at the moment from an attic window at the Manse, whence she was just able to discern their shadowy figures in the gloaming, her heart filled with dire foreboding. There was something about Alan in these days which she could not fathom, but she feared he was falling away from grace.

'Father used to say that I could inspire a man if I loved him,' said Christine. 'But you and I don't know anything about love. Do you believe it exists, Mr. Grier? I have never met it out of books.'

'Your father loved your mother, surely. Have you not seen his face at the rare times when he talked of her?'

'Yes,' she said with a sigh. 'But you see, I never saw them together, and all the married people I know seem never to think of love at all. It is chiefly of bills and babies, and the wives wear a worried look and get old very quickly, like poor Mrs. Noble. The husbands smoke long pipes and grumble because there is never enough money to pay everybody who wants it. The pigeon-holes of our bureau at the Eyrie now are full of bills. I shall show them to Uncle Hedderwick. He is a business man and will perhaps help to put me straight.'

Grier had not a word to say. She was so much of a child—so little of a woman, though her face had already lost the girlish curves. He felt more and more at a loss. It was protection that she undoubtedly needed. Never surely had one been born less fitted to do battle with the world.

'I should like to take to myself all the privileges which you are going to accord to your Uncle Hedderwick,' he said jealously. 'I should like to keep you here now in the Manse of Lochardle and never let you away again.'

Christine smiled very sweetly.

'You've always been kind, and I shall remember it. I shall be sure to come back after I have been out in the world and seen a bit of life.'

'But that may change you, Christine, and take away your love for Lochardle and the Glen of the Ford.'

'That is in my blood,' she answered simply. 'And don't forget that I have a home here too. The White Cottage belongs to me. I want to see Davie and to hear from his own lips what there was about Uncle Hedderwick that made him run away. When Jimmy told me I could see by his eyes that he quite understood. The Clan disapprove of Uncle Hedderwick, and Mr. Nobie said to me to-day that if I went with him to London I should rue it only once—and that would be always.'

Grier made no reply, though Nobie had in these words voiced his own unspoken thought.

'I don't mind telling you that I want to go to London for another reason—because Mrs. Prentice lives there.'

'Who is Mrs. Prentice?'

'It seems strange that anybody should ask who Mrs. Prentice is, now that I have seen her. She is a friend of Miss Wickham, the Quaker lady whom you have seen at the Eyrie. She was brought to Edinburgh by the Society for Women's Suffrage to help them to get the vote. She made everything so clear when she was speaking at the meeting that day. The world is going to be a much better place when women have a direct influence on politics. You see, they are so sound on moral questions. I felt very ignorant while I was listening to her; I did not even know till then whether I had any morals. I told father that I felt as if I had seen a new dawn and wanted to go forward with the day which it had ushered in.'

Her face flushed a little now and her keen eyes shone, but Grier listened in dismay. No such ideas had ever penetrated to the Glen of the Ford. They were alien and antagonistic to everything he had been taught and to all he believed regarding women and their place in the world. But something warned him that this was neither the time nor the place to argue the point with Christine.

'Such women have very often lost their sense of proportion,' he said gravely; 'and anyhow you can be assured that it is not in that direction happiness lies.'

'I've had twenty-five years of happiness—perfect happiness. I have never known anything else in the world. I am going to waken up now. That is why I am so anxious to see London and life.'

'London and life!' Grier repeated under his breath. It was a strange subject for conversation on the evening of her father's funeral day. Not in such mood had he hoped to find and comfort the woman he loved.

'Dear Miss Emily told me that Mrs. Prentice had had the courage of her opinions and that she had suffered very much for them,' said Christine thoughtfully.

'She is a widow, I suppose—or is there a Mr. Prentice?'—and for the life of him he could not help adding 'Poor beggar.'

To his surprise Christine laughed quite spontaneously.

'You are one of the men that Mrs. Prentice spoke about at the meeting. It is men who have lost their sense of proportion. I don't think I shall go on to the Cottage to-night,' she said suddenly; 'and I must find out to-morrow what has become of Davie. Let us go back. I am tired.'

Her face had grown white and weary, and Grier took her by the arm.

'It has been too much for you altogether,' he whispered tenderly. 'I wonder if you know just how much I want to keep you here to take care of you.'

'I am tired of being taken care of. I am twenty-five, and I know nothing,' she made answer. 'I must know for myself what life is like. I am selfish. I must learn to know myself.'

'We love you as you are. Don't go out into the world, Christine. It will change, perhaps harden you. It is not what he would have wished.'

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'Father knew that he had made a mistake somewhere with me. His letter was filled with self-reproach from beginning to end. And now he will never know how passionately I thank him for the lovely life which he gave me all these years.'

'He knows it where he is to-day,' said Grier involuntarily.

Christine lifted questioning, incredulous eyes to his face.

'You say that, but you don't even know whether it is true. Nobody knows, because nobody ever comes back. When your mother was talking to me to-day about being resigned to what she called the Heavenly Will I could have screamed out. And I am afraid I was really very rude to her, but that sort of talk always irritates me—it always has irritated me. I could not listen to it in the pulpit even from you. Father was the same. He preferred to find God in the fields or among the hills where nobody could come between.'

Presently she looked up into his grave face when he did not answer.

'Your mother's religion would terrify me. She said to-day that sorrow was chastening. Who wants to be chastened? Sorrow is not a beautiful thing—it will only harden me. We did not ask much. We were not rich, but we were happy. Why should he have been taken away? It was an act of great injustice. I shall never grow reconciled to it—never.'

'When you are a little older you will understand,' he said with a great compassion in his eyes.

He did not observe the little flash in Christine's eyes. 'Precisely. That is why I will go out into the world—to grow older and to understand. I want to know how other people—all those of whom Mrs. Prentice spoke who are fighting in the open—fare. When I have learned something, perhaps I shall come back to Strathardle—chastened.'

She did not look sweet as she spoke, and the tone of her voice was bitter.

Grier was once more completely at a loss. His love made him humble and shy of rebuking a mental attitude of which he could not approve. He comforted himself by reflecting that it was only the outcome of the shock of a great grief.

'Now I have shocked you,' she said with a sad little smile. 'But surely it is better to be quite frank and to have no illusions about one another if we should ever be so foolish as to marry. Remember, however, that if at any time you wish to change your mind I shall quite understand. We must both be left absolutely free—until at least I have made my little excursion into life. Now there is Uncle Hedderwick! Doesn't he look spick-and-span? Did you ever see any one so well dressed? He positively looks rich.'

She did not wait for Grier's reply, but suddenly escaped through a gap in the hedge and disappeared.

Grier strode on to meet Hedderwick, thinking how well Christine's words had hit him off. He had a fine figure which he carried with the easy assurance of the man who had achieved success. His face would be difficult to describe or define. It had a certain handsomeness, a cheerful, well-groomed look, an expression of perfect self-satisfaction—yet withal a furtive air as of one not quite at his ease, a sort of discontent in the eyes as if much had been gained, yet something missed. Grier wondered what it was as he approached, pleased enough to have an opportunity of speaking a few private words with the man whose personality so nearly concerned Christine.

'Good evening,' said Hedderwick. 'I was wondering where everybody had vanished to while I was settling up with the last of the fellows. I say, they know how to lay it on in these parts. Where has my niece gone? She seems to be a law to herself, and she treats everybody

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alike. I don't profess to understand that young woman—she's quite right in her head, I suppose?'

'Why, of course. Such a suggestion is superfluous and ridiculous,' answered Grier rather hotly.

'Not so superfluous or ridiculous, considering the family history. That poor creature at the Cottage ought really to be under control. If I had known he was so bad I question whether I should have married into the family; but interested parties generally manage to keep their finger on the sore spot till the stranger is taken in.'

It was a coarse view to take; but it was the view of the man of the world, who suspects everybody and treats as enemies even those whom he desires as friends.

'David Breck is quite harmless—a little flaw in development, that is all,' Grier answered gravely. 'In most things he is perfectly sensible, and everybody likes him. I assure you his brother never once contemplated putting him away.'

'Otto Breck was a fool—and pigheaded at that, though he is dead,' replied Hedderwick ruthlessly. 'There isn't an ounce of common-sense in the family. Even my wife—'

He stopped there, arrested by the expression of strong disgust on the minister's face, which gave Hedderwick an unpleasant impression of rebuke that he found difficult to forgive.

'I've been a successful man in a sense, Mr. Grier,' he said pointedly. 'But a man only realises all his ambitions when his wife allows him.'

Grier made no response, refraining from encouraging Hedderwick to discuss his family affairs with him. The man only interested him so far as his relation to Christine was concerned.

'You think of taking Miss Breck back with you to London?' he said inquiringly.

'Something must be done with her. She can't be left

in that god-forsaken hole in Edinburgh with a charwoman. I tell you it was an eye-opener—the state of my brother-in-law's house. Yet he must have made money in his time—he did make it. I have seen it stated that he could sell a picture for a thousand pounds, but Christine will be a pauper—nothing less or more. She will have to earn her own living unless she is fortunate enough to marry well. But she isn't likely to, with that sharp tongue of hers. A month or two at my house will do her good. She has lived too much with men and has really shocking ideas about things.'

It was perhaps the sheer truth, but it hurt Grier as if he had been stabbed.

'I don't think that we on the outside are fully capable of judging the conditions of life in the house of a man of genius,' he said formally; but Hedderwick interrupted him with a cynical laugh.

'Faugh! Genius—it's akin to madness and it's worth precious little, I tell you, in these days. What has he left for probate? How will his genius pan out when set down in black and white? I've no patience with that sort of thing. I once told Otto Breck exactly what I thought of him, and he never forget or forgave my plain-speaking. But I don't keep up ill-will. For my wife's sake I'm willing to give the girl a home for a while until we think what's best to be done for her.'

Grier looked away across the dark loch and hesitated for a moment. Could he confide his hopes to this man who reduced everything to the sordid level of expediency? No—he must wait the turn and tide of events.

'Now, she has kept me here to-night for sheer devilry. She doesn't realise what twenty-four hours mean to a man like me with a big concern on his shoulders. My son isn't old enough to take my place or to relieve me much, and even the best of servants want watching. I may easily have lost a thousand pounds by this waste of time.'

When I suggested that to her, what do you think she said ?
 " Don't stay any longer then ; why should you lose thousands because of me ? "

' Miss Breck does not always mean so much as her words imply,' observed Grier with a shadowy little smile.

' Fact is, she has never had any upbringing. I don't know whether you knew my brother-in-law well, but certainly he seemed to me the very last person to be entrusted with the custody of children. Did you ever meet Christine's mother ? '

' Oh no. She has been dead over twenty years, and I made acquaintance with the Brecks only when I came to Locharde three years ago.'

' Why, of course—what am I thinking of ? But I say, isn't this rather a one-horse show for a man like you—a handful of uncouth natives and a very small stipend ? Why don't you agitate for a change ? '

' I like the place and the people. It suits my requirements meanwhile,' answered Grier somewhat vaguely, in no way tempted to confide any of his ambitions to his questioner.

Hedderwick shrugged his shoulders.

' I can't understand it. If I had gifts like you—they tell me you are clever—I should seek a better market for them. I might have been travelling yet for the firm of which I am now head if I hadn't had the ambition to rise. To reach the top wants courage—and force of character. Now there are some plums in the Kirk in London and its suburbs. We're going to build a new Presbyterian Church in our neighbourhood. I'm giving a thousand to the building fund, and we shall want a really good man. We'll offer him six or seven hundred to begin with. What's to hinder you from aiming at that or something like it ? '

' The life wouldn't appeal to me. I'm a student, Mr. Hedderwick, and I don't possess what are called popular gifts.'

'Well, don't stop here till it's too late. That's sometimes done, you know. Now, where has that girl gone? I must go and look after her and see that she eats some dinner. Have you ever noticed how queer women are about their food? My wife seldom eats a respectable dinner, but tipples at tea at all sorts of unholy hours. Consequence—her nerves are all to pot. Eating is a science—an art that has to be acquired as much as painting or preaching.'

Grier laughed and bade him good-night.

When he entered the Manse he went straight to the study and closed the door. It had been a long and trying day, but Sunday was coming soon and must not find him unprepared. He wished to compose a pulpit tribute to Otto Breck—surely the very last service that the artist would have desired at his hands.

Christine was found in the hotel when her uncle entered; and they dined together in a private room from a menu that had been carefully selected by him. Christine listened to his dissertation on wines and foods in rather an abstracted manner, but she did look a little startled when a certain dish was sent out untouched, because it was not what he had ordered.

'Does it matter what we eat, Uncle George?' she asked—not timidly, but in a sort of quiet wonder.

'Wait till we've had you in London a few weeks. We'll teach you the whole art of dining. Meanwhile it is well to let these heathens see that we know what we are about.'

Christine did not smile. Inwardly she felt a little ashamed. They knew her well at the Inn of the Ford, her father and she having partaken of many a simple meal of bread and cheese, many a homely tea under its roof. This was an entirely new order of things, and she wondered whether she might privately acquaint Mrs. Maclaren with the fact that she had no hand in the rejection of the dish.

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At nine o'clock she bade him good-night and went to her own room, which she had chosen on the ground-floor at the gable-end of the house.

By ten o'clock all the inmates of the inn were asleep, so that none heard Christine when she softly opened her window and stepped out upon the green sward, dank with the autumn dews.

Nor did anybody know that she had spent the best part of the night under the rowan-tree with her cheek close pressed against the laurel leaves which the Clan had scattered on the new-made grave.

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CHAPTER IV

THE POTENTATE

A CATERER'S van stood before the gateway of the Laurels, Abchurch Road, Sydenham Hill, at nine o'clock in the morning, when a cab piled high with luggage turned the corner. Hedderwick, looking out to learn the cause of the sudden stoppage, had a grim smile on his face. It was not the first time he had suspected his family of what he called 'high jinks' in his absence; here was undeniable proof. Suspicious of the whole world—including his nearest and dearest—Hedderwick was in the habit of leaving his business and his home without warning, and returning in the same way in the expectation of finding something wrong when he returned. It is sufficient to say that sometimes these suspicions were fully justified.

The household at the Laurels had counted on his remaining in Scotland until the beginning of the following week, but Hedderwick had brought pressure to bear on his niece and had persuaded her to leave the deserted Eyrie on the evening of the day on which they returned from the Glen of the Ford. The appalling emptiness of the house had made Christine easy to persuade. Hedderwick had found her strangely docile, but so quiet that at times he felt disconcerted. They had some little talk about the future, and Hedderwick, with that lavish generosity which was one of his most perplexing characteristics, had thrown his money about in the usual way and made large promises which Christine scarcely grasped.

Her only concern meanwhile was that she was alone in the world. Never had she felt it more poignantly than when her uncle was charging himself with her future in the arbitrary Hedderwick manner.

When the cab drew up he alighted and called sharply to the vanmen to get out of the way. His wife, superintending the removal in her dressing-gown, heard the sharp, incisive tones in dismay and braced herself for the inevitable scene. Her worn, sweet face flushed a little as she stepped out into the hall to receive them, hoping that Christine's presence would break the back of it—as she expressed it in her own mind. She wished she had had strength of mind to waken Ted at the usual time and pack him off to business. Nine o'clock, and the whole household still asleep! But when she saw the girl's beautiful face looking wistfully about the spacious house, she forgot her husband altogether and ran to her with tears in her eyes, welcoming her in broken accents of affection. For this was one of her own blood—the first who had crossed her threshold since her husband and her brother had had their bitter quarrel.

'My dear, dear lassie, I'm so glad you've come! You have your father's eyes; I think I would have known you anywhere. And you must be very tired! Never mind—we'll soon have breakfast. Then you can lie down. If you had sent me a telegram, George, I would have been ready for you.'

'Maybe ay—and maybe no,' replied Hedderwick drily. 'Where are they all? A fine time of day this for you to be in a dressing-gown, and before all these men.'

'None of them are up, and the men came before their time. I said after breakfast,' answered Mrs. Hedderwick nervously. 'We were late last night, and to-day being Saturday I thought I'd let them off.'

'Umph! And Ted has gone to business, I suppose?'

'No—Ted's sleeping yet, I'm afraid. But it was my fault, George. Come upstairs, Christine.'

'High jinks! Didn't I tell you, Christine, I had nobody at home to trust? Was it a ball or a *cafe chantant* last night?'

'Only a few friends came in and they had a dance. I'm sure Christine wouldn't mind if she's like her father. He always liked to see folks happy.'

'But you might have remembered I was away burying him—eh, Christine?' he said.

Christine looked round uncomfortably, hating the scene and chilled by the atmosphere, but finding a little relief in the kind expression of Aunt Lizzie's tired eyes.

'Just a moment, dear lassie, till I hurry up the breakfast,' said her aunt, disappearing through the green baize door to give directions to the sleepy, unwilling maids.

'You get the key to my position here at the very door—stuck in the door, in fact,' observed Hedderwick as he threw his numerous overcoats on the hall seat.

Aunt Lizzie appeared before Christine could find any reply.

'Come, dear, never mind your uncle,' she whispered as she took her by the arm. 'I dare say you have found out that he's a little sharp, but you'll learn not to mind him—at least, not much. When you've been in the house a while you'll understand too why the bairns had a few companions in when he was away. There was no disrespect to your father in it, dearie, for he was my own brother, and I was very fond of him.'

'I should never think that disrespect was meant, Aunt Lizzie. Does it matter anyhow? The only thing that counts is that he has really gone away.'

Her heart went out to the sweet, worn-faced little woman as they ascended the spacious staircase together. The light from the painted windows seemed to deepen the haunting care behind her soft eyes. The pathos of

that moment of meeting never left Christine. Afterwards she always thought of her Aunt Lizzie as a person who lived two lives and was happy in neither.

'I'm very sorry, but you'll need to lay off your things in the day-nursery. Two of Ted's chums are in the spare room, and your uncle will want to change in mine. But they'll be gone after breakfast and then you'll get your own room. It's a very nice one, looking out to the Palace grounds. I'm sorry it happened like this, but as your uncle did not write we thought he couldn't possibly get back till to-morrow, and then I wasn't even sure whether he would bring you.'

'I wish you wouldn't say any more about it, Aunt Lizzie.'

'Ah well, but if you had arrived comfortably in the evening and found a nice dinner waiting, everybody would have felt better. I don't like night journeys, and arriving at folks' houses at unholy hours. But your Uncle George glories in them. He always likes catching folks—as he expresses it. For me, I don't mind what goes on behind my back, as long as folks are happy and there are no scenes. I'm worn out with scenes, lassie—they've made me an old woman before my time.'

'I didn't mind leaving last night, for when we got back to the Eyrie the whole place seemed so desolate that it broke my heart,' said Christine.

Aunt Lizzie's sympathetic eyes filled with tears.

'Poor lamb! Never mind. We'll try and make you happy here. The bairns are a jolly lot, and Betty has been counting on your coming. You see Katie's away just now, and Betty hasn't a chum. You'll like little Robin if you're fond of babies. He's a dear wee chap, full of fun and nonsense. This is his Zoo—just look at the beasts. Everybody who comes presents him with something new for it.'

A big cage stood against the nursery wall, filled with

stuffed animals of every size, shape, and hue. It was a motley, laughable collection, and Christine's lips parted in a tender little smile.

'A quaint wee chap,' his mother said, as she patted a big woolly lamb keeping guard by the door. 'Sometimes he plays at being God making the beasts at the beginning of the world. But there—I'm keeping you. Mr. Hedderwick will be sure to want me. There's a bath-room through that door, and you can ring for clean towels if there are none. Good-bye just now.'

She hurried off, imagining she heard the peremptory voice of her lord.

Christine stood still in the middle of the nursery floor, looking vaguely round with something of dismay in her eyes. Aunt Lizzie was motherly and kind, but something whispered that not here would she find a home. The sense of unrest, the hurrying discontent, the undercurrent of unbearable sadness made their impression on the girl's sensitive soul, and never afterwards left it.

Meantime Aunt Lizzie in the room downstairs was bearing the full brunt of her husband's anger. He had begun to change his clothes, and was flinging them about the room in a manner which obviously indicated his state of mind.

'Call yourself a decent woman!' he said savagely. 'Do you think it decent to get up a ball while I was away putting your brother in the grave? What can you expect any of your children to come to, reared in such an atmosphere of deceit?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' she answered truthfully enough. 'But they must have a little brightness, George. It was all done on the spur of the moment, and there was no underhand planning about it. How could there be? And anyway I'm not asking you for money to pay for it—I can manage it out of the housekeeping.'

'And keep us on short commons for the next month!

You're worth watching, my lady. But I'll have a word to say to Ted this morning. Talk of a partnership! He was at me about that just before I went away. A bonnie partner he would make—lying in his bed till this time of day.'

'You won't say anything to him before his chums, George. Indeed I won't let you,' she said desperately. 'Besides it was my fault. The last thing he said before he went upstairs was that I was to be sure and awaken him—'

'I don't believe a word of it. There isn't anybody in the house that I can believe. I'm afraid to leave it for twenty-four hours, not knowing what may be going on in my absence. It's jolly hard after a man has toiled as I have done to bring up his family comfortably. But I must take more drastic measures to prevent this sort of scandal happening again.'

His wife made no response, simply because she knew that words would be of no avail. And it was all the same old, old ground, which she had so often traversed painfully step by step.

She let down her hair, which was still luxuriant and plentiful though it had lost its glittering sheen. When it veiled her face she relaxed her tense features so that their sadness seemed accentuated. She suddenly awakened to the fact that she was very tired, that she was not so able as formerly to act the part of buffer between a pack of affectionate but unruly children and the father of whom they were afraid. Somebody must go to the wall—perhaps it would be she! Well, it would be very peaceful in the old burying-ground at the Glen of the Ford—if there were no hereafter. Her thoughts had so completely flown that for the moment she was oblivious of the torrent of her husband's wrath.

'I suppose you buried Otto in his wife's grave,' she said musingly.

'I'm not talking about Otto—I am talking about what's

happening in this house and what's going to happen,' he said grimly. 'Will you kindly give me your attention for a few moments till I tell you what I want and will have?'

'Not just now, George. I'm not able to listen or to take it in—I'm not, really,' she answered, looking at him through the parted masses of her hair. 'Tell me about Otto. What kind of a place had he, and how is Christine left? Never mind the bairns and their dance and my useless ways; we can redd that up later. I've told you the whole truth about last night anyway.'

Her unexpected display of spirit had the effect of calming him for the moment.

'There's precious little about your brother you would like to hear, Liz. He died as he had lived—a thrawn beggar. Such a house and such poverty—not even a servant in the place! No decent servant would bide in such a place.'

'I can't believe that, George, looking at Christine. She's a lady every inch of her. Did you ever see such a beautiful head and one held so high? And there's something about her that none of ours have got.'

'How could they have?' he asked pointedly. 'Her looks are well enough, but she has had no upbringing, and what's to become of her Lord only knows.'

'I thought that Otto got big prices for his pictures. You once read out of the paper when we lived down at Brixton, that he had got a thousand pounds for a picture of the Glen of the Ford with Lochardle in the distance.'

'So he did. But he was like you, Liz—he should never have had the handling of money.'

'But he was nice to live with, George, and that lassie of his was fond of him—you can see it in her eyes.'

'I've seen precious little sign of grief, I can tell you. Her callousness at Lochardle was remarked upon. It's in the blood. There's a big sump of a minister up there that would make eyes at her; but if he took Otto Breck's

daughter to the Manse he would rue it only once—and that would be all his life.'

'You can't know so very much about her in such a short time, George. And besides, probably you weren't sympathetic, for you never liked Otto and you would show it in your manner. I haven't yet recovered my wonder over your going off as you did; but I'm very much obliged to you all the same for that and for bringing Christine back.'

'Umph!' said Hedderwick grimly; but his anger was beginning to melt, and his wife's face visibly brightened. She did not need much to make her happy. She made no exorbitant demands on life. Perhaps had she been more exacting in the summer of her days the present way had been less flinty for her feet.

'They were awfully happy last night, George. I wish you could have seen the bairns, and Betty looked as sweet as any one could look. I was proud of her.'

'Happy—umph! You and they are only happy when you're spending money you couldn't earn.'

It was Hedderwick's way to talk at home as if he were on the verge of bankruptcy, though his personal expenditure was very heavy and the best was never good enough for him.

His wife had ceased to concern herself greatly about the actual state of his affairs, and merely lived from day to day, thankful when each one closed without catastrophe. She was not happy or at home in the big house, and often looked back regretfully to the cottage on the Bucksburn Road where she had begun her married life. Her children loved her undoubtedly, but they had no thought of saving her in any way. At forty-five Lizzie Breck, once the toast of the Glen of the Ford, was a weary-faced old woman with the burden of two worlds resting on her shoulders.

When they gathered about the long breakfast-table a little later the members of the household dropped in one

by one, in no way elated at sight of their father, but all curious to see the only cousin they possessed in the world. Ted was the last to appear—a tall, open-faced young man with a kindly eye and a manner which pleased Christine. Before greeting her he walked straight up to his father.

‘Good morning, sir; I’m sorry you find me here.’

‘I’m sorry myself,’ answered Hedderwick with a grunt.

‘I really meant to be at business, but I overslept myself. I’ll make up for it, I promise you.’

Christine’s eyes glowed with approval, and she marvelled that the frank, manly words provoked so ungracious a response.

There was not much conversation. Everybody ate as if for a wager, and each one as he finished left the table.

Christine sat opposite the sideboard, above which hung a lovely picture of the Ardle below the Ford where it wound through the narrowest defile of the Glen. It had been painted in August after the Lammas floods, and the volume of the water was a beautiful and living thing out of which her father’s spirit seemed to speak to her. And yet it almost broke her down and she made very small progress with her breakfast.

The two guests departed with Ted immediately they had eaten, Hedderwick retired to his sanctum to smoke, and Mrs. Hedderwick, relieved that another half-hour’s tension was over, carried Christine upstairs to the room which she was to occupy.

‘I’m sorry we haven’t any black clothes, dear; but we’ll get them next week. I haven’t had a minute to get them since the news came.’

‘I hope you won’t get black clothes,’ Christine made haste to answer. ‘Father hated them—mourning clothes, I mean, though he liked me best in black; and you see I have still some roses in my hat.’

‘I noticed them, but I thought that, like me, you had been hustled and hurried. I’m always hustled, Christine.

You'll soon find that out, and that the best time to talk to me is after meal times—in the evening for preference. When I get the dinner over I feel that I can breathe.'

'But why should you worry so terribly? Can't Betty or some of them help you? You look so tired—tired to death.'

'I am; but I don't want Betty to take up the cares of life too soon. She must have a good time; she was made for it. Their father has forgotten what it is like to be young. But you'll soon begin to understand us, Christine, and to get the hang of things in the house. You must just shut your eyes to what you don't like.'

Mrs. Hedderwick sat back in the pink-covered easy-chair, half closed her eyes and gave a little sigh. Christine regarded her perplexedly yet with an infinite compassion. What a tale of tragedy was written over the small, weary, yet altogether sweet face!

'Don't look at me like that, lassie. I'm all right and very well-off. Everybody has something to vex them—the very hymn says that there's a crook in every lot, doesn't it? Now let us talk about yourself. Do you know that your father and I were great chums when we were bairns together at Strathardle? Tell me how the bonnie glen looks. Do you know that I've never set eyes on it since I left it after your father and your uncle disagreed about some pictures? Mr. Hedderwick swore that he would never go back to the Glen as long as he lived. I was never more surprised in my life than when he said he would go down to the funeral and bring you back. So you see he can be kind when he likes. Wasn't he kind to you?'

'Oh yes; very kind.'

'He's quick in the temper, of course, but he's so clever and smart himself that he has no patience with slow folks. But we were happier when we were married first and lived in a four-roomed house on the Bucksburn Road outside of Aberdeen.'

'But you have a beautiful house here, Aunt Lizzie.'

'Oh yes, the house is well enough. But oh, lassie—these servants! You can't think what they're like and what I go through with them every day. Mr. Hedderwick is so particular he never lets anything pass. I pay a woman in the kitchen thirty-five pounds a year—and I daren't speak to her. But she cooks the cutlets in the way Mr. Hedderwick likes them, so I keep her on.'

'But surely that is a horrible way to live,' said Christine as she knelt down before her trunk with her keys in her hand.

'Yes, it is. It's bondage—hard bondage. But as I said, there's aye a something, and after you're married you just have to put up with things.'

'But a woman has her rights, and it can't be any woman's right to be worried as you are.'

Mrs. Hedderwick laughed rather mirthlessly.

'I'm not strong-minded, and if I had been, I believe we would have parted long since; but there—I didn't mean to talk to you like that the very day you came into the house. There's something about you that makes me talk. I suppose you've got your father's wheedling ways. It's your eyes that draw me—they look into my soul. When you're married you'll understand better what I'm talking about.'

'One thing is certain, Aunt Lizzie,' replied Christine as she turned the key in the lock with a little snap, 'if my husband doesn't like my cooking of the cutlet he can cook it for himself.'

'You seem very jolly in here,' said Betty, opening the door at the moment. 'Whatever are you laughing at?'

'Your cousin Christine on matrimony. Come in, Betty, and listen to her,' replied her mother. 'How old do you think Betty looks, Christine? She's just twenty-one. Ted's the eldest—he's twenty-three.'

'He looks older, I think, but Betty might be nineteen.'

replied Christine, looking up smilingly into her cousin's face.

Betty's features were not regular, nor even good, but she was undeniably charming, her small nose and wide mouth giving rather a piquant expression to her face. Her colouring was exquisite, and her dark hair contrasted well with it.

'I don't suppose, Christine, that your father minded whether he had his cutlet done to a turn or not,' said Mrs. Hedderwick pensively, as she contrasted the two girls and thought what admirable types they were. 'We didn't see many cutlets at the Glen of the Ford and had to be thankful for what we could get. Now I have to go down to that weary kitchen again, and face Madam cook. She'll be peppery this morning after last night's extra work. Now, Betty, take all that rubbish of yours out of the wardrobe. How often have I told you that the spare bedroom wardrobe should be kept for visitors?'

'All right, mamma. Give me time,' cried Betty as she threw herself on the bed. 'I say, Christine, you know you're awfully pretty. I wish I could do my hair like yours. Look how scraggy and straight it is! Your hair's like mamma's. I often threaten to cut off hers and have it made into a wig for myself. What do you do to it to get it all frilly like that?'

'Nothing—only brush it in the usual way.'

'Ah well, it's too bad when poor wretches like me have to twist and torture the hair with pins and tongs to get the meanest effect.'

She lifted up Christine's hat and set it at a becoming angle on her own head.

'Too big—though it suits you down to the ground. Say, Christine, how did you get on with papa? We were all pitying you when we had time to think about you.'

'He was very kind to me,' replied Christine, not liking these confidences, yet conscious that she obtained from

them a very good perspective of life in her uncle's house.

'You have a way of looking at folks which makes them sit up. How ripping! You could make our pater sit up! Hitherto it has been his prerogative to make everybody else sit up. We're all getting a little restive under it, especially Ted and I since we've grown up. Ted's been worse of late. Of course I'll marry as soon as the suitable party comes along. The difficulty is to choose—all the boys are so nice.'

Christine smiled as indulgently as if she had been listening to the chattering of a child.

'The boys will admire you awfully if you're not too standoffish with them. Say, how do you manage to keep your figure so lovely? Look at me—my waist's two inches bigger than mamma's now. Mamma has got awfully thin lately, don't you think?'

'She's dead tired, Betty, and you ought to help her more than you do.'

'She won't let me, really. She only thinks of getting us a good time, and we have it in spite of the pater. To do him justice, though, he isn't always so shirty as he was this morning; but then if he was more reasonable we shouldn't want to have dances when he goes away. Sometimes he's positively awful to the boys and folks when they come and simply drives them away. If mamma had taken him in hand firmly at the beginning he would have been better. I don't mean to let my husband drum-major me like that, you'll see. Say, Christine, have you ever been afraid of anybody or anything in your life?'

'No—never.'

'Wait till you see the pater in a real tantrum, then you'll see! He was in one just before Katie went away because of Braithwaite.'

'Who is Braithwaite?'

'One of the boys who was after Katie. But she's only

seventeen, and when papa found she was corresponding with him and meeting him outside, he dispatched her to a very strict school at Brighton. But Braithwaite manages to write to her yet. Girls must have a sweetheart. How many have you had? Lots must have been after you, I should think.'

'I've never had even one.'

'Not even one! Why, I've had six proposals. Haven't you even had an offer?'

Christine laughed and began to hang up her dresses in the wardrobe. Betty amused her for the moment like an overgrown child.

But of all the family whom she had seen she liked Ted best. He dined at home that evening and was very attentive to her, and it was easy for Christine to discern that he was the very apple of his mother's eye.

He seemed old for his years, more than thoughtful—even sad for one so young. Across his brow there was a line of care that worried her.

She marvelled at the lavish scale of expenditure in the house—the rich food, the careless waste of materials, and the absence of genuine comfort. It was in no sense a well-ordered household, and always there was the indefinable feeling that there was an undercurrent in the tide of prosperity—or even a skeleton in the domestic cupboard.

When Christine laid her head on her pillow that night, worn out with a day of strange excitements, she knew that not here would her heart find a home.

CHAPTER V

THE HEART OF THINGS

To Christine the Hedderwick household presented an amazing study.

She was taken into the heart of things at once because she was of their own kin, and they all talked to her in more or less confidential terms, each setting forth his own point of view.

Betty was frankly disappointed and made no secret of it.

'There's no fun left in you, Christine, even supposing that you were born with any—which is doubtful. You might have been married a hundred years.'

This, because Christine refused to join a Sunday expedition to Richmond with some of the boys.

'I can't see any fun in that sort of thing, Betty, and these boys are too silly for anything. If I were going to have a secret I would make it something worth while.'

Betty, only partly comprehending, stared out of her round eyes and went her own road, spending her days in small and harmless intrigues, in writing numerous love-letters, in making—but not always keeping—clandestine appointments, and in imagining that she was having a good time.

Aunt Lizzie, finding in Christine some rare quality of sympathy and hugging to her breast the fact that she was Otto's daughter and therefore her own flesh and blood, revealed the whole pitiful system of her life, in the process

unconsciously bringing a heavy indictment against the man whose petty tyranny had engendered in her the most perfect system of deceit of which Christine had ever heard. Everything was built on this false foundation, and there was no fair dealing anywhere. The money entrusted to her for household purposes was diverted into other channels, being spent on additional frocks for the girls or on surreptitious treats, while the bills for food and drink remained unpaid. How she could live and breathe in such a vortex with such depths daily yawning at her feet, Christine could not fathom. Every day there was unpleasantness about something, and the family meetings for meals became a nightmare. The total absence of reserve before the servants appalled Christine, who had a gentlewoman's instincts, and shrank in every nerve before the daily explosion, not with fear, but with disgust.

She continued to admire and respect Ted above them all. He was so quiet, so habitually respectful to his father, even in the latter's unreasonable moments, that she wondered something in Hedderwick's heart did not respond. That he was not without generous impulses she had already proved, but they seemed only to operate outside his family area.

Her sympathy with Ted unconsciously infused into her manner towards him a warmer strain than she was aware of. She had no idea what a revelation she was to him, and what efforts he made to keep the sympathy he had won. Hedderwick was to Christine the one insolvable puzzle.

While he was a man of unreasoning and passionate temper, of complete selfishness, his character was redeemed by deeds of generosity which struck her dumb. He would provide for the future of a whole family suddenly bereaved, even while he was haggling with his worried wife over an unequal balancing of the household books.

'It's the principle, Christine,' he said to her one Sunday afternoon when he had asked her to walk with him in the

Palace grounds. 'What I don't seem able to make my family comprehend is that the first principle of every financial undertaking is honesty. It is dishonest for a woman to spend on lace or frills the money given to her to pay for food. After all these years your aunt remains either wilfully or stupidly ignorant of that elementary truth.'

'Why don't you explain it to her?' said Christine perplexedly.

'Explain! Good heavens, didn't you hear me last night?'

'I heard you talking in a loud voice, but you did not explain anything,' replied Christine calmly. 'You simply frightened her into silence.'

These family discussions were intensely distasteful to Christine, yet they seemed to be the only form of conversation in which the Hedderwicks indulged. They never read books or newspapers, nor did they take any interest in the questions of the day.

Hedderwick eyed Christine with frank admiration as they continued their walk.

'It would not be easy to frighten you,' he said involuntarily.

'No human being has a right to frighten another,' she answered. 'If I were Aunt Lizzie I should not keep any more household books for you.'

'But why should she be afraid of me? Look what I have done for her—what a position I have given her! Yet she isn't a bit grateful, and she thinks nothing of telling me that she was happier when we were poor. That isn't very good hearing for a man who may have cherished certain private ambitions of his own.'

He spoke bitterly, and Christine saw his point of view.

'If only you would explain to my aunt how much you could afford to spend, or pay the household accounts yourself,' she said with difficulty.

'I might pay everything, and bills would still pour in.

My wife lacks something, Christine, and you can't have been in the house all these weeks without observing it. I have in my business men who make excellent servants, but who possess no other qualities—they simply do what they are told. To give them the slightest authority would be to court immediate disaster. Believe me, this inefficiency on the part of the woman at the head of the household is the canker in the home life of many a successful business man. Especially is it so in the case of those who, like me, have risen by their own endeavour and ability while their wives remain at the elementary stage.'

Christine's face flushed, but the bad taste of her uncle's words could not destroy their truth.

'I wish you wouldn't talk like that to me, Uncle George. It is not fair either to Aunt Lizzie or to me.'

'I must talk to some one, and you have got brains to understand. I tell you I have had to bury my private ambitions one by one. I find myself at fifty a very lonely man, and I sometimes make bold to ask the Lord why He has dealt so hardly with me.'

Christine slowed her step involuntarily and regarded him keenly.

There was an acute accent in his voice which left her in no doubt as to his sincerity. Some light was now thrown on the appealing prayers to which she listened morning and evening. They were all dominated by the same note—an arraignment of the Almighty for something left undone.

'Why do you look at me like that?' he asked, meeting her gaze quite frankly, while his handsome face wore its most winning look. 'I suppose that you have long since relegated me to my proper place and, like the rest of them, that you regard me as a mere money-making machine.'

'I was not thinking that, Uncle George. I have never thought it, but oh, what possibilities there are in your house, and how they are missed!'

'What are they?'

'The children. They are such dears from Ted and Betty down to Robin with his cherubic face. Aunt Lizzie gets far more happiness out of the children than you—and why? It is because she does not stint them of love. It might so easily be a perfect home.'

He shook his head.

'I'm Scottish—and a north-country Scot at that. I can't gush,' he said shortly. 'I've done all I can for them, but nothing seems to count. Fact is, if they could all be made to feel the pinch of poverty for a bit it might open their eyes.'

He spoke gloomily, switching the stunted grass with his stick.

Christine walked on in silence.

'You get on very well with them apparently, and perhaps you will do us all good. I hope you feel happy and that you will stay with us for a while.'

'You've all been very kind, Uncle George, but I think I must soon make some sort of endeavour to find a niche for myself. After all I shall have to get my own living sooner or later. I was very glad to come out with you this afternoon because I wished to speak to you about my affairs.'

'They're all right,' said Hedderwick reassuringly. 'We were uncommonly fortunate to get the Eyrie let furnished for a year.'

'To Maclure and Jimmy,' said Christine with a sweet, far-away smile. 'I know exactly how to take that, Uncle George. They thought it would help me, and they all wanted to do something, but they are both poor men and can't really afford the rent that you have made them pay.'

'Why are they poor?' asked Hedderwick with a sudden return to his grinding judgment of men and things. 'They have got painting powers, haven't they? I have seen

Maclure on show here, and I thought James Grant had some vogue as a portrait painter.'

'Oh yes, but artists are always poor, Uncle George—it's part of the heritage. They give their money away just as they earn it. But what will the money—my own money, I mean—bring in? Tell me exactly.'

'I have put it in my business. It will bring you seven or eight per cent.—about seventy-five pounds a year.'

'I could live on that, Uncle George.'

'Where?'

'Anywhere. And I could earn more.'

'I should like to see you try it. Have you any idea what you would propose to do with yourself—how you would set about earning more?'

'I am waiting till a friend comes back from abroad—a Mrs. Prentice—who will be able to help me. It was a great disappointment when I came to London to learn that she had had to leave it on account of her health.'

'Is she a rich woman?'

'Oh no, a working woman—or rather a public woman who gives herself for others.'

'I haven't heard of her. But we shan't let you get mixed up with public women, Christine. Now that we have got a hold of you we'll keep an eye on you.'

Christine merely smiled.

'Remember that, though your father and I had that stupid difference, I shall not allow you to drift into anything foolish. Did he ever say anything to you about it?'

'Never. My father had a very sensitive nature, and the mere imagining of suffering was unbearable to him. He would go a long way round to avoid it.'

'But is that not one form of selfishness?'

'I don't think so. Do you know that never in his life did he speak unkindly to me or give me a word of reproof?'

'You were sensible and clever and did not need it. It is brains that count, Christine, in every department of life.'

'They count, but they can never be the mainspring—of the happy or fruitful life at least,' she answered unexpectedly. 'It is the heart that is powerful for good or for ill. My father believed that absolutely. He set forth his whole philosophy of life in a letter that he wrote to me on the night before he died. There are some passages in it which I should like to read to you one day.'

Hedderwick waived aside the suggestion.

'The heart is a dangerous instrument to apply to the affairs of life; at any rate it should never be made the guiding force. Probably you will marry. If you don't, it will undoubtedly be your own fault. You will be able to pick and choose.'

Christine's colour rose in spite of her efforts to control it.

'But don't be in a hurry. Early marriages are mostly a mistake. So often does one of the partners grow while the other remains stationary. Well, whatever your future may be always remember that your Uncle Hedderwick, with all his faults, will be your friend and that you have a home under his roof.'

Christine thanked him because she knew him to be sincere, though another day she might have doubted it. When he was angry even she did not escape the ban of his displeasure.

Next evening two persons dined at the Laurels—a young girl-friend of Betty's and the Rev. Charles Grindlay, a candidate for the pastorate of the new Presbyterian Church of which Hedderwick had spoken to Alan Grier.

Grindlay was a young man from the country. He was rather shy, but Christine discerned that he possessed considerable gifts of intellect and spirit. Once or twice betrayed into speech on a subject which he understood, he spoke words that made an impression. But he had evidently come from a poor home, and he seemed slightly awed by the magnificence of the Laurels and the ordeal of the long dinner. Hedderwick's manner towards this

young man was admirable—a mixture of fatherly kindness and suggestiveness of favours to come. Aunt Lizzie was her sweet, motherly self, the dinner progressing without any hitch. Her face smoothed, and once or twice her laugh rang out with a spontaneous gaiety which was infectious. The picture presented was one of prosperity and peace, one in which all the best elements of family life were conspicuous. The evening did not remain unclouded, however, for suddenly Ted was missed from the table.

'Where's Ted, Lizzie?' Hedderwick called up the table to his wife.

'Dining in town,' she replied, and the gaiety faded from her face.

'With whom?'

'At the Trocadero with some friends. He won't be late.'

She at once tried to divert the talk into other channels, but the cloud had descended on Hedderwick's brow, and the rest of the meal was dulled by his silence. It was almost at an end, however, and Aunt Lizzie hastened her departure from the dining-room, leaving Hedderwick and the minister to discuss the prospects for the new church and for Presbyterianism generally in South London. Hedderwick was a keen Churchman and gave liberally, the new enterprise owing its origin to his private generosity and public effort.

Betty's friend was singing at the piano when they joined the ladies, but Hedderwick walked straight to his wife who sat on a sofa near the fireplace.

'Why wasn't I told anything about this ploy of Ted's?' he asked sternly. 'I particularly wished Mr. Grindlay to meet him. Who is it he is dining with?'

'Some of the boys,' she faltered.

'But who's giving the dinner?'

'Braithwaite,' she answered bravely. 'It's his birthday, and you know Ted was always fond of him.'

'Braithwaite! After the affair with Katie!' he said darkly. 'You sent him his clothes, I suppose, and gave him your latchkey?'

'I sent him his clothes—yes, to the Trocadero; but I couldn't give him a latchkey because there's only one in the house and you have it. I'll let him in myself.'

'You won't. I'll see to that myself. I'll see that he has his lesson.'

He retired from his wife's side and invited his guest to look at the pictures in the billiard-room. She sat still a moment, working her hands nervously on her silken lap, a red spot burning in her faded cheek. Presently she slipped over to Christine who had taken up a book. Nobody knew that Christine was a fine musician and that her voice, had it been fully trained, might have taken all uncertainty from her future. She had not revealed her accomplishments to her cousins, but sometimes the music heard in the drawing-room at the Laurels tried her.

'Your uncle is very angry about Ted's outing at the Troc., Christine,' said Aunt Lizzie as she sat down beside her, conscious of some strength coming to her from the calm, quiet girl. 'Will you slip down and let him in when he comes? His father won't let me do it, I'm sure, and if you listen you can hear him at the gate and be down before we hear anything. If he could be let in without his father seeing him it would be a good thing for everybody.'

'Certainly. I'll sit up and listen for him, Aunt Lizzie. And don't you look so troubled. It's only a very small matter surely.'

'To you it seems nothing, but Mr. Hedderwick will make it into a mountain. We haven't had an explosion for more than a week. There's going to be one to-night. I feel it in my bones. Don't you think Ted ought now to have his latchkey and his liberty like other young men? He's over twenty-three. Something dreadful will happen

one day if his father goes on treating him as he does. I'm becoming not so able to stand the strain. Feel my hands, dear. They are as cold as ice, but my head is on fire.'

Christine folded her warm, strong young hands over the thin fingers and tried to infuse some of her own peerless courage into the shrinking heart. She was not in the least afraid of Hedderwick, and, seeing all the flaws in his system of household government, could have put her finger unerringly on the vulnerable spot. Courage was what was wanted—courage and honesty on the part of every member of the family.

The guests left early, the latter part of the evening proving less entertaining than the earlier. Then they were all ordered to bed, and after she had retired to her own room Christine heard her uncle going through the house, barring all the doors and windows. She could even hear his descent to the kitchen which he visited every night, including the larder and the store-room, in his prowling order to report on anything offending his taste.

The futility of this procedure did not seem to strike him, nor had he yet grasped the fact that the professional grumbler in the family or the world soon finds himself unheeded.

This was the part of his character which amazed Christine's clear judgment, and she had been obliged to give up perplexing herself over the conflicting elements in the personality of her Uncle Hedderwick.

She was getting very tired of her life under his roof—so petty was it, so calculated to narrow the outlook and keep the soul bound to sordid things. The absence of any noble aim, of any real groping after the higher life saddened her, while she felt herself beginning to be irritated by the restrictions which the other members of the household evaded by trickery and deceit.

Lochardle beckoned her. She thought with unspeak-

able yearning of the wide, quiet bosom of the loch, of the majesty and the beneficence of the hills. The contrast between her present petty environment and the larger, simpler sphere she had known there gave a clear dignity to the life at Lochardle Manse, where duty was the watchword and where every obligation was discharged with alacrity and pleasure. It was a critical hour for Christine. More than once she had taken pen in hand to write to Alan Grier and tell him that she was more than willing to link her lot with his. But she was deterred by the thought that after all the kind of life she daily witnessed in her uncle's house could not possibly be taken as representative of the larger life for which she craved. It was merely an excrescence. She must see more and know more before she took the irrevocable step.

She sat down before the bright fire planning that on the morrow she would go to London and make some other inquiries regarding Mrs. Prentice, and try to learn some definite news of her. Suddenly a small quiet knock at a distant door interrupted her, and rising hurriedly, she sped downstairs. The bolts at the front door, though heavy, were well oiled and slipped back easily.

Ted flushed with pleasure at sight of her, and she could not help thinking that he looked very handsome in his evening attire with all the white about his throat.

'Christine! How simply ripping of you! I suppose the locking up is the governor's work. Absurd, isn't it, to treat me like this? I'm awfully sorry, though, that I've kept you up. It's after one o'clock.'

'Never mind. I wasn't sleepy, and I have a nice fire in my room. Did you have a good time?'

'Ripping! I'll tell you about it to-morrow. Good-night, Christine, and a thousand thanks.'

Christine was already on the stairs. Ted only waited behind her to bolt the door again and turn off the electric lights.

As Christine slipped into her room Hedderwick came out of his and met Ted as he stepped on the landing. A sharp altercation immediately ensued. Christine could not help hearing the voices as they rose higher and higher. Ted seemed less apologetic than usual. Presently his mother's voice intervened, low and pleading. Then doors were banged, and she heard Ted's foot heavier than usual in the room overhead. The voices in the next room, however, did not cease for a long time. With a confused sense of the misery of the household, Christine at last fell asleep, quite dreamlessly, for she was overtired.

When she awoke it seemed to be broad day and Aunt Lizzie was standing by her bed, looking pale and haggard as if she had had a sleepless night.

'I suppose you heard the row last night. Yes, it's late, about ten, and everybody has gone to town. Never mind, I was glad you didn't come down. We had a horrid breakfast-time, and your uncle and Ted did not even travel by the same train.'

'How silly!' cried Christine impulsively.

'Isn't it? And what I hate worst of all, Christine, is the prayers. I feel we oughtn't to have them. One day I'll refuse to sit them out. We are so far from what we ought to be—are not indeed Christians at all. Nothing ever seems to make any difference to your uncle. He prayed this morning quite eloquently, as if we were all as happy and good as possible. Real religion is different—ought to be—don't you think?'

'I have never met any. If there is any real religion it would certainly be different,' admitted Christine. 'But I don't think religion has anything whatever to do with life. It is merely an excrescence.'

'Ah, my dear, you don't know what you're talking about. There is a real religion which makes everything beautiful, only we haven't got it.'

She sat down on the front of the bed, and Christine's

hand closed over hers in a very real affection. Never had she seen the worn face wear such an expression of sweetness and sadness commingled.

'I am going to tell Uncle Hedderwick he ought not to treat Ted as he is doing—bullying a man as if he were a small and wicked boy! Ted was perfectly sober and had been in respectable company. It is terrible.'

'It is. I really think he's getting worse as he grows older. There's no reason left in him, and I don't know where this way of going on will end. Ted will be driven from the house. If he should take to drink and bad companions who would be to blame? What is there for young folks here now? My dear, I assure you I'm so tired of it that if it weren't for Robin and the little ones I shouldn't care how soon they carried me to Lochardle kirkyard and laid me beside your father.'

She did not cry. Her misery seemed too deep for tears, which are only the outlet for a natural and curable grief, and cannot relieve the canker of the soul.

'I'll get up, Aunt Lizzie, and we'll go out together,' said Christine briskly, realising that her aunt must be lifted somehow out of herself. 'It's all so trifling that we must not let it dominate us like this.'

'Trifling! It isn't trifling when you never get away from it. I wonder God can bear to let things go on like this.'

'God has nothing to do with it, believe me, Aunt Lizzie,' said Christine. 'If there is a God it is hardly fair to saddle Him with our enormities—to constitute Him a kind of scapegoat.'

'Oh, there's a God right enough, Christine—only He seems too far away for us to grasp His purposes with us. Your uncle will put Ted out of the house to-night. He said that he would if he showed his face.'

'He'll forget his threat before night, Aunt Lizzie.'

'But Ted won't. He got his monkey up and looked as

I never saw him look before. Of course he's a man now, and men won't stand what we do. It was dreadful to hear them swearing at one another . . . my husband and my boy! Have I deserved it, Christine? I haven't been so very wicked—only told a few little lies now and again to help things to go more smoothly and save the bairns.'

Christine's eyes darkened with pity and passion, but it seemed futile to continue the discussion. The endless tragedy of common things going on under her uncle's roof oppressed her with a very real weight.

'I was a lot happier in my young married life in that dear little house on the Bucksburn Road, with a bairn at my knees and another at my breast, and your uncle only coming home at the week-ends and always so pleased to see us. There was no quarrelling or hiding things then. It's money that has poisoned our life. They're happiest who are poor, Christine. Never, never seek to be rich.'

'I'm not likely to be, Aunt Lizzie.'

'Wasn't your father like that? Didn't he like simple things? Did he care for grand dinners and show, and all that?'

'He never went to them.'

At that moment Betty, with an armful of finery, entered the room.

'Look, mamma, my chiffon frock has come home and the dressmaker has made a mess of it! The skirt hangs all awry at the back, and is too skimpy in front.'

'Put it on here and we shall see!' cried her mother, jumping off the bed. 'Christine always knows whether a thing's right or not.'

Christine was amazed at the sudden cessation of Aunt Lizzie's woes, at her childish interest in chiffons, her quick, eager discussion of fit and style. When they retired at length, breathing wrath and threatenings against the offending modiste, Christine continued her toilet with two deep lines of perplexity across her brow.

Just then a maid knocked at the door and presented her a letter on a salver.

'Just come by special messenger, miss, and there's no answer required.'

Christine thanked her and closed the door. She recognised Ted's handwriting and broke the seal with considerable surprise. What could he have to write to her about that required to be sent by special messenger?

DEAR CHRISTINE,—I've had an awful row with the governor, and it's all up with me. I shouldn't so much mind for myself, but there are complications. I must tell somebody about them. Come into town—will you?—by the 12.25. I'll meet you at Victoria, and we can go somewhere for lunch. Don't say a word to mamma or any of them, but just tell them you have an appointment in town. Arrange it somehow—only come. Don't, for God's sake, fail me, or it will be still further all wrong with—Yours,

TED.

CHAPTER VI

ACROSS THE RUBICON

CHRISTINE slipped the letter into her pocket and went downstairs. Her breakfast waited her in the dining-room and nobody came near her while she partook of it. There were odd moments of complete isolation in the Hedderwick household, and happily for Christine this was one.

When she went upstairs again to put on her hat and coat she heard from a maid that Mrs. Hedderwick and Miss Betty had gone to the dressmaker's establishment in a cab.

'Tell them when they return that I have gone to town for luncheon and will be back for tea,' she said, considerably relieved.

'There's another letter for you, just come, miss. Shall I bring it up?'

All the servants accorded Christine willing service, so pleasant and considerate was she towards them. She thanked the girl, and when she received the second letter looked at it curiously a little disappointed, however, that it did not bear the Edinburgh postmark. She did not recognise the handwriting, and she thrilled at the thought that it might be from Mrs. Prentice. But the first glance at the neatly folded sheet showed her hope to be vain, though it gave her a sudden and fresh interest.

23 SOUTH PLAIN,
MEDWYN, BUCKS, *December 13th.*

DEAR NIECE,—We—that is your Aunt Lettice and myself—have only just heard by the merest accident of your father's

death in Edinburgh about a month ago. We do not blame you for not having acquainted us with your bereavement, for, of course, you could not know anything about us or feel obliged to consider us in any way. Perhaps you may even be quite unaware of our existence.

We are your mother's sisters, and I write from her old home. It is unnecessary to say more at present. The object of this letter is to invite you to come to Medwyn and pay us a visit in order that we make one another's acquaintance. We wrote to your father at the time of our sister's death, offering to take you and bring you up. That offer was, however, declined by your father, with whom we had no subsequent communication.

The news of his death, however, shocked us, for he was not an old man. We ourselves are growing old, and we should like to see the only niece we possess in the world. If you will acknowledge this letter I shall write again and make arrangements for your journey.

Hoping you are well and that you will answer this letter, I am, your affectionate Aunt,
GRACE AMORY.

Grace Amory! Lettice Amory!—the pretty music of the old-fashioned names rang in Christine's ears as she put the letter into her pocket. She heard her mother's name now for the first time, and an indefinable yearning of kinship came over her, prompting her to rise up forthwith and make swift journey to Medwyn to cast herself upon their care and kindness.

The letter came opportunely—like some voice across the misty bridge of the years. Christine felt no bitterness against the name of Amory, which her father had never uttered in her presence. She was unaware even of the circumstances of his marriage and of her mother's estrangement from her own people. In this Breck had proved himself a wise man; Christine was thus able to contemplate new experiences with a perfectly unprejudiced mind. The letter gave an entirely new colour to her thoughts, and she was surprised when the train brought her so

quickly to the station at Victoria. Looking out, she immediately saw Ted on the platform. He advanced to meet her with eager pleasure.

'Awfully good of you to come, Christine,' he said gratefully. 'Had you to shuffle about it?'

'Shuffle!—no. I should never do that in any circumstances. Nothing in life is worth that. No one asked me where I was going. Now tell me what is the matter?'

'Matter! everything,' he groaned, trying to tug the very small moustache which showed on his upper lip. 'I'm fired out.'

'Fired out! What do you mean?'

'Governor has kicked me out—says it's for good. Jolly rotten of him, wasn't it? It's ten minutes to one. Would you like to go for lunch now, or would you prefer to walk in St. James's Park?'

'Oh, walk. I've only just had breakfast and don't want any lunch. I overslept myself this morning.'

He took her arm and piloted her through the indescribable confusion at the entrance to the station, and presently they passed out into the comparative spaciousness of Buckingham Palace Road, and proceeded towards the Park.

'We can't sit down. I'm afraid you would feel the cold—it's so raw and damp. Why haven't you on a fur of some kind?'

'Because I don't possess one.'

'You don't! By Jove, I wish I had the giving of one. It should be the very finest sable—real Russian, and no mistake about it.'

Christine smiled.

'I shouldn't like to have the burden of looking after it. Well, what happened? I thought Uncle George said all that he had to say last night.'

'Well, he did on that particular head. We were on another tack this morning. I had the audacity to ask him for a rise of screw.'

'Surely the moment was inopportune.'

'I couldn't help that—I hadn't any choice.'

'I am beginning to see that lots of things could be prevented by the exercise of a little tact, though I don't possess any myself,' observed Christine.

'I'm afraid you'll never acquire it—the tact at least that is of any use in this sordid world—because, you see, your eyes won't back you up. They proclaim unutterable things.'

'I must shut them then.'

'And remove the light from some of us! No, Christine, you must never do that.'

'Well, let us get to business, Ted. Tell me what has happened.'

'I think we ought to go to lunch first. I want to sit opposite to you and watch you while I'm speaking, and it's too cold to sit here. But look at my stock, lock, and barrel—two and fivepence! It won't run to anything nobler than an A.B.C. shop.'

'I've got some money, but we don't want lunch yet. Let us go to that seat by the water and watch the ducks. Did Uncle George "fire you out"—as you express it—simply because you asked a rise.'

'Well, it arose out of that. There was a lot said—things a fellow couldn't stand, and finally he chucked me.'

'But his anger will be over by night,' suggested Christine. 'Uncle George's blasts are never eternal in their consequences.'

'I hate to eat the leek, Christine. But this time I doubt—I doubt I've no alternative.'

'What have you been doing, Ted?' she asked sharply. 'Your tone suggests incredible things.'

'I've been a fool, Christine, I admit. Gad, what a fool I have been!'

His tone was tragic, but still Christine did not take him too seriously. Exaggeration was an outstanding char-

acteristic of the family, and his heroics rather amused her. He seemed so like a boy playing a little with the fire of life.

'I say you are a ripping good sort—the sort a fellow can rely on. Where did you learn your wisdom and what not?'

'I didn't know I had wisdom, Ted. But sometimes I think that I must have lived before, and that I was very old before I was reincarnated. I never seem to be surprised at anything, and so many things seem familiar.'

'I'll surprise you in a moment, you bet,' said Ted soberly. 'I say, don't you hate London? I should like to get away from it out into the sheer open, where a fellow could live a healthy, normal life far from all these trammels—'

'Then why don't you? You're a man. Everything is open to you,' said Christine with a slight bitterness. 'If I were a man nothing should hinder me from accomplishing my purpose. Sometimes I think I will take a plunge in spite of my sex.'

Ted dismally rattled the coppers in his pocket.

'You can't plunge on two bob. It's jolly nice here and quite sheltered, isn't it? Sit down and I'll stand on the off side and shield you from the wind. Well, I've made a beastly mess of my life, Christine.'

'It hasn't gone very far yet, Ted. Three-and-twenty affords plenty of chances for retrieval.'

'There are some things that can't be retrieved. I'll be twenty-four in April. Lots of idiots are married at twenty-four.'

'Are you contemplating matrimony, then, on your two bob?' she asked with a little bewitching smile.

'I'm not contemplating it,' he said, suddenly standing up before her. 'I've achieved it.'

He stood, looking down on her blank, incredulous face with a deepening misery on his own.

'Have you been drinking, Ted—or what is it?'

'The sober truth, Christine. I said I had achieved matrimony, and I have. Now I'll make a clean breast of it.'

'Won't you sit down there at the other end of the seat and look straight at me? Then I shall know just how much to believe,' she said perplexedly, not even yet taking his announcement seriously.

He obeyed her, and for a moment he contemplated in silence a kindly robin watching them with bright eyes from an adjacent bough.

'Nice little chap, and he hasn't any problems in his life or his eyes wouldn't be so bright. Yes—I've made a mess of my life—a beastly, irremediable mess, but I didn't know how absolutely ghastly it was till you came.'

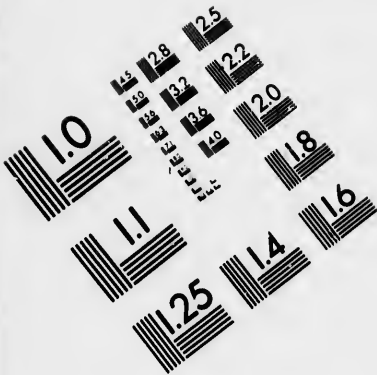
'Leave me out,' said Christine sharply, 'and go on, if you wish me to listen.'

'I do wish you to listen. That's why I asked you to come. Well it happened about eight months ago—just after Christmas last year. We had a little maid at our place—a housemaid, you know—one of the sort one is always meeting on the stairs or turning out of a room when one wants to go into it. She was a nice little thing. Mamma would tell you that, but the governor had his knife in her from the beginning, couldn't stand her at any price, and was awfully nasty to her. Her big eyes used to peer out so pathetically that I couldn't help telling her not to mind, you know.'

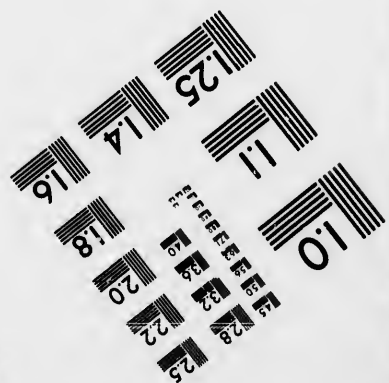
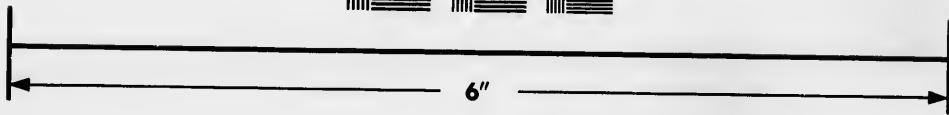
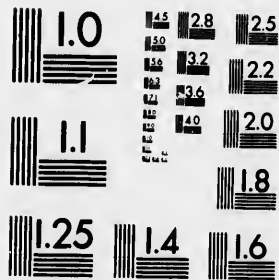
The gravity on Christine's face deepened. She had not expected a sordid story of this kind, and involuntarily she drew herself away. But Ted, now in the thick of his story, happily did not notice this.

'She was so absurdly grateful and so charming in many ways—she was really pretty, you know, and above her station—that I got talking to her a lot more than I had any business to, and then I asked her to meet me outside. Yes, I know it was beastly foolish—and even worse. It





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was wrong, for that sort of thing generally has but one ending for the girl. But at our place there isn't anybody to—to really show us what's right—and wrong. We're all on the wrong tack, from the governor down.'

Christine thought of her uncle's long prayers and of his confidential attitude towards the Almighty, and she wondered how the blame ought to be apportioned.

'The girl left because of a row at last—nothing to do with me—and she had no friends. She came from Devonshire, and the lady who had taken an interest in her was dead. Turned off at a moment's notice for some trifling fault, and without a character—the mater's queer about that and she wouldn't give her one—she had nowhere to go. However, she went to a Young Women's Christian Association boarding-house where she stopped till she got another place. But it wasn't the right sort of place. In fact it wasn't safe for her to remain in it; and, well—I needn't beat about the bush—I took her away.

'But it was all fair and square and above-board, Christine,' he added when Christine did not speak, 'for though I'm a fool I'm not a blackguard. I took her to a registry office and married her. Then I took rooms for her at Brixton, where she has been living for the last seven months.'

'So long as that!'

'Yes, and it has taken every penny of my screw to keep her there and provide for other things. But it can't go on like this. It's time she had a home of her own. In fact the landlady has as good as told her that she must find one. I left the Troc. last night before ten and went to Brixton on the way back, stopping there till twelve. Then I missed the last train and had to walk all the way to Sydenham. That's why I was so late. I haven't a penny left, as you know, and, knowing that things had come to a desperate pass to-day I asked the governor quite civilly whether he couldn't see his way to defining

my position a little more clearly. The thing that put his back up was my saying that I should prefer to live out if he would give me a sufficient income.'

'But you didn't tell him what you have just told me?'

'Oh Lord, no—one thing at a time. He was simply furious and kicked me out. I don't really know what he'll say when he knows, for of course he's very ambitious. You haven't met the Woodhouses yet. They have been abroad all the autumn. It's Katherine Woodhouse he would have liked me to marry. Woodhouse is in Parliament, and his sister's Lady Baker. That's the crowd the governor wants to get in with. But we don't care for them—we like something more natural and jolly.'

Christine sat silent, watching the cool north wind ruffling the waters of the lake and the feathers of the little brown birds that were skimming so gaily across the surface.

'Why don't you say something?' he asked humbly.

'I suppose you think me a rank outsider now, and I can tell you I'm jolly well ashamed of myself.'

'There's nothing to be ashamed of except the secrecy,' she answered quietly. 'Does Aunt Lizzie know anything about this?'

'Nothing—I couldn't tell her, because she has got enough to put up with already. It wouldn't have been fair.'

'I'm glad you had as much consideration for her,' Christine said simply. 'Well, you haven't asked me for advice, but I'll give you some. Go back now to your father and tell him how you are placed.'

He shook his head.

'Couldn't do it to-day—I feel too raw. It has made me better to tell you, and I'm thankful you take it so quietly. That's what we all need to learn—to take things quietly. These cyclones take more out of us than we know.'

Christine rose to her feet.

'Are you going? Don't go yet. I've been an awful fool, Christine—how awful I didn't know till now when I have learned that there are women in the world like you who could uplift a man and make him strive after anything.'

Christine's face hardened, and she turned as if to go.

'I have some shopping to do, Ted, and I should like to be alone for a while. What do you think of doing now?'

'I'll have to go out to Brixton this afternoon—I promised Edie that I should. Would you—would you come?' he added eagerly.

'Not to-day, dear, but I will come one day,' she said more gently, for something in his eyes touched her. 'Will you promise to come home to tea? I shall be there. Promise faithfully.'

'I can easily manage that; but if the governor's there it will be a bit awkward.'

'Not more than it has been at other times, and perhaps you will tell him then. He has to be told, Ted, the sooner the better. Perhaps he'll not take it so badly as you think.'

'What do you think about it? You haven't expressed any opinion.'

'What I think is of no consequence. It is a matter that entirely concerns yourself, your wife, and your own people.'

'But you are one of us, Christine. At least we have hoped—that is, we thought that you had accepted us.'

'Oh yes. But it isn't any real business of mine. I shall say only one thing. It is possible for you to be a man—to play the man's part here, Ted, and you're going to do it. Remember I expect it. Good-bye just now, and I will see you at half-past four.'

She walked away, and Ted, a little stunned, had to

allow her to go, not daring to follow her. She had an aloofness of manner at times which forbade the smallest encroachment.

Christine crossed the Park and came out by tortuous ways upon Whitehall. She hailed a passing hansom and asked to be driven to St. Mary Axe. She had no idea of the distance, nor had she ever been at her uncle's place of business, but she found herself there in due course.

When she asked to be shown to his room the office-boy exhibited lively signs of perturbation.

'Dursn't, miss. Not for me life. Gimme yer nime, an' I'll tike it—thet's all I kin do.'

Christine gave her name, and waited at the door of the lift till he reappeared on the stairs beside it and invited her to ascend in the lift with him.

Her uncle was standing at the door of the private room, smiling affably, no sign of the earlier storm visible on his face.

'This is a pleasant surprise, Christine, though, when the boy said a lady waited, I thought it must be one of the tribe of feminine insurance agents which are the bane of every city man's life. Come in.'

Christine stepped across the threshold, and was then nonplussed to observe other two men in the room.

'My partner Mr. Woodhouse, and his son, Mr. Ernest Woodhouse,' said Hedderwick, proud to present his interesting niece. 'You are a collector, Woodhouse, and you know my brother-in-law's pictures. You have often admired Otto Breck's "Glen of Silence" above my side-board at home.'

Woodhouse smiled as if well pleased.

He was a tall, spare, intellectual-looking man, though he did not appear physically strong. His son, with the same looks, had an air of power and distinction which pleased Christine.

'I am more than pleased to meet Miss Breck. I have

long admired the school of painting of which, I believe, her father was the founder.'

Christine flushed with pleasure. To find her father's work known and appreciated so far afield affected her like a sudden gleam of sunshine on a wintry sea. She had felt so remote from him of late, and all the past had begun to hover in her imagination more like a lovely and delectable dream than a real existence. The talk for the next few minutes was genial and happy, and Christine was amazed at her uncle, who now showed a side of his personality she had never before seen. Here he was no petty tyrant, but a man among men, his manner touched with a little conscious humility due to the knowledge that they were his intellectual superiors.

But when Christine thought of Ted's white young face, of his accents of despair, her heart seemed to harden.

'How is it you are here alone, my dear?' asked Hedderwick kindly. 'Did any of them come in with you?'

'No—I wanted to talk to you on a little business, Uncle George.'

The Woodhouses took the hint and, bidding her good-day, left the room.

'Fine men, Christine—men of the world of the best type,' said Hedderwick as the door closed. 'Woodhouse is no business man, but he makes a good figurehead, and young Ernest is just going to contest Walmsley—will make his mark in the House, or I'm much mistaken. Now these are people who are worth cultivating and whom I wish my family to cultivate, but they won't. Your Aunt Lizzie doesn't get on with them—thinks them dull and standoffish. Of course they have their pride; they have a right to it, but they're worth paying attention to. She won't do it. She asks them to dinner when I tell her, and that's all. Now, if Ted would make up to Katherine Woodhouse one of my dreams would be realised. It would consolidate the business and open up new vistas for us all.'

Christine thought of the little maid-servant in the Brixton rooms, and her colour rose. Surely this was not the psychological moment, yet how could she explain her presence there except by repeating the story Ted had told?

'Dreams are very seldom realised, I think, Uncle George, and perhaps it would not be good for us if they were,' she observed lamely.

Hedderwick spread himself in his chair and regarded her attentively, struck by the anxious expression of her face.

'What's troubling you, Christine? Have you had bad news of any sort?'

'Not for myself, Uncle George. It is something which affects you, and I don't know that I have any real business with it after all. I came on the spur of the moment.'

'Tell me what it is. You will never make me angry, Christine—you needn't fear that. It is not possible to be angry with one who is so straight and honest as you.'

'I am not in the least afraid, Uncle George. I was only wondering whether I was justified in coming here at all,' she replied quietly. Then after an instant she added, 'I have just parted from Ted.'

Immediately Hedderwick's face hardened.

'Did he send you here to intercede for him?'

'Oh no—he is not even aware that I have come.'

'Did he go home, then, after he bounced out this morning?'

'No. I met him by appointment at Victoria Station. He had sent me an express message to come in by a certain train.'

Hedderwick regarded her keenly and with an expression in his eyes which Christine perfectly understood.

'If you are interested in Ted to that extent, Christine—if you have become his special pleader—it will alter matters very considerably.'

She did not colour, but merely shook her head.

'It is not as you think, Uncle George. Ted and I are good friends, and I like him very much. He is in great trouble and I would help him. He has got to be helped. I am sure you will admit that when you hear.'

'His troubles are of his own making,' replied Hedderwick drily. 'He's a hot-headed, impetuous, impossible young cub, and the sooner he is brought to his bearings the better. He talked very tall this morning about going out into the world on his own. Let him try it—it will be a short and sharp cure.'

'He ought to have been more conciliatory to-day,' said Christine quietly, 'because his responsibilities do not end with himself. He has a wife dependent on him.'

Hedderwick leaped to his feet.

'A what!' he shouted, and the sound penetrated to the outer office, where sundry glances of understanding and sympathy were interchanged.

'A wife dependent on him,' repeated Christine calmly. 'Do sit down, Uncle George, and I'll tell you the whole story.'

He did not sit down. Breathing out unutterable threats, he roamed the room like a caged lion while she was speaking. Christine continued as if she heard him not, and put him in full possession of the facts without embroidery, palliation, or excuse.

'What do you think of it?' he inquired when she ceased speaking; and his voice was thick with the conflicting passions of his soul. 'My son, to take up with a common slut like that, and to expect us to countenance her! It is more than flesh and blood can stand. I wash my hands of him from this moment.'

'You can't,' said Christine quietly. 'He is your son.'

'My son! Are you one of those who hold that nothing cancels the tie of blood?'

'I am, and besides it might easily have been worse,

Uncle George. Ted has not been wicked—he has only been foolish. That is something to be thankful for.'

'In this case I could have forgiven him for being wicked, but I can't forgive his folly.'

'It is not you who is speaking, Uncle George. You prayed this morning that God would give us all a larger charity and love to cover all the disappointments of life. If you believe that God exists, and that He has anything to do with our destiny, you must act up to the profession of your faith.'

It was a bold stroke, and it was delivered so quietly that it was a moment before Hedderwick grasped the full meaning of her words. Then he smiled a trifle grimly.

'Christine, upon my word you are great—you are indeed! Do you know that there isn't in the whole world a human being who would dare to speak to me like that?'

'I did not mean to be rude or presumptuous, Uncle George. But that is how it strikes me. You have a great opportunity.'

'For what?'

'Of putting your religion into active practice and of binding Ted to you in bonds of love and gratitude. Don't miss it, Uncle George—it will never come again.'

'But the disgrace,' groaned Hedderwick. 'How shall I look my partners in the face after it?'

'It can't affect them in the smallest degree. Besides, there's no disgrace, though there might easily have been,' she persisted. 'If you only will treat Ted like—like a father, now, you will have part at least of the happiness which, you say, you have missed.'

'You lecture me, Christine—you have missed your true vocation. You ought to have been in the pulpit or on the platform,' he said unwillingly.

'Perhaps I may be yet,' she smiled sweetly but a little wistfully. 'Uncle George, Ted has gone out to Brixton to see his wife, but he promised faithfully to meet me at

home at half-past four. I will wait here all day, or walk about outside till you are ready, but I will take you back with me.'

'To cause another volcano at the Laurels! What do you think my wife said this morning? She said that she couldn't stand any more of it, and that she would take her own life one of these days.'

'She would not do that, but the threat showed the misery of her soul. Make them all happy, Uncle George. Sometimes I am afraid, thinking how much you have in your power—the happiness or misery of a whole house—and that you don't realise it.'

'Preaching again—and yet I'm not angry! But I had no idea that your opinion of me was so low. Haven't I been kind to you, Christine? I have tried to be.'

'More than kind. But harshness to me would have been excusable—to the others it is not. Promise me that you will come, Uncle George.'

He looked at her steadily for a moment and something like a mist blurred his eyes.

'It's against my better judgment, Christine, but I'll come.'

CHAPTER VII

A NEW HORIZON

CHRISTINE left St. Mary Axe assured that her uncle would keep his promise.

She had still some hours at her disposal before she need return to Sydenham Hill. She would occupy them in calling at the address of Mrs. Prentice in Gower Street. A friendly policeman directed her to the nearest station of the Metropolitan Railway, from which she made the journey without difficulty.

Rain had begun to fall when she left the train once more—a dreary fine rain, filtering through a sea of fog. Christine thought how depressing was the long line of the street in the blurred light, and the cries of the hawkers muffled in the mist had a weird effect.

She found the number without difficulty half-way up the street—that of a large house with the name Whitefield's Private Hotel on a wide brass plate. A foreign servant in livery rose from the hall seat and, in answer to her inquiry for Mrs. Prentice, asked her to walk in.

'Mrs. Prentice has returned, then?' she said in French.

'Last night, madam. You are one of the ladies she has asked to luncheon?'

'No, I am not; but, unless her guests have arrived, please ask Mrs. Prentice if she will see me for a moment.'

'Madame is disengaged. Come now,' said the man, and Christine followed him up the wide staircase, where the crimson carpet against the white treads gave a warm effect on a winter day.

The man went up two stairs and then showed Christine into a large sitting-room where Mrs. Prentice was writing at a table between the two long windows which looked to the street. She rose at the opening of the door—a striking figure in a long black gown unrelieved by any touch of white or of colour. She had a fine arresting face of an exquisite pink and white colour, though recent illness had somewhat impaired its bloom. It was framed by a mass of white hair, cut short, and curling round her head like a man's. The style of hairdressing, so simple and severe, showed the classic outlines of her head and features as no other could have done. She smiled with surprise and pleasure at sight of Christine.

'My dear, I am glad to see you—really glad. Some inspiration has brought you to-day. I have just opened my letters, and I had laid yours aside for immediate answer this evening. I have been very ill abroad and no letters have been forwarded.'

She took Christine's hands in both her own, and a warm sympathy seemed to emanate from her. Her keen, flashing black eyes assumed a soft tenderness which those who knew only her militant moods would scarcely have credited them with possessing.

'I am so sorry for you in your trouble. I have always remembered how you spoke of your father that night in Edinburgh. I said to dear Emily Wickham after you had gone that it was an ideal relationship, too rare in a world where kinship is so often an irksome bond. The fault of our civilisation, eh?'

Christine's eyes filled. She had had a trying morning, during which all the resources of her nature had been severely taxed. The sudden transition to this atmosphere of sympathy and strength where she was free to lean, instead of being constrained to guide, awakened an unwonted emotion.

'There, there, my dear, sit down. You have come at

an opportune moment! I am entertaining three women to lunch to-day—my intimates and my colleagues in the work. If you can spare the time it would be a pleasure to me to have you join us.'

'I can spare the time,' answered Christine readily—'I am free until four o'clock—if you would not consider it an intrusion.'

'I have asked you, have I not? Sit down and let us talk in the intervening moments. My friends will not arrive for about twenty minutes. Just one moment while I finish this note which has to go out for an early post.'

Christine occupied the silence in looking with interest round the room. It was barely furnished in the severe commonplace style of the private sitting-room in second-rate hotels, and its occupant had evidently made but little attempt to beautify it. An immense basket of exquisitely arranged chrysanthemums stood on the centre-table, where they looked like a welcome home, the card being still attached to the handle of the basket. But otherwise there was not the smallest attempt at decoration or even at palliation of the ugliness which depressed Christine's artistic sense. Then she rebuked herself with the thought that probably Mrs. Prentice could rise superior to her environment whatever it might be.

'Now I am ready, and we can talk,' she said, wheeling her chair round. 'Where are you living at present? Your letter was dated, I think, from Edinburgh.'

'Yes. I wrote it on the evening I left Scotland with my uncle, at whose house at Sydenham I am living now. I have been there for the last month.'

'And your old home is quite broken up? Emily Wickham told me what an ideal artist's home it was.'

'It is not yet broken up, though it will be later on. It is let meanwhile, as it stands, to some artist-friends of my father.'

'Ah, do you wish to tell me anything about yourself or your circumstances? I would not question you, but you may believe that I am interested.'

'I should like to tell you all there is to tell, though that is not much,' replied Christine eagerly. 'I am left quite alone in the world. The relatives I am living with now are very kind, but I could not make a permanent home with them.'

'I understand. And what about means? Have you that which will stand between you and sordid anxiety?'

'I shall have seventy pounds a year from money left by my father which my uncle will invest in his business.'

'It is good to have a certainty, however small. There are hundreds of working women in London of refinement and education, who have to live on less.'

'I'm afraid that I have very little idea of the spending value of money. When my father was alive we lived like the birds of the air, without thought of to-morrow. We always had enough.'

Mrs. Prentice smiled.

'Cherish that precious memory. Here in London one has to face the eternal question of values, but I am glad to think you have even that modest income. It simplifies everything. It will suffice while you are preparing for your future, whatever that may be. Tell me, have you any plans?'

'None meanwhile. I have lived so long without plan that it is difficult to face the new order of things. My month in my uncle's house has, however, taught me a good deal, and I shall not rest until I have mastered the first principles of domestic economy which includes the whole art of laying out money.'

Mrs. Prentice laughed at the suggestive words. Her laughter was a very beautiful and genuine thing, springing from a childlike heart. Sitting in intimate talk with her,

Christine could scarcely associate with her the trumpet-call to action that had sounded through the hall in Edinburgh on the occasion of her lecture to women.

'I should like to tell you a bit of my own experience, dear—it may help you. When I took the decision to order my own life I left my husband's house without a penny, and with no prospect of earning any money. I had gifts of a kind—not then marketable. There was no niche for the independent woman with the courage of her convictions and centuries of wrong goading her to the very fore-front of the fighting line.'

'What fighting line?' asked Christine with her eyes aglow.

'The great army which is seeking to combat prejudice and injustice and oppression. It was a very small column when I began first to march at its head. Now we are numbered in our thousands, and soon we shall be as the sands of the sea for multitude.'

Christine listened with her heart in her eyes, only, however, partly comprehending the meaning of the words. She had not come much in contact with the injustice or oppression of which Mrs. Prentice spoke, though private instances of domestic inequality such as had existed under the roof of Hatley Noble, and in a greater degree in her uncle's house, had often roused her indignation. Mrs. Prentice, however, spoke as if injustice and oppression towards women were rampant in the land.

'I should like to take part in this great campaign, but I am so ignorant that I don't even know what you are fighting for.'

'Freedom and equality for all men and women,' replied Mrs. Prentice instantly. 'And when they are achieved they will bring in their train as a natural sequence emancipation from all the old trammels of superstition and dogma. The new era will be built upon the finest foundation of all—a noble and purified humanity.'

Once more she was the prophet and the seer. Rising to her feet she swept up and down the room, her face aglow, her eyes shining with the earnestness of conviction and purpose.

Christine was no dreamer, and though her heart was stirred by the words to which she listened, she felt their vagueness. Mrs. Prentice had an extraordinary intuition, and she immediately divined the mental attitude of the girl before her.

'You think I am talking high falutin and are wondering what it is all about. Perhaps after luncheon you will be more enlightened. We are meeting to-day to discuss plans for opening a more militant campaign for the suffrage. We expect a general election in spring. We must be prepared for it and set about exacting pledges from the Government which is coming into power and forcing them to fulfil these pledges afterwards. Does the subject interest you?'

'Certainly it does, though I am, of course, very ignorant,' replied Christine frankly. 'Would you believe that though I had heard the words, "Woman's Suffrage," before I met you in Edinburgh, I never associated them with any serious movement—certainly not with one in which women like you would be interested?'

Mrs. Prentice nodded in great satisfaction, as if she had made a new discovery.

'Precisely. You do not surprise me in the least. Yours was once the universal attitude of women, but they are awakening very rapidly now. No one knows how the leaven of enthusiasm has spread, but they will know when Christmas is over and our campaign has begun.'

'Will you organise and attend meetings and lecture as you did in Edinburgh?'

'Organise. Yes, we shall be perfectly organised, and every election of importance will be taken part in by one of our foremost speakers. The smaller constituencies will

not be neglected, but we have to speak with no uncertain voice now, and we must therefore reserve our chief demonstrations for the more important centres. It was most unfortunate that I happened to break down last summer. I have been missed—oh yes. I'm a born fighter and can inspire others.'

'You were very ill, then?'

'Yes—I had a great sorrow, but I cannot speak of it now. Perhaps when we get to know one another better I shall be able to talk to you about it. It was one connected with my private life, and it came in the guise of a great disappointment—that is all. But so far as it went it gave me another instance of the injustice that has been meted out to women from time immemorial. But we are talking too much about outside things. What I am at present interested in is your future. You have great gifts, my child. I do not know precisely in what direction they can be utilised, but yours is a personality which interests and draws people—you could lead others. Have you ever felt the stirring of that power in you?'

Christine thought of her experiences within the last two hours, and she remained silent.

'I have had very little opportunity of testing myself,' she said at length. 'But I can generally make up my mind quickly and can speak it clearly—if that is any sign of power.'

Mrs. Prentice assented with an appreciative nod.

'Most certainly it is. The curse of our sex is that so many of us are invertebrate as well as inarticulate. But the new movement has done one thing, even if it has not yet accomplished its main object—it has put backbone into many a hitherto useless woman and made her a force in the world. Well, and what about your uncle's house? You will not remain there, you think?'

'Not much longer. I have had an invitation to visit my mother's relatives at Medwyn in Buckinghamshire.'

Mrs. Prentice started, and her colour receded suddenly, leaving her face rather white and set.

'Medwyn! Now that is passing strange! What was your mother's name?'

'I only learned it to-day. It was Alice Amory, and it seems I have two maiden-aunts living at South Plain, Medwyn. I have Aunt Grace's letter in my pocket now.'

Mrs. Prentice walked to the window, and stood there for quite three or four minutes in perfect silence with her back to Christine.

Not knowing what to think, Christine could only wait in a puzzled silence. When Mrs. Prentice turned to her at last, her face was still pale, and it seemed to Christine that all the sweetness had died out of it.

'It is very strange. You think you will accept this invitation from Miss Grace Amory?'

'I think so. It is natural—is it not?—that I should wish to see my mother's old home.'

'Oh, quite natural. I wonder how the life at Medwyn will affect you. It is a backwater where you will find the prejudices and the wrongs of centuries hidebound and impenetrable.'

'You know Medwyn, then?' said Christine in surprise.

'It was the scene of the great disaster of my life—my marriage, and my husband is still there—Rector of All Hallows, Medwyn.'

'Is he not dead?—I mean—you are not a widow!' cried Christine with the deepest interest and surprise.

'No. I thought that perhaps Emily Wickham might have told you something of my story—No? Then one day I must tell you myself. It is a tragedy, but perhaps I shall reserve my narration until you return from your visit—if you ever return.'

'I expect to return. I may even only stop a few days. Do you think I should find an atmosphere such as you describe congenial?'

'Ah, one never knows. That is what makes it so difficult to engineer a woman's cause—at the most unexpected crisis she will fail you, and go off at some tangent utterly unforeseen. Her nature has never been disciplined—another of the injustices of the ages.'

'If she has suffered for so many generations from injustice, surely she should be well disciplined by now,' remarked Christine shrewdly, whereat Mrs. Prentice broke into one of her spontaneous and singularly pleasant laughs.

At the moment the door was opened and Lady Carteret was announced. Christine was surprised to behold a very handsome and fashionably dressed woman who presented a strong contrast in every way to Mrs. Prentice, though in Christine's estimation she was not nearly so fascinating.

'How do you do, Lillah?' said Mrs. Prentice, and they kissed one another with seeming affection. 'Yes, thank you—I am much better, though a little shaky in the nerves yet. Permit me to introduce my young friend, Christine Breck, who may perhaps become one of us.'

Lady Carteret adjusted her eyeglass and beamed kindly enough on Christine, though she did not offer to shake hands.

'Hasn't Mary Lancing come yet? I thought I was late.'

'Here she is!' said a gay voice at the door, and a very small, fluffy creature danced into the room, laughing merrily as if delighted with herself and all the world. She was indeed very tiny and rather odd-looking, but behind all the froth and the gay humour, Christine, with an instinct that surprised herself, could discern an inflexibility of purpose and a singular depth of judgment which easily made her one of the leaders.

The third guest being very late they did not wait, but immediately went down to the dining-room where she joined them shortly, and was introduced to Christine as

Miss Ellen Braithwaite. She was a tall, gaunt person, badly dressed and gloomy of face, and as the meal progressed she seemed to take delight in throwing cold water on every scheme and suggestion discussed by the others. Why she was admitted to the inner circle Christine was puzzled to understand, but some months later, hearing her speak on a public platform, and being carried away by the extraordinary flood of her eloquence and the charm of her exquisite voice, she understood.

They did not seem to regard Christine as a stranger, but discussed the details of the coming campaign with great frankness and completeness.

While not interested personally in the questions they discussed, and wholly unconvinced regarding the frightful wrongs and disabilities of women, Christine was yet drawn by their enthusiasm and filled with a vague envy of the purpose of their lives. At least these women lived, they had found a meaning and a vocation for each day. That the cause to which they were pledged filled their whole horizon she could easily see. And its aims were wholly noble. There was no hint of self-seeking, they were united in a desire to labour for the common good.

It was a very fresh outlook for a girl whose life just then was without aim or purpose, and whose future seemed a blank. Small wonder that her heart was touched and her imagination fired with the desire to become an active unit in the coming struggle. Mrs. Prentice, while talking almost incessantly and seemingly entirely engrossed by her theme, at the same time watched Christine, perfectly gauging the effect of the conversation upon her. She felt much drawn to the girl, who had accidentally crossed her path. At the moment she was feeling a singular desire for younger companionship than was available in her circle, and she felt tempted to make Christine an offer there and then. But after a moment's consideration she decided to wait till the visit to Medwyn had been made.

The lunch was considerably prolonged, and when they retired upstairs to have coffee, Christine was surprised to discover that it was now half-past three.

Remembering her double promise to appear at Sydenham Hill at half-past four, she said she must immediately take her leave.

Mrs. Prentice accompanied her out to the landing.

'You have been interested to-day?' she inquired with one of her penetrating glances.

'Oh deeply. I was enchained. Could you not see that? How interesting and how full is a life such as yours! Think what mine is like! I am as one who has been asleep.'

'But who is now awaking,' added Mrs. Prentice with her sweet smile. 'Well, we shall meet again after you have been at Medwyn.'

'I have not even decided to go there.'

'But you will decide to go—indeed, I think it is your duty. You will hear of me in Medwyn—may I ask one thing from you?'

'Surely—as many as you like. If only I could do you the slightest service, I should be proud,' said Christine impulsively.

'When you hear of my enormities—as you will hear—remember that every story has two sides, and reserve your judgment till experience of life has widened the horizon for you.'

'I should never believe you guilty of enormities,' said Christine emphatically. 'I should not require experience to disprove my faith in you.'

'Ah, one never knows! The trammels of conventionality are strong at Medwyn. It is right that you should make acquaintance with that side of life. If you join us after it, your allegiance will be really unassailable. Good-bye. We shall certainly meet again.'

The whole aspect of life had changed for Christine, and

as she journeyed across the labyrinth of South London, the Hedderwicks occupied a very small portion of her mental horizon. She was recalled to the problems of their existence, however, when she came within sight of the house and pictured to herself what might be going on within.

She had not been fortunate in her trains, and it was now nearly five o'clock.

She hastened her steps and entered without ringing. As she set her umbrella in the stand she stood still a moment, listening intently. The house seemed very quiet. Then she remembered that the nursery tea would be in progress and that the others would be in the drawing-room. She opened the door and looked in. The tea-table was spread, but the room was quite empty, the dining-room also being unoccupied.

The morning-room was at the back of the house—a pleasant place, with a French window opening to a verandah overlooking the garden. From thence the sound of low voices seemed to come.

She put her hand to the door, conscious of a strange nervousness, but striving to overcome it, opened the door softly and looked in.

Her aunt was sitting in a corner of the sofa with her hands before her face. Ted was standing beside her, and from their attitude it was easy to see that he had been confiding his story to her.

Christine would have withdrawn, but Aunt Lizzie, dropping her hands from before her face, called her to come.

Ted turned round with a dismal smile.

'We thought you'd never come, Christine. I've told mamma, and now I don't care what happens. It must be better, anyhow, than what I've endured in the last months. I've been telling her too that I've got a job with a city firm, and that I enter to-morrow.'

He drew himself up and squared his shoulders, but it

was at Aunt Lizzie that Christine looked. She moved swiftly to her side, and, dropping on her knee, clasped both the cold, unwilling hands in hers. The pallor, the expression of consternation and terror on her face appalled the girl. It was not anger over Ted's indiscretion, for her heart was far too large and expansive to refuse forgiveness for what was to her always a lovable fault—it was simply apprehension of what was yet to come.

'Aunt Lizzie, don't look like that! It's nothing, really nothing. It may even make a man out of Ted.'

'It isn't that—he has a right to please himself where he falls in love, and Edith is good enough—a nice little girl with a lady's manners—but his father! Christine, I think I must go out. He may be home any minute. I am really not strong enough to endure his anger to-day. I must leave you to fight it out.'

She rose, tottering to her feet. Too late. The door opened and Hedderwick entered. Christine unconsciously put her arm about her aunt, and turned her fearless face to her uncle, her eyes mutely reminding him of what had already passed between them. Ted set his teeth and once more squared his shoulders.

Hedderwick closed the door and came across the room smiling a little—a perplexing smile which Christine scarcely understood.

'Aunt Lizzie knows, Uncle George, and—and look at her!' said Christine in a low voice.

She hid her face on Christine's arm. Hedderwick came forward, pushed Christine gently aside, and put his own arm round his wife in a manner which brought back to her strained heart the happy days in the Bucksburn Road. She looked at him in amaze, and never had her face been so sweet, her eyes so full of appeal.

'Don't be too hard on him, George, when he tells you his story. You were young once yourself, and nothing else but love mattered.'

'My poor wife,' he said, straining her closer, and he held out his hand to his son.

'Christine has told me everything. We'll weather it together, Ted, and try life on a new tack.'

Christine with heaving bosom slipped away very softly and closed the door.

he held
her it
softly

CHAPTER VIII

THE BACKWATER

CHRISTINE arrived at Medwyn on a cold grey afternoon in the early part of January. As the train wound its way through the undulating landscape, the uniform greyness seemed unrelieved. In parts a slight sprinkling of snow lay upon the ground, though the fall had been insufficient to drape the pathetic nakedness of the wintry trees. The streams were few, and they flowed black and sluggish between uninteresting banks, mostly flat.

Christine mentally compared the landscape with the rugged and ever-varying beauty of the Highland scenery she loved so well, and the English picture certainly suffered from that comparison.

Her prejudiced eye gave her no inkling of the particular and exquisite beauty and charm of these pastoral scenes when the promise of the spring has been fulfilled. She was acutely home-sick, though she was unaware of the fact. She had parted from the household at Sydenham with a curious mingling of regret and relief, followed by the lamentations of every individual member. Her uncle had broken his business day to see her off at Euston, had purchased her a first-class return ticket lasting for six months, and had volubly assured her regarding the open door of his house.

'You're not needing to be beholden to a single human being, Christine, remember,' Aunt Lizzie had said through her grateful tears. 'This is your home whenever you like

to come. We could not love you any better if you were our own bairn.'

She had not specified or dwelt upon her own sense of gratitude—that was amply apparent in her altered and happy mien. Yet Christine had been glad to escape from that affectionate atmosphere and had blamed herself for her perverseness. Certainly a vast restlessness possessed her, an overwhelming desire for new experiences.

She was, however, only moderately interested in the destination to which she was hastening. The journey occupied her about two hours and brought her in the last stages to the wide and rich vale of Aylesbury. But she, fain for the majesty of mountains, for the illimitable spaces of wide moors under solitary skies, for the rush of wild torrents and the mystery of inland seas whose moods no man can master, belittled the scenes through which she sped. Void of magnetism, they seemed to suggest, even to embody the everlasting commonplace.

The train slowed down as they approached the little town, comfortably embowered among trees and watered by many streams.

No vast chimneys belched forth corrupt and devastating smoke. This was the core of a pastoral region where man, in kindly league with nature, tilled the soil with amazing profit. The houses—mostly of red brick, mellowed by immemorial time—peeped out everywhere from sheltering trees, and seemed to be surrounded by wide spaces of garden ground. A few homely spires rose high in the quiet air, and from the town-steeple came the subdued yet cheerful peal of bells. The tall square tower of the fine court-house was the landmark and centre of the town, and gave dignity and character to its market-place.

All these characteristics Christine noted as the train drew up leisurely to the platform, when she rose and commenced to gather her personal belongings from the rack. She felt no haste to greet the welcoming face

which so often makes the end of a journey a better thing than its beginning. When she stepped out, however, there was more eagerness in her glance, but among the mere handful of persons on the platform she could discern no figure answering to the appearance she expected either of her aunts to present. The gaunt image of a middle-aged woman standing statue-like near the book-stall arrested her, and when their eyes met the woman took a step forward.

'Miss Breck, miss, if you please?'

'Yes, I am Miss Breck.'

'And I am Sophia Timbs, at your service, miss—own maid to Miss Amory.'

While she spoke she took Christine's wraps and travelling-bag with the quiet good manners of the trained servant.

'The other luggage, miss, if you please. If you'll kindly point it out to the porter he'll put it in the fly. Miss Amory begged you to excuse the carriage not coming to-day as one of the horses has a bad cold.'

Christine nodded and stepped forward towards the confusion of boxes that had been disgorged from the van. Her own were quickly found, and in two or three minutes she took her seat in the large, dingy station fly.

'You'll excuse me coming inside, miss, if you please. The driver says there ain't no room on the box.'

'Certainly. Come in. There is plenty of room,' said Christine, sitting further back in her corner.

Sophia climbed in, arranged the dressing-bag on her knee, and sat well forward, gripping it tightly—a picture of the well-bred serving-woman who knew her place. Her small, neat face with its ordered expression was full of significance for Christine, and gave her the keynote of the house to which she was going.

'My aunts are quite well, I hope,' she said politely, feeling it to be quite impossible to sit in absolute silence beside any human creature.

'Oh yes, miss,' said Sophia's trim voice—'that is, as well as they is mostly. Miss Letty's 'ad a bad day, and Miss Grace ain't left 'er—not once since mornin'. They don't go out much in the afternoons, ever—specially when the wind's in the east.'

'They don't have good health then?'

'Miss Letty don't 'ave good 'ealth—not to speak of,' she replied evenly.

Something in the fine straight gaze of the girl at her side had a most curious effect on Sophia Timbs. It unloosed her tongue.

'Oh, miss, I remember your mother, I do! It don't seem no more than yesterday since—since it 'appened.'

'Since what happened?'

'Since she ran away with the artist, Mr. Breck. Nobody didn't blame 'er after they 'ad seen 'im.'

Christine, at a loss for a fitting word, looked straight out of the carriage window. She could not say to the woman that her words, so fraught with import, conveyed something she had never before heard. In a moment whole vistas cleared, and she understood much that had loomed mysterious in her retrospect of the past. She fully understood now why she had never heard of her mother's people, why her father had been so silent regarding the brief experience of his married life. It had not been altogether grief that had sealed his lips.

'That was a long time ago,' she said vaguely at last. 'I am twenty-five.'

'It will be twenty-seven years on the twenty-third of May next.'

'At three o'clock in the afternoon,' murmured Christine, idiotically moved to add to the sum of minute detail.

'No, miss,' replied the woman evenly. 'I believe it 'appened at night. It generally do. Fust place I went to one of my young ladies ran away with the groom.'

'Is there anybody in Medwyn I could run away with,

just to keep up the old traditions?' asked Christine, her eyes for a moment brimming with impulsive laughter.

'No, miss, an' I don't think,' she added deliberately, 'that there's anybody in the world worth doing that for—no I don't. But I didn't ought to talk like this, miss. Please excuse me. My ladies wouldn't like it. Ever bin in Medwyn before, miss? I was born round that there corner by the Town 'All. My father was a saddler an' did all the county work. Bin dead eleven year on the fifteenth of January.'

Christine looked out interestedly as they crawled across the market-place to which the stately edifice in the centre gave a certain dignity.

'Where is South Plain—and why Plain?' she asked.

'Dunno, miss, unless it's because it's so flat. We don't 'ave no mountings them parts. But South Plain's the best part of the town, and we do 'ave nice gardings. Ours is lovely, but this summer, with the rain an' what not, Miss Letty 'as 'ardly ever bin in it. We didn't 'ave tea out only once, when we 'ad the Mothers' Union. Ah, there's our Rector—see! Mr. Prentice.'

Christine started and looked out, only to catch a glimpse of a disappearing back and a fringe of grey hair under the brim of a soft clerical hat.

'E comes a lot an' 'e do comfort Miss Letty. 'Ad a history, 'e 'as—is wife 'as left 'im, nobody seems exactly to know wy. She gave up everything else fust—never went once to 'Oly Communion for over a year. Miss Lucy's comin' 'ome from Switzerland to keep 'ouse for 'im, which'll be a good thing for her pore father. Mostly 'e 'as to put up with Miss Coles the charwoman. Good servants won't stop where there's no decent missus. Miss Lucy was to 'ave 'er choice when she growed up—between 'er father an' mother, I mean, an' she's choose to come 'ere. 'Ere we are, miss, 'ope I 'aven't talked too much. Something seemed to come over me like, an' we're very quiet

to South Plain. There are days when nobody don't speak above a whisper in our 'ouse. Maybe you'll 'liven us up a bit. No offence, miss. I knowed your mother, an' she was the sweetest critter that the sun ever shined on—beggin' pardin for bein' so free.'

Christine could not but smile at this spontaneous tribute, and the reflection that she could find a friend in this homely human creature comforted her heart.

South Plain was a wide *cul-de-sac* with tall houses flanked by broad pavements and shaded by a row of fine old trees down the centre of the way. The houses looked substantial, roomy, and severe—the immaculate curtains, the blinds lowered to correct angles, the shining door furniture all proclaiming housewifely souls stirred to commendable rivalry.

Christine greatly admired the knocker of the door at which the fly stopped—an immense griffin creature in heavy brass, wonderfully wrought. She was about to raise it for the sheer pleasure of touching it, when she was arrested by the hurried whisper of Sophia Timbs.

'Not to-day, miss, if you please, bein' one o' Miss Letty's bad days. Mostly we 'aves it tied up. I 'aves my key—'ere it is.'

She threw open the silent door which, though heavy, was admirably hung. Then she stood back decorously, and Christine stepped across the threshold into the dim recesses of the large square hall on which a subdued light fell from a small fire on the hearth. It had ingle-neuk seats at the fireplace, but they looked as if nobody had ever sat on them. There was a slight sound from an inner room. A door was opened, a curtain drawn back, and a tall figure, rather gaunt but held erect with a certain dignity and grace, came forward.

'Your Aunt Grace, miss,' said Sophia Timbs and busied herself about the luggage at the door.

'How do you do, Christine?' said a measured, quiet

voice in which there was no trace of welcoming warmth. 'I am sorry that you have arrived on one of your Aunt Letty's bad days, but I am glad to say she is a little better and will receive you now. You have had a comfortable journey, I hope.'

'Oh yes, thank you.'

Christine stepped forward to the inner room, the atmosphere of which was heavy with the mingled odours of flowers and sal volatile. It was a wide, low-ceiled, pleasant room, admirably furnished in perfect taste. A large chintz-covered couch near the fireplace held the figure of a woman—a small, slight figure buried in wraps and shawls from which peered forth a face of some sweetness, though much faded, and marred by an expression of discontent and peevishness.

'Come forward, Christine, as quietly as you can and let me look at you. Not very like Alice is she, Grace? No—it is a disappointment. Won't you sit down and let the door be shut? Grace—the door—and the screen, at once!'

A swift hand closed the offending door and adjusted a heavy screen to exclude any possible air.

'Another light, Grace, so that I may see Christine better. No—she is tall, Alice was short. Her hair is fair—almost red, *n'est-ce pas?*—her colouring quite different. Yes, it is a disappointment. But won't you sit down?'

Up till now Christine had not uttered a word. Something in her throat seemed to prevent her.

'Perhaps she had better see her room now—her garments may be damp. And we shall have tea a little earlier. Then you can talk to her,' said Aunt Grace in her measured tones.

'Why don't you say something?' asked Aunt Letty querulously. 'I suppose there is nothing the matter with you. We ought to have asked that. I am so delicate that it would not be right to have two invalids in the

house. You can see that. You are quite strong, I hope?'

'Oh yes—perilously strong.'

'Perilously strong—what does she mean, Grace? Do you hear her? I hope you won't make a noise in the house or want to play the piano much, or have all the lights up. You see, my poor head and eyes couldn't stand it.'

Christine gave a small hysterical laugh. A false note had been struck on the very threshold. For the first time she experienced a pang of regret at the thought of the household she had left.

There the elemental passions had raged, while the cloak of conventionality was of the thinnest guise. But the new atmosphere in which she found herself was stifling. The hot room with the smell of exotics and stimulants gave the keynote to the house, which was pretentious and insincere. Such was Christine's hasty judgment as she mentally decided that her visit to Medwyn should be short.

'You are to have your mother's room—my thought entirely,' went on the languid voice of Aunt Letty. 'A pretty idea, don't you think? Grace would never have entertained it for a moment—it would simply not have occurred to her. She has no imagination—no romance. Don't you think it is romance that gives a halo to life?'

'I am sure I don't know,' said Christine, and never had she spoken in a more bald, unpromising manner.

'Come, Christine. I am sure she is talking too much,' said Aunt Grace.

Relieved, Christine followed at once up a beautiful oak staircase to a wide landing on which many doors opened.

At the end of a long corridor they entered a pleasant room hung in old patterned chintz, and having two long windows overlooking the garden and the river. It seemed to be sparsely furnished, but the few articles were beautiful, the bed itself with its delicately carved spiral pillars almost

priceless. Some water-colours on the wall hung upon a quaint latticed paper completed a picture which rested Christine's eyes while it satisfied her artistic sense. Here she could be at home.

Yet its very perfection, the snowy whiteness of every scrap of muslin or lace, the shining of the mahogany imparted a little chill. Here was formalism expressed in inanimate things.

'Was this really my mother's room?' she asked with a little feeling of awe.

'Yes; as girls, she and I shared it together, but latterly it was all her own. These are some of her books. They were never sent to Scotland, though I believe she asked for them.'

A little tremor crossed the face of Christine. Her Aunt Grace spoke in matter-of-fact tones as if the affair was of little consequence.

'It was all very painful at that time, of course, for us as a family. We had been well brought up. There had never been anything of that kind before.'

'But there was no disgrace. My mother married a good man—a great artist and a perfect gentleman,' said Christine, struggling with her emotion yet determined to make her stand without delay.

'Nothing could excuse the manner in which he took my sister away. It was unforgivable,' was the decisive reply which forbade further discussion of the theme.

'We must avoid painful subjects; it is unnecessary that they should be discussed or even mentioned. They never are, in well-bred families. And here it is specially necessary for us to cultivate cheerfulness. You see how frail your Aunt Lettice is; and she is so sensitive that things hurt her which have no effect on me.'

'Has she any special disease?'

'A very weak heart, and a soul too large for her frail body. Poor darling, she has suffered a good deal in her

life, and imagines herself misunderstood and misjudged. We must never argue with her, it would be most dangerous.'

Christine leaned a moment against the bow-fronted dressing-chest, staring at her aunt in what she felt to be a singularly stupid manner.

What strange elements were these to which she was being introduced and how would she affect, or be affected by, them?

'It was really I who thought of inviting you to pay us a visit,' continued Aunt Grace in her perfectly even, yet peculiarly harsh, voice. 'I thought that perhaps a younger element in the house would be beneficial to my sister at the beginning of a long winter. You are our only niece, but we have a nephew in China.'

'There was another sister, then?'

'No; he is the son of our only brother, John Amory, who was killed by the savage heathen for whom he gave his life.'

'Was he a missionary?'

'Yes and no. He was actually a Government official in the Chinese Customs where his son now is. But he was interested in missions and constituted himself a lay-preacher in the wild parts where his duties took him. He thought he possessed the complete confidence of the people among whom he had lived and worked so long, yet they stole upon him in his sleep and stabbed him to death. We no longer, of course, subscribe to missions.'

Christine was more deeply interested than she could express.

'Our Rector understands our scruples, and of course never presses the matter. We no longer hear from our sister-in-law, because we do not think that she acted wisely or becomingly at the time of John's death. Instead of coming home at once with her son, who was only seventeen, she not only elected to remain in Hong Kong,

but even went to spend weeks in the very place where the tragedy took place. She wrote a lot of nonsense about helping to carry on the work her husband loved so much, but dear father and mother could not see it in that light, and the correspondence ceased a good few years since.'

'You have never seen your nephew, then?'

'No, but at Christmas this year we were surprised to receive a few lines from Lois sending a photograph of John. We were further surprised to behold him grown into an extremely handsome man. He occupies a high position in the Government service owing to his command of so many different dialects. His father was an accomplished linguist, and he seems to have inherited that gift. For some special service rendered in this direction he has been granted leave, and is to be received with distinction here in the course of this year or the next. That was his mother's news, and she also expressed the hope that we would receive them here, but we have not yet replied, nor have we even discussed the matter. Ah—there is Lettice's bell. I must go. Timbs will come to you when tea is ready. We do not ring gongs or bells in this house. Lettice does not like them.'

When the door closed, Christine remained standing against the dressing-chest, uncertain whether to laugh or cry. Her heart, hungering for the love and kinship of her mother's people, recoiled, starved upon itself. Could she sleep even one night under this strange cold roof? She put her hands in the pockets of her travelling coat and walked across the floor to the mantelshelf, above which stood a small miniature in an ebony frame. Her mother's face looked into her own with the same sweetly rounded outline, wealth of fair hair, and speaking, laughing eyes which Otto Breck had immortalised in the studio at the Eyrie. The child had never left the face nor the heart of Alice Breck. From first to last she had kept her winsome looks. And this cold, formal house had been her home!

What wonder that she had been eager and ready to fly to the dark and true and tender north!

And now, here, in the very room where Alice Amory had lived and slept and dreamed her girlish dreams, the heart of her child was seeking to make a shrine. It was something to be assured that her mother's feet had trod the selfsame floor; that her mother's eyes had rested on these inanimate objects; but poor Christine, who had never known a real mother, was now a little weary with groping for the shadow. The lingering sweetness from out the past was so elusive a thing that she could not grasp it. She felt already assured moreover that here was no warm home-nest into which her heart might nestle because she was her mother's child.

The decorous knock of Sophia Timbs disturbed her as she laved her hot face in a basin of clear cold water.

'Ave yer everything, miss? I'm to wait on you. I *am* glad,' she said with a quivering note of satisfaction in her voice. 'Do let me do somethin' for you, miss, please. It would make me 'appy.'

She took the brush that Christine had hastily lifted from the dressing-bag, and with deft fingers unbound the rich hair, brushing it with that practised touch which imparts a sense of comfort and well-being.

'It shines just like 'ers did—it were like the sun of a mornin'. Oh, miss, I did love 'er. She was the one bit of brightness in this dull old 'ouse, an' when she left it the sun never shone no more. No—that it didn't; there ain't bin a bit of real sun in South Plain since Miss Alice went away.'

Christine listened with a softened expression on her face, assured that a kindly human heart beat in the homely bosom of Sophia Timbs.

But such a weight of silence seemed to rest upon her that she could find no words wherewith to answer her.

'Tea's in, an' they don't like to be kep' waitin'. We

goes by clockwork 'ere, as you'll find, miss. Now are you ready? My, you do look nice!

She took a whisk brush to remove imaginary dust, and piloted her charge with perfectly perceptible pride downstairs to the drawing-room door where she left her to enter alone.

The fire had been freshly made up and another lamp lit, and the room wore a very cheerful and a very English look of comfort. Aunt Lettice was now propped up by all the pillows of her couch, and had removed the wrap from her head and looked brighter and more animated.

'Come in, dear; now I can have a better look at you. The door and the screen, Grace! Would you credit it, Christine, I have to make this remark every time any one comes in or goes out! I am so sensitive to the slightest change of temperature. A little farther to the left, Grace! Ah, if only one could get up to do things for oneself how much easier it would be.'

'Let me help you, Aunt Grace,' said Christine, stepping forward to remove the screen to the required angle.

'Yes—that will do now. My tea, Grace. No—I will *not* have buttered toast, and very well you know it! If there is no dry toast I can go without. The bell! Now who can that be? Just run down, Grace, and tell Benson that we are not at home to anybody except the Rector.'

There was a moment of silence while the hall door was opened. The colour flushed Lettice Amory's cheeks becomingly when Benson—the angular parlour-maid with the weight of years and discretion on her shoulders—announced the Reverend Ambrose Prentice.

CHAPTER IX

THE MOLLUSC

MR. PRENTICE entered the room with the air of a man assured of his welcome. Christine saw that he had a power over the household. She was puzzled at first to account for this, since his looks were undistinguished and his personality without charm. He was a man who, unfrocked, would quickly sink to the level of the commonplace. Prejudiced against him from the outset, Christine could not be just, but imagined in him untold meanness of nature, and read cruelty in the narrow lines of his mouth. His bright blue eyes, closely set together, gave shrewdness to his expression and seemed to promise consideration for himself.

'Dear ladies, I hope the uninvited guest does not intrude at an inopportune moment,' he said smoothly; and even his voice, much admired in the intoning of the prayers, did not commend itself to Christine's hostile ear.

'Intrude, Mr. Prentice! How can you suggest anything so impossible?' cried Miss Amory, who had become a new creature, all smiles and coquetting.

Christine could not help looking at her, feeling fascinated by her changed demeanour.

'I am becoming a horrible kind of person,' she muttered to herself—'a sort of detective and snake in one. What makes me like this?'

The Rector's eyes bent themselves interestedly on her

face as her aunt made the necessary introduction. Christine shook hands, but she had no response ready for his somewhat effusive expression of pleasure at meeting her. She disliked him intensely from that moment; his small physical defects, his habit of biting his lips, a curious droop of his left eyelid, the sleekness of his hair—all obtruded themselves.

'Your dear aunts have been looking forward to this meeting, Miss Breck, and the advent of a stranger is quite an event in our little community. You have never, I understand, visited Medwyn before?'

'Oh never,' answered Christine hastily, colouring as she became conscious that three pairs of eyes were bent mercilessly upon her. 'I did not know until I had my aunt's letter that such a place existed.'

Mr. Prentice gave a slight laugh.

'Do sit down, Mr. Prentice,' said Miss Amory solicitously. 'You look tired.'

'I *am* tired. I have been at Thorpe this afternoon, making inquiries about the person you spoke to me about last Saturday. I was unfortunate enough to miss the return train.'

'And had to walk! I am sure it is quite five miles.'

'Four and three-quarters, but Mrs. Ovenden overtook me in her victoria and very kindly gave me a lift.'

'Mrs. Ovenden drives a good deal, surely,' observed Miss Amory rather snappishly. 'We are always hearing of her from one person or another.'

'She is very busy—in good works, let us hope,' replied the Rector as he accepted his cup of tea from Miss Grace's hands and helped himself to a very large muffin. 'To-day she is giving a tea to the old women of the chapel guilds, whatever that may mean.'

'Mr. Prentice, forgive me. But was it quite wise to drive publicly through Medwyn with such a pronounced Dissenter as Mrs. Ovenden? It gives such occasion for

talk in a small place, and you know how unkind Medwyn people are.'

She proffered her question timidly, with an assumption of humility which the Rector received as his due.

'I try not to be narrow-minded, Miss Amory. It is our duty to set the example of Christian forbearance. I had some need of mine this afternoon, I assure you, for Mrs. Ovenden tackled me with the utmost rigour about the Grove Street district which, she says, is a disgrace to any town, and that because it happens to lie partly in All Hallows' Parish, I must be held responsible.'

Miss Amory set down her cup and leaned forward in a white heat of indignation.

'Did the creature actually have the presumption to say that? I hope you had a fitting answer ready for her.'

'I think I convinced her that All Hallows' had not been behind in effort for the redemption of Grove Street, and I assured her that a little experience would quickly convince her that it is the people themselves who are incorrigible.'

'What did she say to that?'

'She laughed and said she was glad that the Church, in this instance, would give Dissent a free hand.'

'How vulgar, but then she doesn't belong to *us*, Mr. Prentice! It is astonishing that the county suffers her as it does.'

'I think she is making some headway, Miss Amory—upon my word I do. She dines to-night with Lady Mary at Horncastle.'

'Indeed! She told you that in a boastful spirit, of course. I am surprised at Lady Mary. We have looked to her hitherto—and not in vain—to keep society purged for us in these degenerate days.'

'Mrs. Ovenden did not boast of it, and I believe that she is quite sincere when she says she does not care a fig

for the county. This lady of whom we are speaking is one of the *nouveaux riches*, Miss Breck, who has lately purchased Polesden Abbey from one of our oldest families.'

'She must be an interesting person, I should think,' was Christine's answer.

'Is she interesting, Miss Amory? She is certainly very handsome and dresses extremely well,' said the Rector.

'Extravagantly,' snapped Miss Letty, 'and far too youthfully for her age, which cannot be less than fifty or sixty. At the Yeomanry fête she positively wore a white dress though she is a widow.'

'But very early widowed, I think,' put in Mr. Prentice smoothly. 'The surprising thing is that she should never have contracted a second marriage, for she is undeniably handsome.'

'Do you think so? Grace and I decided that her style was loud and vulgar. She wore an ostrich feather in her hat—a white hat, by the bye—the feather quite half a yard long. It must have cost pounds and pounds. Don't you remember, Grace, how decidedly we were of opinion that she was vulgar and over-dressed?'

Grace elevated her brows, and Christine was much surprised to behold a faint, half-derisive smile lurk for one brief instant about her hard mouth. Could there possibly be some reserve of humour or mirth hidden away behind the grim exterior? The absence of humour in all the people she had met since she left the Eyrie had impressed her more than anything. The endless stream of mirthful talk that used to flow there, at the gatherings of the Clan, and the gentle, happy wit that had touched all her father's comments on men and things, before the blight of his illness had robbed him of the verve of life, seemed the loveliest things on earth now that they were gone for ever. These people were all so grim and serious

and life was so ugly to them, so wholly unredeemed by any exalted ideal!

'Mrs. Ovenden is generous with her money. She even assured me to-day that I might apply to her if I had any specially needy cases,' said Mr. Prentice with a satisfied air.

'But you would not take her money, Mr. Prentice! It is unnecessary. We hope you refused and remembered that neither Grace nor I have ever grudged money when you have asked for it.'

'I thanked her of course—that was my duty. I also mentioned that I had generous friends in my own church to whom I could apply—that likewise was no less my duty. I think you may trust me, Miss Lettice. But let us leave such uncongenial themes,' added the Rector as he passed in his cup to be refilled. 'Your dear aunts understand as few do the whole art of home-making. There is no tea in Medwyn worth drinking after theirs.'

'Mr. Prentice is always too kind, Christine,' said Miss Amory with a little sigh of content. 'It is an art we do not cultivate as we should—the art, I mean, of making people happy.'

'You will find as you go through life, Miss Breck,' observed the Rector sententiously, 'that it is the truly humble and the truly great who are inspired with Miss Amory's divine discontent.'

Christine wondered why he persistently addressed her since, though listening attentively, she had hitherto taken no part in the conversation.

'I hope to bring my little Lucy to be initiated into the whole art of home-making as understood and practised by your aunts,' he continued. 'I had a letter from the child this morning, Miss Amory. She has left Lausanne and will arrive in London on Saturday.'

'On Saturday! That means a late night for you. Mr. Prentice has five services on Sunday, Christine, beginning

with early communion at half-past seven—think of that! He does not eat the bread of idleness. He would need comfort and consideration at home.'

'Is Lucy travelling alone from Switzerland?' inquired Miss Grace quietly.

'No. A relative of one of the pupils at Traviata happens to be returning from a shooting expedition in Dalmatia and offered to bring her. His women-folks were to join him at Paris. Your niece would make an admirable friend for my little Lucy. There are so few young people in Medwyn.'

'You'll have to stop calling her little Lucy now, Rector,' observed Aunt Grace. 'Isn't she as tall as you are?'

'She will always be little Lucy to me, poor motherless lamb, and it is my earnest hope that she may find the same solace in this house that her poor father has done. It has been a veritable oasis in the desert to him.'

Intense pleasure made Miss Letty's face radiant, nor had it lost its glow when her sister returned from showing the Rector out.

'The work that man accomplishes in spite of his tribulation!' she observed to Christine. 'Never a word of reproach or grumbling! Always cheerful, he certainly sets a great example to us all.'

'He did not strike me as conspicuously cheerful,' Christine could not help saying.

'He is not vulgarly boisterous. No well-bred person is, and you will have to learn to discriminate between the quiet cheerfulness of the heart and of the well-balanced mind, and the loud high spirits which are always fatiguing and seldom genuine.'

'Do you think I am guilty of the latter, Aunt Letty?' inquired Christine, goaded to ungracious speech by some irritating quality in her aunt against which her nature seemed to revolt.

'I think you are a young woman of remarkable self-possession and with a dangerously sharp tongue. But much can be excused to you when one considers the circumstances and probable faults of your upbringing. But I hope that you will benefit by your visit to us.'

'Thank you, Aunt Letty.'

'The great sorrow of my life is that I cannot do more active work in the parish and so help the Rector more. But one can only do what one is permitted,' she added piously. 'And it is something to be able to hold up a prophet's hands.'

Aunt Grace returned at the moment and essayed to finish her tea which had been somewhat retarded by waiting on others.

'There is too much cinnamon in Perkin's cake again, Grace, and you know the Rector has expressed his dislike of cinnamon. You will tell cook—or would you like me to have her up?'

'The cake's very good, Letty, and if the Rector doesn't like it he isn't bound to eat it. There are other things to eat on the table. I hate a man who thinks so much about his inside.'

'Don't be vulgar, Grace—before our niece too! I'm astonished and pained at you. After all my efforts to accomplish that divine harmony of thought Mr. Prentice so often speaks about it is disappointing.'

'I don't see what harmony of thought has to do with a cinnamon cake, Letty. It is either a good cake or a bad one. This time it is good. I'll tell you the sign of a good cake, Christine—it requires no outside adornment. When you see a cake smothered in sugar or sticky ice, avoid it. Now look at that beautiful firm brown outside! I say it is first-rate.'

Christine laughed merrily, greatly enjoying this spirited little passage between her aunts, which redeemed the appalling dulness of the last half-hour.

'I thought it very good, but then I am always hungry,' she said readily.

'If you are to be against me, Christine, I must prepare myself for it,' said Miss Amory plaintively. 'I have been misunderstood and misjudged in this house a very long time. Rude health has very little sympathy with the finer moods of the spirit which are born of much physical weakness. Grace, a little eau-de-cologne!'

'Let me get it, Aunt Letty,' cried Christine, jumping up more from a desire to save Aunt Grace than from sympathy with the invalid.

'Ah, thank you! What it must be to be young and active! I pray you may never know the torture of an eager spirit confined in a narrow earthly cell. Ah, that is better! Now, Grace, don't you think we might tell Christine a part at least of the Rector's story? It will help her to understand, perhaps to appreciate, his great nature.'

'Timbs told me something in the fly as we drove from the station,' said Christine bluntly, 'when she pointed him out to me in the street.'

'I am surprised at Sophia Timbs, and it is unusual for her to obtrude her opinions. She is a good servant. You must have encouraged her to talk.'

'I don't think I spoke a dozen words all the way, but I assure you I was very pleased to hear her talk. She gave me some particulars about her family and the dates of the principal events in Medwyn, that's all.'

'Well, about Mr. Prentice,' said Miss Letty with the air of a woman quite unconvinced. 'What would you think of a woman privileged to be the wife of such a man leaving his side, forfeiting and flinging aside all her wifely duties after having heaped on him every indignity and scandalising the whole parish?'

'I should need to hear both sides, Aunt Letty,' replied Christine steadily, 'and Mr. Prentice looks as if he might be bad-tempered.'

'Bad-tempered—that angel of a man! Grace, you hear her? She suggests that Mr. Prentice might be bad-tempered.'

'As to that, I don't know, Letty; but I shouldn't care about a man with fiddling ways like Mr. Prentice—always thinking about the ingredients in his food. It is hardly decent for a man to be always inquiring what things are made of. He's too finicking. I think that his wife had something to put up with, though I don't say she was justified in doing what she did.'

Aunt Letty mopped her eyes and forehead with her heavily saturated handkerchief, and there was an uncomfortable silence.

'Two in league against me and against truth! I cannot understand it,' she said resignedly. 'You I can excuse, Christine, for probably you have never been privileged to meet a saintly man like Mr. Prentice.'

'No, indeed, I have not—and I'm glad of it,' replied Christine, floundering still more deeply. 'But I have lived side by side with truth all my life, and I have a reverence for it. It is the only thing that matters.'

'Grace, I think our niece had better withdraw,' said Miss Letty faintly. 'In my present state I am unfit to argue with her. She has a fire in her room, I suppose, and can be quite comfortable there till dinner-time.'

Christine jumped up.

'There's a fire in the morning-room, Letty,' answered Aunt Grace grimly. 'But she hasn't said anything so very dreadful. After all everybody doesn't worship Mr. Prentice. His wife has some supporters in the parish even yet.'

Aunt Letty put her handkerchief to her eyes and lay back exhausted among the cushions.

Christine took the opportunity of slipping from the room. Her own had been made ready for her by one who was interested and who had given her affectionate thought.

The curtains drawn, the low easy-chair set by the bright fire, the small table close by with some books upon it—all was restful and inviting. She closed the door and threw herself into the chair with a sudden sense of relief from strain. Nearer contact with her aunts had not removed the chill which had accompanied her welcome.

There were possibilities in Aunt Grace, but she was dominated by the selfishness of her sister to an extent which paralysed and submerged her own individuality. Christine had no doubt that Aunt Letty was both physically and mentally the strongest person in the house and that, therefore, she was a humbug. She foresaw endless conflict for herself arising out of this conviction, and she quietly decided that she should tell them that very evening that her visit would be very short. She had not escaped from Uncle Hedderwick, and she laughed a little hysterically at the grotesque thought that in some form or other he lurked under every roof. She took up A Kempis again, and for the first time she observed her mother's name in small, delicate, faded writing on the fly-leaf underneath the words ' Help Thou mine unbelief ! '

What unbelief? Had her sweet-faced mother, then, been assailed by doubt—had her fine spirit revolted against the formalism of creeds?

A subtle spell from out the past subdued the rebellious thoughts surging in the girl's heart, and for the first time she became conscious of something drawing her spirit—not back, but—upward by ' the cords which come from out eternity.'

Whither had all those spirits winged their flight? Were they mysteriously distributed in the upper air whence, unseen, they ministered to those beloved on earth?

Drawn thus upward from sordid details, Christine pondered with increasing joy and interest on the greater problems of life and destiny.

An innate conviction that no human being, however

dominant or self-assertive, has the final power to order destiny for himself or another, began to take definite form in her mind filling it with a certain terror. The ultimatum would go forth 'Thus far shalt thou go and no farther,' and the puny will be broken and set at naught. She felt herself strong with the fine strength of splendid youth to conquer fate, but she would be met by invisible forces as the others had been met, and would have to lay her fighting armour down. A yearning for definite guidance—for something greater and stronger than herself, overwhelmed her. For the first time she realised the needs of her soul.

Upon this confusion of inarticulate yearnings Aunt Grace burst with the abruptness of movement characteristic of her.

'She's better, Christine, and now may I warn you? We are bound to have scenes while your Aunt Letty is so weak and so highly strung, but we needn't aggravate them. We must let her have her own way in most things—don't you see that?'

Christine clasped her hands round her knees and rocked herself in her chair.

'Perhaps it would be better for me to go to-morrow, Aunt Grace. I can't promise not to say the wrong thing. In fact something tells me I shall be continually saying it.'

'Not at all. You must learn to control yourself. Look at me! I am old, and I have been controlling myself all these years until I have almost acquired a second nature.'

'But has it been right—for you, I mean? You are entitled to be yourself surely. Why should another dominate you like that?'

A curious expression flitted across the impassive face of Grace Amory, lightening its mask for a moment.

'Child, where did you get these strange ideas? You are very different from anything I expected.'

Christine shook her head.

'I told Aunt Letty I had lived beside truth all my life. My father called everything by its own name. I suppose that helped to make me what I am.'

'We never knew him, and perhaps it was a loss,' said Grace Amory musingly. 'It was a terrible thing that your poor mother had so short a spell of life after her marriage.'

Christine did not answer. The words awakened too much that was painful.

'Aunt Grace,' she said suddenly, 'I ought to tell you that I know Mrs. Prentice.'

'You know Mrs. Prentice! How extraordinary! How altogether unusual! Where and how did you meet her?'

'In Edinburgh—at the house of an old friend of my father.'

'Indeed! You surprise me. Here she is considered outside the pale of society.'

'The house where I met her belongs to one of the best-known women in Edinburgh, whose social position is unassailable. I have seen her again—only a few weeks ago—at her hotel in London.'

'You surprise me! Did you tell her you were coming here?'

'Yes. She did not seek to prejudice me at all, only begged that I would reserve judgment—as she expressed it—until I had more experience. She also asked me to remember that every story has two sides.'

'She is quite right, and in spite of my sister's slavish worship of Mr. Prentice, I believe that he would be difficult to live with. May I beg that you will not say anything about this before Letty? It would certainly upset her again. She thinks Mr. Prentice has been hardly used.'

'I see that. I will try to remember what you say, Aunt Grace, and not be a stirrer-up of strife,' she said

with a smile of inexpressible sweetness which suddenly warmed Grace Amory's heart.

'Youth is prone to take short views, and to arrive at hasty judgments, my dear,' she said gently. 'Do you know that I am fifty-two years of age and I am afraid to judge any human being? I have made so many mistakes.'

This unexpected humility seemed to open Christine's eyes to the knowledge of unknown depths in the heart of her Aunt Grace, who was a strong, just person, held in bondage to another's smaller nature. The idea of the perpetual conflict which this woman must wage with herself for the sake of peace interested her extremely.

'We must not talk longer now. Dinner will be served in less than a quarter of an hour. I am glad you have come, my dear. You are not very like your mother, but there is a trick of the voice and something in your eyes that brings her back—the flower of our flock. Promise me that you will not leave us very soon.'

'Dear Aunt Grace, you make me ashamed of myself!' cried Christine. 'I will try to be better for your sake. What shall I put on this evening? I have only a very plain dinner-dress. We lived very simply at home and never dressed in evening attire.'

'You are all right as you are. We too are simple people, and your Aunt Letty has to be wheeled to the dining-room. So you see we can't keep up formal company manners.'

She left the room as abruptly as she had entered it, once more dropping the mask over her face.

Christine made some slight alteration in her dress, conscious of a quickened interest in her environment. When she went downstairs as seven o'clock struck, the dining-room door was open and Sophia Timbs waiting for her there. Her aunts were already seated at the table.

Benson, the angular parlour-maid, between whom and

Timbs there raged eternal feud, was keeping guard like a butler behind Aunt Letty's chair.

Grace was immediately said, and the formal meal proceeded almost in silence. It was simple, but it was exquisitely served. There had been many long and pretentious dinners in her uncle's house, but Christine had never eaten such delicious food as now. It bore the *cachet* of fine selection and artistic preparation. Aunt Grace ate very little, but the invalid made a good meal and drank three glasses of Burgundy.

The massive and beautiful table-appointments indicated that the refinements of generations had contributed to the dignity of that table. It was always the same, and no preparation or addition was ever needed even for an uninvited or unexpected guest. Christine wondered how the careless haphazard of an artist's house had affected her mother after this ordered luxury and daintiness.

Coffee was served in the drawing-room with the advent of the evening paper from which Aunt Grace read aloud certain passages to her sister as she reclined, nicely posed on the chintz-covered couch.

'Letty, Mrs. Prentice has been making a speech at Caxton Hall advocating more militant measures for the advancement of the cause she is fighting for,' said Aunt Grace excitedly. 'Shall I read it to you?'

But Aunt Letty sank languidly back among her cushions.

'Spare me. If there is nothing more edifying in the paper you may put it in the fire.'

Later, when her aunts had retired Christine hunted for the paper, eager to read the paragraph about the woman in whom she was so deeply interested. But she was disappointed in not finding it, and she was informed by Sophia Timbs, hovering about for another chance of waiting on her, that it had been taken up by order to Miss Amory's room.

CHAPTER X

ALL HALLOWS' RECTORY

ON Sunday morning Christine was awakened by the ringing of many bells, some of them melodious as they stole softly across the middle distance from some outlying belfry. It was then grey-dark, and on looking at her watch she discovered that it was just seven o'clock. Presently the door was opened after a preliminary knock, and Timbs appeared carrying a morning tea-tray.

'Good-morning, miss. Miss Grace's compliments, and would you care to go to early communion with them at 'alf-past seven?'

'Oh no, thank you, Timbs,' replied Christine, raising herself on her elbow. 'Tell me, does everybody get up at this unholy hour on Sunday morning?'

'Yes, miss, it's our 'ardest day. Miss Amory be goin' too this mornin' in 'er chair, which I 'aves to push. Shall I send Eliza in to light your fire now so as you can get up comfortable after we're gone?'

'Hadn't I better get up now? How long shall you be gone?'

'Till 'alf-past eight—depends on 'ow many there are at service. We 'aves breakfast at a quarter to nine sharp on Sunday mornin'.'

Left alone, Christine took up Thomas à Kempis—the little book which continued strangely to draw her. She now dipped into it often. The marked passages—due to her mother's pencil, she did not doubt—were of the

deepest interest. The book as a whole troubled Christine and even repelled her.

She wondered how her mother in her youth had found anything to cheer or comfort her in this epitome of self-abasement. It was surely a book to appeal—when it appealed at all—to the old and tired and sad who have done with the things of time.

To Christine the mystic's pronouncements upon life and conduct were sealed and mysterious.

She was still engrossed with it when her Aunt Grace came to her.

'Good-morning, dear. So you won't go out this morning?' she said a little disappointedly.

'I can't, Aunt Grace. I have never been to a communion in my life.'

'And you are twenty-five? Oh dear, oh dear!'

Her distress was perfectly genuine, and her eyes were full of shocked surprise.

'Nobody has ever explained it to me, and it would not have any meaning,' said Christine simply. 'But why do you get up at this time on a cold winter morning—and Aunt Letty, too, in her delicate state? It can't be safe.'

'It is our duty, my dear,' was the calm reply. 'And it is the bit of service which I like best of all. There's something in the quiet of the early morning that seems to help one. Your Aunt Letty will be horrified if she hears you make such a confession and will certainly wish Mr. Prentice to speak to you.'

'I shouldn't like that. I suppose he will be there this morning?'

'Why, yes, of course. He administers the Holy Sacrament.'

'I should like to go to a Presbyterian church to-day if I may. It is the only service that I know anything about. We went to church only when we were at the Glen of the Ford—never in Edinburgh.'

'But you lived in Edinburgh?'

'About half the year.'

'Dear, dear—you have been sadly brought up, my dear, and we must always think of that when you perplex us.'

'Why?' asked Christine whimsically. 'Father was a good man and the most reverent whom I have ever met. He worshipped everything that was beautiful and good.'

'But a materialist. Mr. Prentice would do you good, Christine, if you could have a nice quiet talk with him. He is really a very good man, and he is at his best, as you will find, in the exercise of his sacred functions.'

Christine shook her head quite emphatically.

'I should like you to go with me to the service at eleven. Your Aunt Letty does not go out again after early communion.'

'Very well, Aunt Grace. I will go.'

She rose when her aunt left the room and, hearing the small commotion in the hall over their departure, drew up her blind and watched the little procession starting out in the grey half-light.

A very large rubber-tyred bath-chair with the hood up so that it looked like a miniature victoria, Timbs decorously pushing, and Aunt Grace in a long sealskin coat walking slowly alongside crossed the road in a slanting direction, making for the square red sandstone tower of All Hallows' Church, from which the bells still poured forth a riotous peal.

Christine dressed leisurely and then went out about eight o'clock to take a walk along the river-bank. It was a very raw morning—everything dank and sodden, though the grey mists were rolling away from the landscape and being mysteriously drawn back from the heavy skies. The new day seemed reluctant to be born, and the heavy stillness of the atmosphere was oppressive. From South Plain one came quickly to green spaces and wide distances, the whole vale of Aylesbury stretching for

miles in front. It was not, however, on a raw January morning a very cheering prospect, and Christine did not find her spirits rise.

Losing her way as she returned, she came close to the church as the congregation was dispersing, and was surprised at the number of persons, men and women, old and young, who poured out of the door. It was a revelation to her. What made all these people leave their comfortable beds on a bitter cold morning to take part in a communion service? It could not be mere formalism with them all—to some surely there must be a deep significance in the service. She hastened her steps as she thus pondered, and had reached her own room before her aunts returned.

Miss Amory breakfasted in her own room and spent an invalid morning. Shortly before eleven Christine accompanied her Aunt Grace to church.

All Hallows' was a fine building, recently restored, and great pains had been taken by a modern architect to preserve all its dignified characteristics. It was filling rapidly, and by the time the bells ceased there was not an empty seat. Though Christine was unfamiliar with the Anglican service the stately music charmed her, and the reverent attitude of the worshippers struck a harmonious note. Even the voice of Mr. Prentice, reading the lessons and intoning the prayers, did not jar. He looked well in his surplice, and he seemed uplifted by the dignity of his office. She could not listen, however, to the brief sermon which seemed without life or point. When they left the church a young girl wearing a dark blue costume came rather quickly behind them and touched Miss Grace on the arm.

'Miss Grace, you haven't forgotten Lucy Prentice? I'm so glad to get back to dear, sleepy old Medwyn.'

'And we to see you,' said Aunt Grace heartily. 'This is my niece, Christine Breck.'

'Papa has already raved about her,' replied Lucy flippantly. 'I'm very glad to meet you. I hope we shall be chums. Will you come to tea with me to-morrow?'

Christine looked hesitatingly at her aunt, who immediately accepted the invitation for her.

'That will be delightful. I'm so glad you are here. There are no girls left in Medwyn. They all get married or are adopted by rich relations—no such luck for me! By-bye, Miss Grace. Love to Miss Amory.'

She flitted away, having accomplished the whole object of the moment—to make acquaintance with Christine.

'She is very different from what I expected. She has not the manners of a school-girl, but is very much grown up,' observed Christine as she looked after her, noting the elegance of her figure and the smallness of her waist.

She was like her father in feature and colouring, and a somewhat hard line about the mouth suggested a little temper.

'Poor child, she has not had a fair chance. She's been so oddly educated. Her mother taught her entirely while she was in Medwyn, and naturally, as Mrs. Prentice took up her time with so many things outside her home and was so often in London at meetings, the child suffered. At last the Rector very properly intervened and sent her to school at Lausanne, where she has been for two years now.'

'And not home in the interval?'

'No. At the end of that time she was asked to choose which parent she would live with, and she has come here.'

'I wonder whether that could be the disappointment to which Mrs. Prentice referred,' said Christine thoughtfully.

'I shouldn't think so. A woman like Mrs. Prentice would be rather pleased not to be troubled with the care of a girl like Lucy, who is a little firebrand and is rather selfish. What frightful havoc people make of their lives!

Really the number of matrimonial tragedies one can count even in a sleepy place like this makes one thankful not to have essayed matrimony.'

Christine made no reply, though the words started a train of thought.

Sunday seemed very long and dull. The ladies did not go out after luncheon or to evening service, nor was the piano opened. Christine went for a solitary walk in the cool evening and was relieved when it was time to retire to her own room.

Next afternoon she was directed to the Rectory, which stood in one corner of the spacious wooded square on which the church was built.

Even in winter these trees were beautiful, their enormous trunks and giant branches giving the idea of age and strength. Christine stood still to look at them, thinking what a beautiful picture one would make, showing the intricate tracery of its branches against the delicate grey background of the wintry sky.

She was astonished to find herself at the Rectory gate, falling so easily and meekly into every arrangement made for her. Nor did she any longer feel the wild desire to turn her back on the place. There was something restful in the ordered life, the quiet ease and luxury; even the very dulness was not without its charm. She had had no further passages with her Aunt Lettice, of whom indeed she had seen very little for forty-eight hours. She always breakfasted and often lunched in her own room, to which Christine as yet had not been invited.

It was only her interest in Mrs. Prentice which had decided her to accept the invitation to the Rectory. She felt naturally anxious to see the home which that able woman had so deliberately left. Also she wished to know something more of the girl who had made a difficult choice apparently without any hesitation.

A boy in buttons admitted her when she reached the

door after her walk between the closely-clipped yew hedges. It was a large house, but it had none of the comfort and rich colouring which so charmed her in her aunts' house. Evidences of a small income, of a perpetual struggle with poverty met her on every hand. The stone hall had only a few faded mats upon it and was meagrely furnished, while the drawing-room seemed to strike the last note in shabbiness and ugliness. A cheerful fire redeemed it a little, and when Christine entered, Lucy, in a sweeping black skirt and a white blouse, leaped up to welcome her.

'So jolly glad you have come! Papa won't be in yet awhile, so we can have a talk. Suppose you find it awfully slow up there at South Plain. My! aren't they a caution—these aunts of yours? I remember them as the bogies of my childhood.'

Christine did not know what to say in reply to this frankly spoken outburst and merely smiled.

'They are quite kind to me.'

'Oh, I daresay. They'll give you plenty to eat anyhow. Have they told you about me and our hopeless ménage here? But I'm going to make them all sit up. Now I have a chance of being my own mistress I mean to do it well.'

'You are very glad to be done with school, then?'

'Yes, of course. I'm twenty almost. I wanted to come home last year, but papa thought I was too young. Have they told you anything about my mother? I suppose you know that she's alive yet.'

'Yes. I have the privilege of knowing her a little, and I hope to know her better.'

Lucy Prentice, standing close to the hearth with one very dainty slippered foot on the fender, gave a little start.

'You do, eh? How did you manage that? My mother's an outsider. It's a shame the way she has

treated us—papa and me, I mean. And then she was disappointed because I wouldn't go to her in London. She came all the way to Lausanne to reason it out, but I knew my way about too well for that. You know women who do that sort of thing have no place anywhere. It would have ruined my future. I have come home to Melwyn to marry respectably—the richest man I can find.'

She gave her head a little defiant shake.

'You're surprised at me, are you? Or perhaps you aren't. You're clever—I can see it in your eyes—and you don't always say all you think. Neither do I. I'm clever too in my own way—not much brains for learning, but I have studied life a bit. You see, my mother talked with appalling plainness to me at a very early stage in my career, and I have never been a child. The hair of your venerable aunts would have stood on end if they could have heard some of the discussions that went on here long ago, even before school was talked of for me. Consequently while other girls were playing with their dolls I was pondering on the problems of life.'

She spoke with a curious mixture of bitterness and sarcasm, and her small features seemed to sharpen while her big dark eyes contracted strangely.

'I think papa mentioned that you are an orphan? Well, orphans have their compensations. We are not allowed to choose our parents, and we have to take what is ordained. I have been particularly unlucky, that's all.'

Christine sat back on the sofa, looking candidly at the small pointed face which had a certain dainty prettiness, but which was nevertheless the face of a shrew.

'You see, what makes everything so particularly aggravating in my case is that mamma has the money. If she hadn't had it she couldn't, of course, have done what she did. There are heaps of women sick of matrimony, only, being dependent on their lords, there isn't any way out for them.'

'Where did you learn all that worldly wisdom?' asked Christine in surprise. 'I am several years older than you, and yet I am a mere baby in comparison.'

'Well, you see, I have been out and about a good bit, and school teaches one a lot. We had a French governess at Traviata who had been through all sorts of experiences. She was most amusing. Mamma did not like Traviata. She said it had no tone, but, you see, the principal is a sort of connection of papa's, and she took me at half-fees.'

Lucy stated all the facts of her life as if Christine were entitled to hear them. Her flippancy, her hardness of outlook suggested either a soulless person or one who had been very early soured and saddened.

Christine could not help wondering that a woman so large-hearted and sympathetic as Mrs. Prentice should have such a child. Could she have done her duty by her? It was a question which somehow naturally suggested itself.

'Say, what are you going to do with your life?' asked Lucy, showing her really beautiful teeth in a quizzical smile. 'You're so awfully good-looking that everything will be easy for you. I suppose scores of men have been after you already?'

'Not one,' said Christine, but in spite of herself her colour rose a little, at which Lucy laughed mischievously.

'You don't expect me to believe that, I see! If it is true Scotland must be a queer sort of place. You have the air and could carry off—what the penny novelettes call a ducal coronet. Don't you wish you may get it offered to you? The man I wish to marry is a nephew of Mrs. Ovenden of Polesden Abbey—not much to look at, but she has no children and he will be her heir. That's my programme. Don't you wish I may see it through?'

There was a knock at the door, and the page-boy announced Mrs. Ovenden. Lucy stepped forward in

genuine delight. There was the soft swish of skirts, a whiff of exquisitely subtle perfume, and a vision enveloped in rich furs came forward into the room.

'Now this is kind,' said Lucy so warmly and brightly that Christine was astonished and wondered how much of the effusiveness was genuine.

'Your father told me last week that you were coming home on Saturday, and I thought I would come and call upon you,' said a hearty, gracious voice.

Mrs. Ovenden's veil was thrown back and Christine looked upon one of the most winning faces which she had yet seen. The lady was about forty years of age and of comely face and figure—not exactly handsome, but possessed of an undefinable charm which made itself felt in every assemblage, disarmed criticism, and destroyed prejudice. Many people spoke harshly of the somewhat fearless and unconventional widow until they met her—never after.

'This is Miss Breck, the niece of the Miss Amorys at South Plain,' said Lucy, presenting Christine. 'You know the Miss Amorys, don't you—funny old dears?'

'I haven't met them yet, but of course the name is well known in Medwyn. I forget how many generations of Amorys there have been in the old house. Can you enlighten me, my dear?' she added with her frank delightful smile at Christine.

'Five, I think Aunt Grace told me, and the house was built in the fifteenth century.'

'Hear that, Miss Prentice. You and I may retire abashed. And now you have come home you will be a great comfort to your father, I am sure.'

'I am not sure whether he thinks so, but I shall have to be very busy for some time—I find the house in such a state. Now we must have tea. Papa has gone out to Boreham, Mrs. Ovenden, and may be a little late.'

'I came to see *you* to-day, my dear,' was the smiling

reply. 'Now, when will you come to Polesden to spend a long day? Perhaps Miss Breck would care to accompany you? I can send the carriage in for you both. Shall we say Friday at half-past twelve, which will bring you in time for lunch?'

Her proffer of hospitality was delightful. It was impossible for her to give an invitation that was not hearty and compelling. All who came under the spell of that wholesome, gracious, womanly heart felt at once its largeness and its sincerity. Christine was strangely drawn to her, she was so delightfully human and happy-hearted. She had the faculty of drawing out all that was best in those with whom she came in contact. Even Lucy in the sun of her presence expanded into something sweeter and better than her small narrow-souled self.

She made a very short call, and when Lucy had seen her out she returned, shaking her finger at Christine in playful threatening.

'Isn't she nice, positively charming? Papa will be very sorry he has missed her. I'm really glad she asked you too, only we must make a compact—no poaching on my preserves. I have set my heart on marrying Gerald Ovenden and on being in the fulness of time mistress at Polesden. It's a heavenly place. Wait till you see it; it will fill you with ecstasy. But no poaching on my preserves! I want to be friends with you, and women should deal honestly with one another—that is, when they can.'

Christine laughed.

'I won't poach, you may be very certain. But I accepted her invitation only conditionally. My aunts may not wish me to go there.'

'Won't they just? They can't afford to quarrel with Polesden Abbey. Why, here is papa. You have just missed Mrs. Ovenden. Did you meet the carriage?'

'No. I came across the fields and in by the stable

gate,' replied the Rector. 'And how is Miss Breck to-day? Needless to say we are pleased to welcome her to the Rectory.'

Christine murmured a polite reply, but did not prolong her visit much further. When she rose to go the Rector, to her dismay, said that he would walk with her to South Plain as he had something of importance to say to Miss Amory. The distance, however, was short, and she felt glad to think that she need not be more than five or ten minutes in his company.

'Certainly I have a message for your aunt, but I wished for a word with you,' he said eagerly as they turned down between the yew-tree hedges. 'What do you think of my daughter? I suppose you have heard of the painful circumstances of my life from your aunts.'

'Yes,' answered Christine in a low voice and with an extremely pained look. That Mr. Prentice should make a confidante of her was the last thing she desired.

'I am sure that I have your sympathy. I should not have felt the position so keenly for myself, but it has been a terrible thing for Lucy that her mother should have acted in so unwifely and unchristian a manner. My wife is a very clever woman, Miss Breck, and because it was necessary to remind her at times that a house can have only one head, she became very resentful and difficult. Then unfortunately she got into the hands of unscrupulous persons and had a large correspondence with free-thinkers and socialists and all sorts of objectionable persons, who completely perverted her judgment. Finally she refused to conform to any of the sacred observances of our Church. You can imagine in what a position that placed me. Could I be blamed for offering her an ultimatum?'

'Mr. Prentice,' said Christine painfully, 'I wish very much you would not talk like that to me.'

'I wish to make my position clear, and, if possible, to

enlist your sympathy for my worse than motherless girl, who has so sadly missed a mother's care.'

'I am only a bird of passage here, Mr. Prentice. I shall be gone in a few days' time, so I shall not be of much use to Miss Prentice.'

'You surprise me. I understood from Miss Amory, that you were likely to be a permanent inmate of their home.'

'Oh no. I have still a home in Scotland.'

'Ah well, I am sorry, but I felt I wished to stand well in your eyes. You are a person whose esteem people naturally wish to gain. You have such just, kind eyes. I trust you will believe that I, at least, tried to do my duty where my unhappy wife was concerned and that, though I seemed harsh, I had no alternative. Except for the fact that I have been domestically most uncomfortable my mind has been happier since she left me. You can have no idea of the burden life had become through wrangling and bitterness. We seemed to misunderstand each other at every step.'

Christine involuntarily quickened her steps.

'She derided all that was sacred in my eyes, and she even questioned my sincerity. You can imagine how such a hostile influence in the parish would weaken the power of a priest. Sometimes I ask my Lord and my God what I have done to be so cruelly tried. Believe me, all the worst in my nature was roused to activity by my wife's behaviour.'

He spoke with a certain passion, his harsh features working in a manner which left Christine in no doubt as to his sincerity.

What a strange medley was life, and why, oh why, had she the peculiar effect upon most of the people she met of their being instantly seized with a desire to confide to her the most intimate concerns not only of their ordinary life but of their inner selves?

CHAPTER XI

THE BIRD OF PASSAGE

AT dinner Christine mentioned that she had met Mrs. Ovenden at the Rectory that afternoon.

'Why was she calling there?' inquired Miss Amory sharply. 'Had she business with the Rector?'

'I don't think so. Her call was for Miss Prentice.'

'Indeed. What reason did she give? She is not even in our parish.'

'I rather think from what she said that Mr. Prentice had asked her to call, Aunt Letty.'

'I don't think that for a moment. He has never spoken as if he wished any closer acquaintance with her. She is a pushing person, I am sure. Did you not feel that about her?'

'She was delightful, I thought,' replied Christine quietly, not heeding the signalling of Aunt Grace's eyes.

'Delightful was she? But you have not very much experience of the world, Christine, and would naturally be impressed by the superficial. Why do you smile? It is rude to smile in that aggravating manner when a person older than yourself speaks to you. It is a sign of ill-breeding.'

'Oh Letty, Christine did not mean anything of that sort,' put in Miss Grace deprecatingly. She had often to intervene to prevent misunderstanding when little skirmishes threatened to rise between her sister and niece, who were evidently antagonistic to each other.

'What had the creature on? I suppose she was overdressed as usual.'

'She had some lovely soft furs, and her personality seemed to breathe kindness and well-being.'

'What does that mean? Grace, can you enlighten me? How can a person breathe a sense of kindness and well-being? I wish you were not so fantastic in your speech, Christine. It worries old-fashioned folk.'

'I am sorry if I worry you, Aunt Letty,' said Christine primly. 'I only meant to convey the idea that I like Mrs. Ovenden. I should have said so frankly.'

'You do not know her, so of course it can go no further,' said Miss Amory. 'Timbs, tell cook there is too much vinegar in that sauce and that we will not have vinegar in ordinary sauce. I thought I told her so very firmly when she came. If it happens again she must go.'

'She won't take no messages from me, ma'am,' replied Timbs respectfully but firmly. 'It will be better to 'ave 'er up.'

'Well, remind me in the morning without fail. Well, about Mrs. Ovenden—what did she talk about?'

'She only stayed about three minutes, Aunt Letty, and asked Miss Prentice to spend the day with her on Friday. She also invited me.'

'She asked you! I hope you did not look eager or disappointed or anything that would lead the woman to think you would like an invitation? That would annoy your Aunt Grace and me very much.'

'It wouldn't annoy me, Letty, in the least, and it would be a nice outing for Christine. Polesden is a lovely place, and there isn't much that is lively going on here.'

Miss Amory drew in a little sharp breath and called Timbs to bring her smelling-salts.

'I have only one thing to say, Grace—Christine will not go to Polesden with my consent. Why, we haven't even called on the woman, and that she should invite a

visitor from our house shows how underbred she is. I hope you refused.'

'I did not, Aunt Letty. I said I would come if I were still in Medwyn, which was doubtful.'

'Why doubtful? I suppose we are too quiet for you. We built a good many expectations on this visit, hoping that perhaps you would be more like your mother than you apparently are.'

'I agree that the method of invitation is a little unusual, but then Mrs. Ovenden is noted for doing unusual things,' observed Aunt Grace as she saw Christine's face change. 'But couldn't we stretch a point and let her go up to Polesden with Lucy Prentice? After all it would not commit us to anything, and I suppose that sooner or later we shall have to know Mrs. Ovenden.'

'Grace,' answered Miss Letty in a tone mournfully resigned, 'I observe that you have changed a good deal since our niece arrived and that you seem inclined to league yourself with her against me. So be it. Perhaps it is no more than I deserve. I have long ceased to expect anything but trouble. As the Rector says, we are born to it as the sparks fly upward.'

'I will not go to Polesden, Aunt Letty. It would be very rude indeed of me to accept any invitation directly against your wishes so long as I am in your house. I suppose that I may write to Mrs. Ovenden to say I cannot come and that I may tell the reason why.'

Miss Amory fidgeted in her chair.

'Really you are a most uncomfortable person, Christine. I suppose we must remember that you have never been used to polite society. But it is hard to understand how you have grown up without any idea of the unwritten laws which govern the behaviour of really nice, well-bred people. You will write to Mrs. Ovenden, of course, and say you regret very much that, as other engagements have been made for you, you cannot accept her kind hospitality.'

'But that would not be true, Aunt Letty,' said Christine quite calmly.

Miss Amory looked exasperated.

'Child, you will never get through life without disaster. Even you, Grace, will admit as much. How can it be untrue to say that we have other arrangements? We might have several engagements for the week that you know nothing about.'

'You know you have not, Aunt Letty,' was all that Christine said. 'I will write to Mrs. Ovenden and simply say that you prefer that I should not accept her kind invitation.'

'Hear her, Grace! She would make an enemy of the woman for us for life! Could ignorance and stupidity go further? I will write to Mrs. Ovenden and show you how diplomatic and at the same time how perfectly truthful a gentlewoman can be when she has to do something requiring both courage and tact.'

'But Mrs. Ovenden invited me, Aunt Letty, and I must write to her. Indeed I will do so.'

'A storm in a tea-cup,' said Aunt Grace spiritedly. 'It will be far simpler to let her go to Polesden, Letty. After all it commits us to nothing.'

Christine rose and left the table. She was very angry. Indeed the intensity of her feelings surprised herself. She had been totally unused to having authority of any kind exercised over her, had always ordered her coming and going as she liked, and the questioning of her movements which her aunts—but especially her Aunt Letty—had practised so freely and despotically awakened in her a species of rebellion. The mere suggestion that she should spend the rest of her life, or any portion of it, in such an atmosphere filled her with such dismay that she laughed aloud. And yet even while she decided in her own room that she would leave Medwyn the next day, at latest, a strange fear was born in her heart. For where in all the world could she find such freedom as that in which she had grown

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up for five-and-twenty years? Everywhere she would meet with people to whom she owed some obligation, who required consideration—possibly sacrifice—at her hands.

Was this the inexorable law of life? She asked herself the question almost in terror. If so, how little was her undisciplined heart prepared for it. This certainly was what her father meant when he had deplored the many mistakes he had made in connection with her—especially the initial mistake of her upbringing—in his last letter which she had re-read only that morning. Each day some new light was thrown on that perplexing document which had been so uncharacteristic of her father that she had found it difficult to believe that it had actually come from his hand.

She sat down by the open window unheeding of the cold wind that blew across the open plain. It was very dark outside, and the wind had a wailing note. Some few lights flickered through the naked branches of the trees—the light from the windows of houses inside of which were people living out the drama of their lives. Had they difficulties as colossal as hers? Did problems vex and torment them at every turn? It was all so small and petty that she almost stamped her foot because it had such power to ruffle her. Poor Christine had yet to learn—she had indeed begun to learn—that the day of the infinitely little is more powerful to harass than the day of calamity and stress, that life is largely made up of nothings, and that—with some few exceptions—human beings lay down their armour all battered at the last through conflict, not with giants, but with gnats. Out of the stillness and the dark sane thought returned to her and a fresh resolve. She rose quickly, smoothed her hair, and walked downstairs to the drawing-room where, as usual, coffee and the evening paper had been taken in. Nothing could alter the routine of that well-ordered household. To be five minutes late for anything destroyed the symmetry of their day beyond possibility of restoration.

She closed the door softly and walked up to Miss Amory's couch, her head held a little high, her face somewhat paler than usual.

'Aunt Letty, I beg your pardon. I spoke rudely to you, and I ought not to have done so. I was disappointed because you objected to my visiting Mrs. Ovenden—not that I wanted to go so very much, but that I had been accustomed to do as I wished without consulting any one. I see now that it is not possible always to do that. I will write to Mrs. Ovenden and simply say that I am sorry it will not be convenient for me to accept her invitation.'

'Good child, there speaks your dear mother at last! I have kept on saying to Grace that the Amory strain in you must show sooner or later,' said Miss Amory, smiling and reaching out her hand to offer an approving pat. But Christine, only half propitiated, drew back.

'We must plan a little outing of some kind for you, mustn't we, Grace? And I am sure that when you have been a little longer here you will become all we could desire.'

'But I think I will not stay, thank you, Aunt Letty. I can say to Mrs. Ovenden with truth that I can't go to Polesden because I shall have returned to Scotland. I shall leave on Thursday.'

'On Thursday! It is impossible. Why, you will have been only one week in the house! Tell her, Grace, that she can't leave us like that. Besides you have no proper home. Where, pray, would you go to in Scotland? Did you not tell us the house in Edinburgh was let?'

'Yes. But I have a little house of my own in the north—the White Cottage at the Glen of the Ford—and my uncle is there and will be more than glad to see me.'

'And would you purpose to spend the rest of your life there?'

'I don't know, Aunt Letty, but at least it will always be a home for me. It is at the place where my father is buried.'

Christine turned away her head, and at the moment observed that Aunt Grace was crying quietly behind the newspaper.

'Well, well, if you are determined. But I don't think you show a nice spirit, leaving us like this just because you have not had your own way about going to that Polesden woman. I will see the Rector to-morrow and ask his advice. Perhaps he may even disapprove of Lucy going. I think it more than probable.'

'She will go, I assure you, Aunt Letty, whether her father disapproves or not,' Christine could not help saying, but she refrained from looking at Aunt Grace surreptitiously wiping her eyes behind the paper. The sight of these rare tears was more disturbing to her than all the tantrums of Aunt Letty that she had witnessed since coming to Medwyn.

'Please go on reading, Grace,' said Miss Letty tartly. 'It will be better to leave any further discussion till to-morrow.'

Next morning a little note dispatched to the Rectory brought Mr. Prentice round to South Plain, where he was closeted with Miss Amory in her boudoir for quite an hour. When he left Timbs was sent to fetch Christine. This was the first time she had been asked into that delightful room. Two large apartments on the first floor had been apportioned to Miss Amory when her health failed—a long, wide, luxuriously furnished sitting-room having a south aspect communicating with her bedroom which looked upon the garden. All the appurtenances of a rich and idle woman were to be found there together with certain suggestions of invalidism, such as numerous screens, foot-rests, small tables, etc., comprising the acme of comfort.

Miss Amory was most becomingly attired in a *negligee* of soft pink adorned with lace and many bows. An expression of deep self-content was on her face as she bade her niece good-morning.

'I have sent for you, Christine, to tell you that I have had a long and helpful talk with Mr. Prentice, and that he thinks we should certainly allow you to go to Polesden. He is permitting Lucy to go. He understands fully that a certain latitude must be allowed to younger people, and he reminded me that we cannot expect old heads on young shoulders. So I trust you will be pleasant once more, Christine, seeing that you will get your own way.'

She smiled a little archly, and Christine observed that she was in high good humour.

'Thank you very much, Aunt Letty, but I have already posted my letter to Mrs. Ovenden, and also one to my Uncle David in Scotland, telling him when to expect me. I will travel to Edinburgh on Thursday, sleep the night in the house of some friends there—at Hately Noble's, an artist friend of my father's—and next day go on to the Glen of the Ford.'

'No, no, Christine. We don't wish you to leave us yet. I will write to Mrs. Ovenden myself. You can trust me to do it delicately and nicely. I flatter myself there are very few who have more tact and delicacy than I have.'

'I have made my arrangements, thank you, Aunt Letty. I am sorry, but I feel that I have been a long time away from home.'

'We quite thought you had no proper home, and I don't see yet how you are going to live in that remote Scottish village without a chaperon.'

Christine smiled a little.

'I have lived without a chaperon for five-and-twenty years, Aunt Letty, and have often stayed for weeks at a time at the White Cottage alone with my Uncle David.'

Miss Amory, unaccustomed to be thwarted, waxed a little angry, and Christine, under the ban of her displeasure, felt herself dismissed.

She made her preparations for departure quietly that day, packing up her things and getting ready for her

journey by an early train next morning. Only once did she hesitate a little when Aunt Grace came into her room late that night after she had left her sister.

'Christine, I am very sorry you are going away,' she said with a little unsteady note in her harsh voice. 'You believe that, don't you?'

'Yes, Aunt Grace, I do. And if you had been here alone I would not be going yet, but you can see for yourself that Aunt Letty and I don't get on. Isn't it better for two so antagonistic to one another to part company?'

'I suppose it is. I see your point of view perfectly, but I think you'll find as you go through life that it is not always possible for us to turn our backs upon what does not suit us.'

Christine was arrested by the words.

'But, Aunt Grace, there is no obligation between Aunt Letty and me—none at all. She does not need me. I aggravate her at every turn, and I get so aggravated myself that I am both surprised and frightened. And life here is too luxurious and too idle for me. I shall always be glad I have come, and I shall carry a picture of this dear room away with me. Perhaps some day when I am older and wiser you'll let me come back.'

Aunt Grace took a step forward and clasped her for a moment in her arms, then drew back as if a little ashamed.

'I did not think I could have grown so fond of any one in so short a time. Promise me that you'll think about me and feel that you have a home here if ever you are in trouble, my dear. Your old Aunt Grace won't fail you.'

Christine brushed from her eyes two unaccustomed tears, and choked back something in her throat. Deep respect and a feeling akin to affection she would always have for her Aunt Grace, who in a sunnier atmosphere would have developed on gracious and lovable lines.

The parting from Aunt Letty in the chill of the morning was a very different affair, though she unbent sufficiently

to say that she would be pleased to see her back on another visit to Medwyn. On the whole Christine was glad to get away from Medwyn. The cramped atmosphere had been irksome to her, and she felt out of tune with her surroundings from the first hour of her coming among them.

Arriving in London about eleven o'clock, she had three hours at her disposal before taking the afternoon train for the north.

A strong impulse drew her to Gower Street to have a word or two with Mrs. Prentice before she left London, as she did not know when she would see her again. She was fortunate in finding her at home, and there was no doubt about the warmth and friendliness of her greeting.

'I suppose you are up for the day? Well, how do you get on at Medwyn?'

'Badly. I am on my way to Scotland now.'

'So soon. Why, how long have you been at Medwyn?'

'Only a week.'

'A week, and what was the trouble?'

'I could not get on with my Aunt Letty. You know her, I suppose?'

'Oh yes, well.'

'You did not give me any warning.'

'Why should I? It was just possible that she might strike you differently. I always found her the incarnation of selfishness masquerading under the cloak of piety. I could not stand her. Latterly I did not visit at all at South Plain.'

After a moment she leaned forward in her chair and looked keenly at Christine.

'Did you see anything of my husband or of my daughter who, I believe, returned from Switzerland last week, though they did not let me know what day she would pass through London?'

'Yes. I met Mr. Prentice several times and your daughter twice. I went to the Rectory to tea on Monday.'

'You did?'

She sat back again, and her face paled a little, while shadows gathered in her eyes.

'How did it all strike you—the whole life and atmosphere of the place? Was it deadening to your soul as it was to mine?'

'It could not affect me in the same way, because I was only a bird of passage, but I can understand what you have told me.'

'And sympathise with me?'

'Yes, very deeply.'

She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes for a moment.

'I am grateful to you, and a little surprised that you should have grasped the whole situation so quickly. I was only seventeen when they married me to Mr. Prentice. It was my mother who did it. She knew me as a difficult girl, and her idea was that a good strong man would mould me into the desired shape. Unfortunately he did not set about the moulding process in the right way. Mr. Prentice has a very low ideal of women—of their intellects and capabilities. He treated me like a child, or a chattel, and did not give me sufficient affection. I knew nothing when I went first to Medwyn Rectory, my heart was a blank page on which any fair message could have been written. I left it after seventeen years of misery, an embittered woman, without belief or hope of any kind. I have only now recovered and grasped the true meaning of life. Their formalities killed in me every vestige of religion and even the desire for it. I had proved it so often to be the mask for selfishness and unkindness. But they rendered me an unconscious service, since by that complete disillusionment I found fuller light. But there! I am talking too much about myself.'

'That is impossible!' cried Christine impulsively. 'You interest me deeply.'

'Ah, but your affairs are meantime of the first importance. Where are you going to-day? Back to your uncle's house at Sydenham?'

'Oh no,' answered Christine, struck by the fact that the Hedderwicks had for the time being passed completely out of her life—she had not even remembered how near she was to them in London. 'I am returning to Scotland by the 2.20 train.'

'But what to do?'

'I want to be quiet for a time to think over what I have seen. I am going far north to the Highland glen where my father is buried, and there, among the solitudes he loved, I may get to know myself.'

'I like that. Silence and solitude undoubtedly foster strength, only they must not be unduly prolonged. But we shall meet again. My heart has gone out to you, and something tells me we shall be more to each other yet. You will let me hear from you from time to time, and, above all, do nothing rashly. You are very attractive, so be particularly careful that you do not make the most irreparable of all mistakes for a woman—a wrong and wretched marriage. No worse fate can befall a woman than that, because the consequences to herself and others are irremediable.'

Christine made no reply.

Three days later Malcolm Macgregor, the postman of Lochardle, handing the letters to the minister at the Manse gate, volunteered a piece of news which made Alan Grier's pulses thrill and the blood course hotly through his veins.

'Miss Breck came to the White Cottage last night, sir and David says she's come to stop.'

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CHAPTER XII

THE LAST REFUGE

CHRISTINE was not surprised when the shadow of Alan Grier's tall figure fell athwart the narrow window of the White Cottage in the course of the afternoon. She was sitting in the old wooden arm-chair by the kitchen fire which she had just banked up with a fresh supply of peats. She loved the odour of peat reek. Last evening it had welcomed her with subtle perfume from out the past, fragrant with happy memory.

She was in the mood to glorify and idealise everything connected with the Glen of the Ford, but no amount of imagination could mitigate the change she had found in her Uncle David. He was certainly queerer than ever, and he had not spoken a word to her, good, bad, or indifferent, since she came within the door of the White Cottage. Moreover, he had disappeared for the whole of that day. As she had been alone with her thoughts since she got up that morning, her face wore a welcoming smile when, in response to the minister's slight knock, she stepped to the door.

He took both her hands and, finding that she did not resist, raised them to his lips. It was gracefully done, and the expression on his face left Christine in no doubt that, though the dark clouds of a coming storm prevailed outside, there was summer in his heart.

The knowledge that she was wholly responsible for that brightness of mien had a most exhilarating effect on

her. She mistook it for a response to the feelings of his heart.

'I could not believe Malcolm Macgregor when he told me at noon that you had come. It was a sudden resolve surely?' said Grier, his voice vibrating with tenderness.

'Not so very sudden. I always knew I should not stay long away from the Glen of the Ford. I hope your mother is quite well.'

'Only fairly so. We have had a great deal of wet and cold and her rheumatism has troubled her. Tell me how it is with you. Had I known where to find you I should have written, Christine.'

'Perhaps it was better not. Won't you sit down, Mr. Grier? I was just thinking of getting my tea. Now I shall have company.'

'I will sit down presently. I must go on looking at you, Christine. You have not yet told me how you are?'

'Perfectly well. I felt a little tired yesterday, for I did not sleep the night I was at Hatley Noble's. We were at the Eyrie till two o'clock in the morning. Oh, how I should like to go back and live there! It is the only place where I shall ever feel truly at home.'

'I understand how you feel, but was it wise to go back? I am sure that as a rule it is better to let the dead past bury its dead.'

'But my past is not dead at all—it is the most live thing about me. I felt like a different being there. My gaiety of heart came back to me. It is so cold and hard outside, and people are so uninteresting.'

'Your little excursion into life—as you expressed it—has not been very successful then?' asked Grier, and he could not keep the exultant note out of his voice.

'It depends on what success means. I have met a good many disagreeable people and hardly any nice ones. Also I have discovered what a very disagreeable person I can be myself.'

He smiled indulgently as one would smile at the vagaries of a child. To him, with his grave, serious outlook upon life, his ignorance of a woman's heart, she seemed only a child to be petted and cared for, but not taken seriously.

'I was afraid you would not be very happy at your Uncle Hedderwick's.'

'Oh, but I was fairly so at the end. He is much better than one has any idea of when one gets to know him thoroughly. Latterly I have been at Medwyn, visiting my mother's sisters.'

'Oh!' said Grier in great surprise. 'I did not know you had ever been in communication with them.'

'The correspondence began only after I went to London. They wrote asking me to visit them, and I accepted their invitation, but I don't want to talk about them just yet. I was not very happy there. You can't think what a joy it was to me to arrive at the Glen yesterday. Even the blinding rain did not damp my enthusiasm.'

'But you can't stay here—it is quite impossible,' said Grier decidedly. 'You must have noticed the change in your uncle.'

'He certainly seems queerer than ever. I don't think he has spoken six words to me since I came, and I haven't seen him at all to-day. I heard him get up about six o'clock and go out. He has not yet returned home.'

Grier hesitated a moment, not sure how the common gossip of the place might affect Christine, and yet feeling it his duty to warn her.

'He really is not safe, dear,' he said gently, and with a quiet air of protecting tenderness which she found very sweet. 'He has all sorts of hallucinations, and delusional insanity is the worst sort. Doctor Macfadyen told me no later than yesterday that he ought to be certified.'

'Oh, that's all nonsense—he's as gentle as a lamb.'

'I'm not afraid, Mr. Grier. Uncle Davie and I understand one another.'

'That's very well, but I shall never know a moment's peace of mind about you. I come from my mother to ask you to come up to the Manse. I'll send Donald down with the cart for your luggage to-morrow.'

She looked at him in surprise.

'Why should I do that? Thank you very much, but I will stay here. Uncle Davie has probably got more morbid than usual through being so long left alone and through not having the weekly letter from father he used to have. I ought to have thought of that and written to him. He'll be all right after he has got used to the idea of my being here.'

Grier stood still, leaning against the dresser and regarding her intently. She always knew what she wished to do and seemed independent of advice. But the brevity of her stay away from the Glen of the Ford augured well for the realisation of his hopes, and though she had not betrayed any emotion at sight of him, certainly she had not repelled him. He must walk warily, he reflected, for she had yet to be won.

He helped her presently to get the tea ready, she laughing at him for his awkward handling of household things.

'Your sister always said your mother had spoiled you,' she said banteringly. 'I don't believe you could get yourself a meal to save your life.'

'I'm afraid I couldn't, but under such tuition I should rapidly improve,' he said, greatly daring.

'Do you think so? I'm afraid I'm not at all a housewifely person. I should never pass the bar of Mrs. Grier's judgment. I have often wondered how it is possible with one maid to keep the Manse as she does. I am afraid your mother works a great deal herself.'

'I suppose she does. My mother has always been housewifely—as you express it. The only place she leaves

in peace is my study, and that only under protest, and because once in the tidying-up process my sermon was lost, and I had to preach an old one. It took her a long time to get over that.'

'As if it mattered—one sermon more or less!' said Christine merrily. 'I think it would be a better world without sermons.'

She could think of no reason why she should not make a remark of that kind if she felt inclined, and Grier, in spite of the fact that he was very much in love, visibly winced.

'They must mean something to somebody, Christine, seeing that they have been in demand for generations, and that they are likely to be so for generations to come.'

She shook her head, wholly unconvinced.

'Why don't you set the example and cut the sermon out of the service and introduce more music? It would be ever so much more attractive. I have attended an English church once since I have been away, and the musical part was so delightful that the sermon didn't matter. It lost its aggravating quality, I mean.'

'What is that?' he asked interestedly. 'I didn't know that you had such a poor opinion of sermons.'

'Well, you see, one can't protest. The preacher has it too much his own way, but I am afraid I am very rude. Shall we change the subject, and would it be beneath your dignity to toast this bit of bread? I am afraid it is rather stale, and Willie Melville, the baker, won't be here for a good hour yet.'

Grier took the fork from her hands and, smiling at his own awkwardness, bent his tall figure to the humble task. Could his mother have seen the minister relegated to such a position how great would have been her ire!

They enjoyed their meal together, and Grier, descending from the pedestal on which others had set him, became a very simple human creature as prone to laughter as Christine herself, who seemed extraordinarily light of

heart. To Christine he had never seemed so delightful. The mingling of simplicity and strength appealed surprisingly to her. It grew dark upon them, and still there was no sign of David Breck's return.

'I can't leave you here like this, Christine. If your uncle does not come back soon I will insist on taking you to the Manse.'

'Oh no. I'm not in the least afraid, nor would I be even if he should not return to-night. There is nothing to hurt one in the whole Glen of the Ford—that is part of the joy of it all.'

'But I am afraid for you,' replied Grier, and, going to the door, he looked up and down the road for some sign of the returning wanderer.

He waited till about nine o'clock and then insisted that Christine should return with him to the Manse. She protested, but, when he would take no denial, she put on her hat, took a small bag with some necessary things, and agreed to walk back with him on condition that the door of the White Cottage should be left unlocked so that David could get in if he came back. When they reached the Manse gate Grier observed a brighter light than usual shining through the trees, and he surmised that his mother was watching for him on the doorstep. He then wondered for the first time how she would receive the guest.

Her face did not wear a smile as they approached the door; nevertheless Grier called out cheerily, 'There you are, mother! I have brought you a visitor—Miss Breck. She will stay the night with us, for David has not come back.'

'Oh, what has become of him?' she asked a little stiffly and primly. 'How do you do, Miss Breck? So you have got back to the Glen? I have been wondering what has kept the minister so late.'

'It was his own fault, Mrs. Grier, and I am here under protest now. I assure you, I was not in the least afraid

of sleeping at the White Cottage alone. Nobody could be afraid in the Glen of the Ford, though I am, I confess, concerned about my Uncle David.'

Mrs. Grier looked keenly at her as she stepped across the threshold. Christine was immediately conscious that there was something hostile in that austere look.

'Mother,' said Grier quickly, 'take Miss Breck up stairs. You understand—don't you?—that it was impossible that she could sleep down there alone, and nobody knows how or when David might come back,' he added in a lower voice. 'And if you have anything to give us to eat so much the better.'

'We are not supper folks at the Manse,' she replied primly. 'A bite of bread and cheese and a cup of coffee or cocoa—which would Miss Breck prefer?'

'I require nothing, thank you,' replied Christine, a little chilled by her reception and hesitating whether she should even yet go back the road she had come. But Mrs. Grier had already begun to lead the way up the dimly-lighted stair, lifting the small hand-lamp from the staircase window as she ascended, her black skirts trailing ghostly-dim behind her.

Christine followed, and was presently ushered into what was called the prophet's chamber—a small room above the kitchen which was kept for 'supply.'

'It's only a little room, but it's warmer than the big spare bedroom because it's above the kitchen fire,' said Mrs. Grier as she set the lamp down on the immaculately starched cover of the chest of drawers. The bareness of the room, its painful cleanliness, the white gloss of the linen pillow-sham lying lace-trimmed at the head of the bed, made a little shiver run through Christine. It was all of a piece with the cold exterior of the minister's mother, who was not glad to see her and who made no pretence about it.

'So you have come back to the Glen,' she repeated as she opened the door of the hanging cupboard in the wall,

indicating to Christine where she was to put away her few garments. 'We thought you had gone south for six months at least. Did you not like London?'

'Yes, I liked it very well, but I wanted to come home.'

'And you are going to live there at the White Cottage with David Breck, if you speak about it as home?' she said drily.

'That is what I think of doing meanwhile, but I have not made any great plans, Mrs. Grier. Nothing seems to matter much nowadays—nobody seems to care.'

It was a speech which would have evoked some tender and comforting response from a motherly woman, but at her best Marian Grier had never been that, and her heart was hard against Christine Breck because she greatly feared that her son favoured her above all the women he had ever met.

They did not linger long in the prophet's chamber, having none of the confidences to exchange which make a bond between two women who are friends or who are even congenial. Immediately Christine had hung up her things they proceeded downstairs to the study, which was certainly a very cheerful place. It was full of books, lined round and round the walls, sufficient in themselves to redeem an ugly room, though the study of Locharidle Manse was not that. It was less painfully tidy than other parts of the house, and Mrs. Grier felt obliged to apologise for it. The minister had cleared his papers from his own chair and drawn it from its corner so that it faced the cheerful fire, and in it he placed Christine, much to his mother's disgust. He never made such fuss over her, nor did she desire it; nevertheless she resented his act of courtesy towards a strange woman, who took it all as if it were no more than her due.

'I'll see about the supper, such as it is. Will you have it here or in the dining-room, Alan?'

'Is there a fire in the dining-room?' asked the minister.

'No, but there's one in the little parlour. Will that do?'

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'Why, of course. We don't wish to make a stranger of Miss Breck, mother,' he answered cheerily, and, when she had closed the door, he turned to Christine with an anxious little smile.

'My mother does not make a fuss, but she means kindly. The Griers are not demonstrative folks. You must not run away with the idea that she is not glad to see you. She's like that with everybody. Some of the supply have a hard time of it with her because they don't understand her.'

'Does she ever smile?' Christine could not help asking.

'Why, yes, of course—and laugh too, but we don't see very much of each other. I'm always busy here, and she about the house; we meet only at meals.'

'How dull for her! And what do you do here all day in this room—make sermons?'

'Occasionally.'

'But you have to preach one every Sunday, haven't you?'

'Sometimes two.'

'And do you need all these books to help you with the sermons? I think I could write one without the aid of any books.'

'Tell me how you would set about it, and what would be your text,' he asked, leaning his arm on the mantel and looking down upon her where she sat in his chair—an alluring vision. His heart beat at the thought of a future when she should be there by right, taking his chair and all the best he could give her in return for herself.

'Oh, I shouldn't have a text,' she answered, leaning back and thrusting out two very small neat feet to the cheerful blaze. 'I should simply get up and tell everybody to be kind to one another and say that there never can be too much loving-kindness in the world. The want of that is what's the matter with us as a race, I have discovered. We relegate all the feelings to "the back of beyond," as father used to say. One night at the Eyrie we had a discussion, led off by Jimmy Grant, on Scotsmen

as lovers. It was the funniest thing you ever heard in your life. Jimmy gave samples. He is a splendid mimic, though nobody would ever guess it from his lugubrious face.'

Her eyes were smiling, her lips had a bewitching curve. She had suddenly become conscious of her immense power over the big strong man in front of her, and it gave her a most womanly and delicious thrill.

How interesting it would be to galvanise this big, slow, strong nature into passionate life, to teach him that there were other things in the world besides creeds! The desire for conquest seized Christine and awakened all sorts of witchery in her.

'Nevertheless the Scotsman might learn to make love if he had a good teacher,' observed Grier, waxing bold.

'The consequences to himself might be dire.'

'Not necessarily. There must have been a good deal of love-making of a kind in Scotland after all,' he replied, entering into her mood for the moment with a lightness which surprised himself.

But suddenly her face grew graver, and he would have given much to have fathomed her thought.

'What are you thinking of?' he asked, bending toward her with a solicitude born of the deepest interest of the heart.

'I was thinking of something a woman said to me in London the day I came away.'

'May I not hear what it was?'

She shook her head.

'No. I did not tell you when you were asking about London this afternoon that I had seen Mrs. Prentice. I have discovered the tragedy of her life.'

'Mrs. Prentice?' he repeated in a puzzled voice, and Christine, so deeply interested herself, could hardly forgive him his lapse of memory.

'The lady I spoke to you about last December before I went to London, don't you remember? She came to lecture in Edinburgh.'

'Yes, of course. I ought not to have forgotten, but I can think only of one thing while you are here.'

It was a lover's speech which ought to have arrested her, but she continued as if she had not heard it.

'I saw her twice in London, and, strangest of all, I found her husband and her daughter at Medwyn. He is the Rector of a church there.'

'And why doesn't she live there too?'

'Well, because she has left him.'

'Why has she left him?'

Christine hesitated a moment. Called upon thus suddenly to present the case of Mrs. Prentice, she felt that it was certainly difficult of statement and that it required a good deal of explanation.

'I could hardly make you understand, I think. I did not understand myself until I went there to the environment that she found intolerable.'

'But after all, she chose that environment, didn't she? And none of us have the right to turn our backs on duty even when it has become irksome.'

Christine made a little impatient movement.

'I don't think it's any use trying to make you understand. Mrs. Prentice is a woman of strong, eager temperament, holding certain definite views. They clashed with her husband's, and he tried to coerce her—to make her fall in with the cold formalities of his creed.'

'He's a minister of the gospel, isn't he?'

'The Rector of All Hallows', Medwyn.'

'Then I take it, we may presuppose in him some high spiritual sense—some single-hearted ideal of duty.'

'You may presuppose it, but it isn't there,' said Christine bluntly. 'I dislike him intensely. I don't even believe him to be sincere.'

'You were doubtless prejudiced against him through his wife. What was her special grievance? Wasn't he a faithful and kind husband?'

Christine did not immediately reply. She could guess the unbending attitude of Grier's mind towards certain questions regarding life and conduct, and she thought she had been injudicious in bringing Mrs. Prentice's affairs under discussion.

'I think we had better not talk any more about it,' she said soberly. 'You would have to be on the spot to understand.'

'Perhaps. But she took certain vows and broke them—we can't get away from that elemental fact.'

'She was justified,' replied Christine, and at the moment, to her intense relief, Mrs. Grier came into the room to tell them that a meal awaited them.

It was Grier who did most of the talking while they partook of it, Mrs. Grier often rising from the table and waiting on them in a manner which considerably disconcerted Christine.

'Why don't you make this lazy son of yours wait on you, Mrs. Grier?' she asked at length. 'You spoil him, and he forgets his manners to other folks. My father always waited on me. He never allowed me to get up to fetch anything—not even at the last, when he was often tired. It made him angry when I offered to serve him.'

'It is a woman's duty to serve,' was the unexpected answer, whereat Grier, though a little put out, laughed heartily.

'Miss Breck is right, mother. You have spoiled me, and we must turn over a new leaf. Sit down, and let me fetch what's wanted. Hasn't Annie Donald come in yet? This is her night out, and she has a sweetheart at Sonnen Lodge, it appears, so we mustn't be too hard on her.'

'I remember Annie and what a pretty face she had,' said Christine. 'Wha is the lad?'

Before they could reply there was a loud ring at the front door, and Grier, immediately apprehensive of evil, rose from the table to answer the summons.

He was a long time gone, and the sound of voices talking very fast and, it seemed, excitedly, broke upon the few sparse sentences that passed between Mrs. Grier and her guest. At last the minister's mother, whose curiosity, in spite of her stillness of manner, was insatiable, could bear the suspense no longer and rose to leave the table.

Left alone, Christine looked round the little dining-room, marvelling at its ugliness, at the taste that could have expressed itself in gathering together so many incongruous articles in one place. While she was studying a highly-coloured oleograph above the mantelpiece the door opened and Grier entered.

His face was very white, and Christine gathered from its expression that he had bad news for her.

'Something has happened to Uncle Davie,' she said in a clear quiet voice.

'Yes, my dear, troubles are coming thick and fast upon you. They have found him.'

'Where?'

'At the Salmon Pool below Colin's Brig.'

'Drowned?'

Grier nodded, and then without more ado put his arms round her as if he would shelter her from all other alarms.

'You must belong to me now, Christine. Everything has made you mine.'

Christine, momentarily unnerved by the fresh tragedy, suffered him to comfort her, her heart partially re-echoing his words. Surely this was the refuge designed for her by fate—the only one left to her now on the face of the earth.

The minister's mother, in a flutter of trembling excitement, burst in upon them and, seeing their attitude, as quickly withdrew.

Outside the door a sudden fury shook her, and the sound that broke, in spite of herself, from her quivering lips seemed like the low cry of a wounded animal at bay.

CHAPTER XIII

WILL IT WORK?

THE minister prepared to accompany the messenger back to the Ford, and he begged Christine to go to bed. He was relieved that she did not insist on accompanying him. At the door he turned back to ask his mother to be kind to the girl, but she gave him no answer, good or bad. He was unaware that she had opened the parlour door and seen them together, or he might have carried a more foreboding heart back to the White Cottage.

When he returned it was close on midnight, and he was surprised, perhaps none too well pleased, to find his mother still downstairs.

'You should have gone to bed, mother,' he said a trifle sharply. 'Your face is the colour of ashes. There was really no need to wait up.'

'You know I never sleep when you are out, Alan. Did David Breck take his own life?'

'We shall never know. He may have lost his footing in the dark. You know how steep and dangerous the bank is just above the Pool. It ought to have been fenced in long ago. Perhaps this may stir up the proprietor to see to it.'

'Will you finish your supper? I have kept the coffee warm.'

'I shall be glad of the coffee. Did Miss Breck go soon upstairs?'

'Whenever you left.'

'I hope you were kind to her and made her comfortable, mother. Poor thing, hers is a forlorn and pitiful case.'

'I did the best I could, but I'm no hand at making of folks, Alan, you know that.'

She did not speak graciously. Never had her mouth seemed so long and thin and unsmiling.

'It's mothering Christine needs. Can't you remember how you used to feel for Effie or for me when we were little bairns? That's the sort of treatment she is needing now.'

'You'll do all that's needful in that direction, Alan,' she said dully. 'I opened the parlour door and saw you together, though you didn't see me. I suppose it means that you'll marry her.'

'Yes, it does mean that,' he answered, and his face cleared. He had not meant to blurt out the truth so soon, but it was certainly better to clear the ground. 'And I mean to do it as soon as it can possibly be arranged.'

'Her father has not been dead three months. You'll have to wait a year at least.'

'We'll never do that, mother. Anything might happen in a year. Why should we wait?'

'It would not be decent otherwise. Some respect should be paid to the dead, let them be what they like.'

Mrs. Grier invariably spoke of Otto Breck as if he had been a doubtful character, of whom the less said the better.

'Otto Breck was the last man to pay attention to such things, mother; and, as we are upon this subject, I may tell you that it was of this he wrote in that letter which came to me on the day I went to Edinburgh and which I did not show you.'

'You mean that in it he asked you to marry his daughter?'

'Yes.'

'Then you had made it up beforehand—she and you? I mean, this is no new thing?'

'I asked her before she went to London, but she would not give me any answer. She said she would come back some day.'

'And she hasn't waited long. It's just what might have been expected. It's not every day a man like you can be picked up, Alan.'

The minister laughed.

'Such nonsense! I'm a poor creature enough, and have hardly a penny to bless myself with. Christine has nearly a hundred a year in her own right. I'll need to bestir myself for her sake and not stop much longer in Strathardle.'

There was anguish in the eyes of Marian Grier as she listened to this announcement which presaged the downfall of all her hopes. She loved Strathardle and the quiet of the well-ordered life at the Manse, and the prospect of leaving it desolated her heart. But the minister, being overwhelmed with the fulness of life and all the glowing possibilities spreading before him, took no heed at all of his mother's pain. Indeed he had no idea of its depth and bitterness. A little disappointment she was bound to feel, as every mother did at the prospect of losing her son to another woman, but she would quickly get accustomed to the idea and fit herself into the new order of things.

Such was his superficial reasoning sufficient at the time to sweep away any misgiving.

And she? It had never been part of her creed or destiny to obtrude herself. She had been subservient all the years of her married life, as wife and as mother, to those to whom she was bound. She had no anger against her son, but at the moment she hated Christine Breck; and the thing men called Christian forbearance—a virtue she had often heard her husband and her son extol from

their respective pulpits—had no place whatever in her heart.

'There will be great changes. She is one who will make them,' she said with a jerk. 'Perhaps you would like me to leave the Manse, Alan.'

'What for would you leave the Manse? We shall need you here more than ever before—Christine is young.'

'Not so very young,' she put in drily. 'You were lying at my breast before I was five-and-twenty.'

'Well—inexperienced, then.'

'She ought not to be since she kept her father's house so many years.'

'Well, mother, of course if you want to go that will be different,' he said, a little nettled by her persistence. 'But remember it's the last thing either Christine or I would desire. This is your home—you are entitled to it. It will be a bad day for me, mother, if I ever forget all you have been to me and done for me.'

A tremor crossed her face, causing its tension to relax, and the misery lessened in her eyes.

'It might not be fair to her. I would do my duty, Alan. We must leave that for discussion afterwards. Perhaps I could get a little house near by, so that I could still be useful.'

The words 'still be useful' touched Grier's heart, and he took a step nearer her. He realised, I believe, in that moment something of the sublime sacrifice of his mother's life—sacrifice that had done no good to anybody, least of all to him. The world is full of such mistaken sacrifice—of unnecessary martyrs who, wearing no crown here, are not even certain of a crown beyond. But just so long as courage is lacking in so many of the relations of life such useless sacrifice will be made and perpetuated.

'Mother, you have worked too hard all your life and denied yourself too much,' he said impulsively. 'I have

always thought that. When Christine comes you will be able to take things easier, and it will be our delight to see that you do.'

She smiled, though a little wintrily.

'Do you think she will be one that will be a true helpmeet to you, Alan? You must excuse me—but now is the time to speak, and when I have had my say I will be done. You know how she has been brought up—what a godless house Otto Breck kept at the White Cottage and in Edinburgh.'

'But he was not a godless man, mother. I have never met a more reverent soul.'

'If there had been sanctified reverence in his soul, Alan, he would have paid more respect to Kirk ordinances, and he would not have laughed as often as he did at the things godly folk prize. But the man is dead, and doubtless by this time his Maker has dealt with him. I'm not blaming the lassie. As the tree falls so it maun lie. What I am asking is whether she is fit to be a minister's wife. You will need to instruct her in grace, Alan, and point out to her all in which she is lacking.'

The minister shifted uneasily from one foot to another and bit the end of the pen-holder which he had absently lifted from the table. He could not picture himself instructing Christine 'in grace,' as his mother expressed it. He could almost feel the flash of her protesting eyes.

'Mother, we must remember that different upbringing makes different folk. The Griens have always lived, I think, in too narrow a groove. You have heard Effie say that.'

'Never without arguing it with her,' said his mother firmly. 'And where Effie got her rebellious heart from I have never been able to learn.'

'If we remember, then, how Christine has been brought up it will help us. She has a heart of gold, as you will find out when you begin to know her. Now I think you

should go to bed. You look clean spent, and remember that the laddie you have brought up never needed you more than he does now.'

He bestowed on her one of his rare kisses, and she, partly comforted, but wholly unconvinced, retired to her own room where she spent the next hour upon her knees.

The words she had spoken came back to Grier in Edinburgh a month later when, on the eve of his wedding-day, he walked with Christine on the broad road below Salisbury Crags looking down upon Duddingston Loch.

'Why should I wish your mother to leave the Manse? The bare thought is horrible. She can go on being mistress there, tell her. I have no wish at all to usurp her place.'

'But my wife must be mistress in her own house. My mother will be content to be your ally in all the household ways. She is never happier than when making jam and bottling fruit and tidying up. She can go on doing all that—can't she, Christine?—you helping in moderation when you have a mind.'

'There is no reason why she shouldn't,' replied Christine a little absently, her eyes roaming the misty waters of the loch.

It was a soft March evening with a hint and feeling of spring in the air, the earth teeming with newness of life. Christine stopped to examine a whin-bush where the tender buds were ready to burst into bloom, touching them softly while the words of an old song were on her lips—

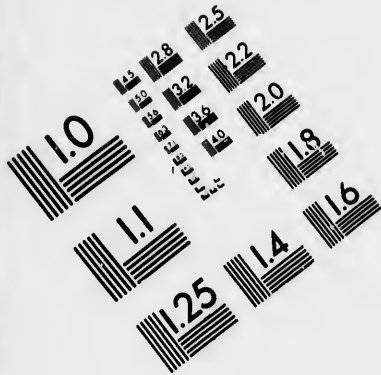
'Love's out of fashion when the whin's out of bloom.'

'Father used to say that if we couldn't find a single whin-bloom luck had indeed left us.'

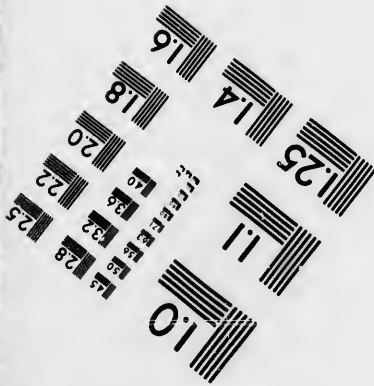
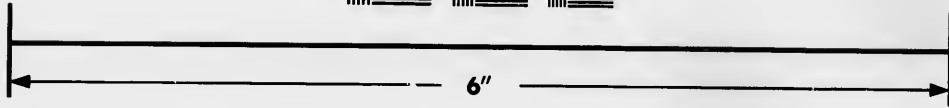
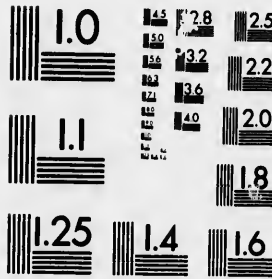
She smiled upon him whimsically, and he caught her hand and held it fast, careless of the fact that two urchins, bird-nesting among the whins, were watching them from above.

'Alan, your mother doesn't like me,' she said when she





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had freed herself with a warning glance. 'I wonder why, and I find it hard to forgive her for refusing to come to the wedding. Her presence would make it all so much more respectable.'

'She's getting oid and the rheumatism troubles her a good deal, Christine. She will be far happier getting ready for us to come home.'

'We'll live our separate lives at the Manse, I suppose, and never come any nearer to understanding one another. Will Effie be like that? She wrote me a delightful letter full of wise advice about you, Alan. I am afraid your sister does not worship you from afar as your mother does.'

'Effie has always had a sharp tongue and mistakes flippancy for cleverness,' said Grier, a little vexed. 'And what does she know about me anyway?'

'She must know a little surely. I like to see you cross, Alan. It makes you more human. I warn you that I am often cross.'

'I have never seen any sign of it.'

'But you will. I have the artistic temperament—not very highly developed, perhaps, for I have achieved nothing by it, though I sometimes think I will write something one of these days. It is just sufficiently developed to make me disagreeable and to refuse absolutely to give rhyme or reason for its moods. Don't say you have not been warned. It is not too late even yet to claim your freedom.'

He only smiled indulgently as one might smile upon the prattle of a beloved and irresponsible child.

'I am quite serious. I have promised nothing, and I can never be anything but myself at the Manse of Strathardle.'

'It is yourself I love and desire, Christine—don't you make any mistake about that.'

'The Clan are taking it badly,' she went on again. 'Haven't you observed their lugubrious looks? Even

Jimmy Grant hasn't a joke left in him, and I think the farewell supper at the Eyrie to-night will be a failure unless your sister is prepared to enliven us a bit.'

'What's the matter with the Clan is that they want you for themselves.'

'Maclure and Jimmy!' said Christine with a little tender laugh. 'If only it were not such a hard world to live in, I would be living with them now at the Eyrie, and would never marry anybody. That's the kind of wife you're getting, Alan. Aren't you afraid even yet?'

'In mortal terror! Of course I am. Come back from that precipitous edge, Christine; it is unsafe.'

He took her by the arm, pulled her back from the sheer edge of the steep incline, and looked down into her eyes.

'Christine, you don't mean the half of what you are saying. Would it cost you nothing to say good-bye here, for ever?' he said passionately.

She shivered a little and tried to draw herself away.

'Oh, I don't know. Sometimes everything seems wrong and nothing right. I am not like other women. Since I have come to live at Canaan Lane and have seen the endless toil of Mrs. Noble for her selfish husband and her thankless crew of children I am afraid such a life would never be possible for me, Alan; nor should it be asked of any woman.'

'It will never be asked of you, Christine. But I could almost take my affidavit that if you were to ask Mrs. Noble to-night she would say that she was a happy woman and would refuse to change places with the Queen on the throne.'

'Ah, that would prove nothing at all,' retorted Christine. 'What o'clock is it? I wish to go alone to the station to meet Effie, Alan.'

'I will take you.'

'No, I want to meet her by myself. We shall come straight to the Eyrie for the supper-party, and mind

you're not late and that you don't let Mrs. Noble be kept at home by any of the tribe. If you do you will be sent back for her. Now let us return.'

She walked on in front of him so quickly that he was hard put to it to keep pace with her, and he realised that for the time being she had done with graver things. Reflecting, however, that in twenty-four hours they would be away together, with none to come between, he possessed his soul in patience. He loved her greatly and was not afraid. But Christine, whose love was yet wholly unawakened, feared to be a moment alone with her thoughts.

It was a Friday evening, and Effie Grier at the close of her week's work in the Lanark school had taken the earliest train for Edinburgh. It arrived shortly after seven o'clock at Princes Street Station, and when she looked from the carriage window, she was surprised to see Christine waiting alone to meet her.

'Where's Alan? Hasn't he come down from Strathardle yet?'

'Oh yes, he came yesterday,' replied Christine. 'I wished to meet you by myself. Won't you give me a kiss, Effie?'

'Two or three—or half a dozen if you like. My kisses are not at a premium,' answered Effie with her cheery, wholesome laugh, and setting down her bag, forthwith she hugged her new sister-in-law with all her might.

'Now I like this. I was afraid that you were going to be angry with me for writing that letter. It had to be written, and even if it made you angry, Christine, it relieved my soul of a bounden duty.'

'It didn't make me angry at all. I liked it, and I know it's all true.'

Effie nodded soberly, taking in every detail of Christine's appearance.

'I haven't seen you since last summer, and you have changed a lot. You're thinner and you look older, but

you're the prettiest woman I've seen since we met last, and that's the truth. Why, it seems a shame for you to be shut up in Strathardle Manse. Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

'Yes—I think so,' replied Christine. 'Let us get into a cab, and tell the man to drive slowly. I have heaps to say to you, but we must share the same room at Canaan Lane to-night, for every room is fully occupied.'

'Are we going there now?'

'No—to the Eyrie first. There's a supper-party by way of good-bye to the old life. The Clan have arranged it. You'll like the Clan.'

'I remember Maclure. I liked him—a big slow man; and I saw a picture of his at the Glasgow Exhibition which haunts me yet. But it's at Mrs. Noble's house the wedding is to be, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I see. So you weren't angry because I said your bridegroom would need a lot of breaking in. He knows no more about women than a baby.'

'But he will learn.'

'I dare say,' said Effie with a comical, shrewd smile. 'But the learning stage is sometimes a little rough not only on the learner but on the teacher. I know it because, you see, teaching happens to be my daily bread. Do you realise the awful, deadly dulness for three parts of the year at Strathardle?'

'Yes.'

'And the inflexible laws of the Medes and Persians that obtain in the Manse?'

'I shall not observe these laws, Effie. I'm under no delusion about the life I'm going to lead. I know Strathardle too well for that.'

'Ah, but hitherto you could always leave it when you liked.'

'So I will yet. I have told Alan to be prepared, for I

shall certainly rise up and go whenever the spirit moves me.'

Effie shrugged her shoulders, and as they trundled out of the station there was a momentary silence.

'I'm not keen on matrimony—even if I weren't too plain to tempt any man—for the very reason that it's eternal. You can't get up and walk when you like. What about my mother? I can't help thinking it a mistake that she is stopping on in the Manse.'

'I don't. I should hate to be shut up in a house with nobody but a man,' said Christine grimly.

Effie turned sharply and looked at Christine's clear, exquisite profile with a sudden apprehension.

'Christine, you're not in love with him—I know you're not. I have never been in love myself, but I have heard and read about it. When you really care for a man you want him and his house and everything belonging to him to yourself, and can't think of sharing the smallest bit of him even with his own relations.'

'If that's being in love, Effie, then certainly I'm not. But I have no qualms about my future—I'm going to make it a success.'

'I sincerely hope you are. I don't know how Alan has managed to win you. He never seemed to me to have the sort of charm women like in a man. But I hope you'll be happy together, and always remember that I'm your friend, Christine. I'll be your sister if you like. I'm outside the family in a lot of things, and they never consult me, but you'll find me square and reliable if the need should ever arise.'

Christine did not reply, because her lips were trembling.

'Well, about my mother. You'll find her slavish worship of Alan a little trying. I do, and I generally depart from the Manse before my time for leaving is due and not in the odour of sanctity. Poor mother, she was just like that with father, and it has become second nature

to her to serve. Have you heard her sum up the whole destiny of woman?'

'No, but I can imagine what she would say. Perhaps she will learn something from me, Effie.'

Effie shook her head.

'She's too old and too set in her ways to change. I shall be interested to hear how you get on. I haven't got any smart new clothes for the wedding, Christine. I couldn't afford it. I'm saving up for something else.'

'Your clothes will do. It will not be a smart function,' replied Christine absently. Then she turned suddenly to Effie. 'I should like to dress you. You don't make the best of yourself. Some day when we have some money and some time to spare we'll go on a shopping expedition together.'

Effie nodded, and a sudden moisture sprang into her eyes. She did not know why, but her heart was very tender and a little yearning over the girl who in another day would be her brother's wife; she felt that she could have mothered . . . As for Christine a warm, comforted feeling crept over her, such as comes to a child conscious of protection and shelter. That night the bond was forged which was to stand the storm and stress of the days to come.

The supper-party at the Eyrie was a failure, and the Clan did not rise to its usual height of glee. There was the sense of something lacking, and even of some shadow overhanging them all. The speech which Jimmy Grant had prepared as a send-off for Christine remained undelivered, and the party broke up soon after nine, Christine making the first move to return to Canaan Lane.

They walked back, and they sorted themselves naturally into pairs, and Maclure fell to Effie. She liked him. There was something solid and comforting about his massive frame and his slow infrequent speech.

'The Clan are not easy about the wedding that's to take place to-morrow, Miss Grier. What do you think of it?'

'I don't know what to think. Christine and my brother don't seem very well suited to each other, do they?' said Effie a little wistfully. 'I never thought them less suited than they appeared to-night when you were all talking and my brother had so little to say for himself.'

'It is the marriage her father desired for her, and that's the queerest thing of all. If you had known Otto Breck well you would think the same.'

'I didn't know him well, but doubtless her father's wish would weigh with Christine. I hope the marriage will turn out well. My brother is a very good man—you can see that, can't you?—and as human as ministers generally are. But his ways are not her ways, and I don't really know how she's going to conform to the routine of Manse life.'

'She won't,' replied Maclure decidedly. 'If there's to be peace he'll have to conform to her ways.'

Maclure, who had studied Grier's physiognomy, not without result, shook his head as he spoke; then he suddenly laughed outright.

'What are you laughing at?'

'Jimmy. When Christine wrote to us, telling what was going to happen, Jimmy was in an awful state and stuttered violently, as he always does when he gets worked up. That's why we didn't have the speech to-night. He was all the evening at the stuttering stage. That morning Christine's letter came he threw up his arms and said, "It w-w-w-on't w-w-w-ork. If I weren't forty-eight I'd m-m-m-arry her m-m-m-yself."'

'Perhaps you feel like that too?' said Effie shrewdly.

'I'm not easy in my mind. We have always known Christine, and we helped to bring her up—but she will be difficult to live with except among her own kind.'

'And you don't think my brother is her kind?'

Maclure tugged at his beard and simply inquired 'Do you?'

CHAPTER XIV

THE REALITY

THE minister stood within the Manse porch, closed his umbrella, and shook the drops from it, and carefully removed his mackintosh before he entered his well-kept house. It was a day in the late October, a day which heralded the coming winter. Since the dawning the wet mists had wrapped loch and moor like a shroud and had hidden the higher mountain peaks, while a low wind had whistled down the Glen wailing the departed summer.

Alan Grier's face was grave as he stepped within the house and entered the little parlour where his mother sat before the table plying her needle among a great pile of household mending.

'Where's Christine?' he asked abruptly.

'Gone out more than an hour ago: she said she couldn't stand the house any longer,' replied Mrs. Grier in her quiet, even voice. 'She has not done a hand's turn to-day, nor, so far as I could see, read a word.'

'Never mind that, mother. Well, I can't get a trap for Cleish. All three are out from the Inn of the Ford, so I'll have to walk to the baptism. You don't happen to know the direction that Christine took? If she is willing she might as well go with me.'

'To a baptism?' queried his mother with brows slightly uplifted.

'She can stop outside if she doesn't care for the service. I won't be long,' said Grier, and still hesitated a moment,

looking down upon his mother's neat spare figure, on the thin fingers applying a fresh piece of material in a small hole with all the skill of the practised darning who takes a certain pride in her work.

'You seem to be busier than ever, mother. You should get Christine to help you with that mending. Put some of it aside, and I'll ask her when we come back.'

Mrs. Grier laughed and gave a little sniff at the end, which conveyed unutterable things.

'You don't encourage her much in household ways, mother,' he said quickly. 'You let her see too palpably that you think she can do nothing as well as yourself.'

'She doesn't hurt herself with offering,' Mrs. Grier answered. 'You had better leave things as they are, Alan. I'm quite able—as able as ever I was—to look after the house. If you could get her to take her place outside it would be something worth doing. It's seven Sundays since she was in the kirk. I'm quite tired answering folk at the door who ask whether she is well; and it's your duty, Alan, to bid her go to the sanctuary.'

'Christine is a child of the wind and the mist, mother. She can't be bound.'

Mrs. Grier sniffed again.

'A strong young woman nearly six-and-twenty, that has been badly brought up and had her own way all her life—that's what she is! It's time she was broken in. I did not mean to say so much, Alan, but your wife's conduct is getting too much for me, besides being a public scandal. I'm whiles thinking I'll hae to leave the Manse. I cannot bear it. If it were not that I ken what a pitiful place it would become, left to her and Annie Donald, I would go south to Effie for a month or two.'

'But Christine is very nice to you, mother. I have often admired the courteous deference she pays you.'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'I wadna mind a sharp word now and then, for that's

human nature, if I saw her do her duty by you and by the parish. The folk she mostly taks up wi' are the Frees. She's for ever up at Cairn Tewan amang the bairns, and she says Mrs. Farquhar is the salt of the earth—whatever she may mean by that. Maybe she's there now—very likely.'

'The Farquhars are very nice folks, mother,' said the minister lamely.

'I'm no sayin' onything about the folks—they're weel enough. It's Christine I'm speaking about. There are folks in our own kirk that the minister's wife should pay attention to, even if the minister's mother doesna. A mother and a wife are different. I think ye have failed in your duty these last six months.'

The minister reddened, but he was in no way surprised. He had known for some time that the moment for plain speech must sooner or later come. He leaned against the mantelpiece and stared gloomily before him, totally at a loss. There was sufficient truth in his mother's words to make denial impossible. And his own heart and conscience were by no means easy. He had no fault to find with Christine in the house, where she was always considerate and kind, effacing herself as much as possible, and much more than he desired or thought fitting. At times she seemed listless, as if life had disappointed her. As to the kirk, she dropped in there when she had a mind, sitting down at the door or in any handy pew—among bairns for preference—while her mother-in-law occupied the Manse pew in solitary state. It was a small thing, but in these latitudes the infinitely little constitutes life, and tongues were already busy with the affairs of the minister, his wife, and his mother. The usual conclusion had been arrived at that the two latter did not agree. Sympathy was divided in the parish, where a good many had come under Christine's spell. But though some had been rebuked by the elder Mrs. Grier's severe tongue,

they could not deny that she was 'a good-living woman,' which was their highest term of praise.

Christine was in sore need of a wise friend and counsellor just then, and none was at hand. So she made her mistakes while courageously fighting her own inward battle, baffled by its complex problems and in dire dread lest she should have actually and already made shipwreck of her life.

It was not her nature to quarrel, therefore she lived at peace with Mrs. Grier by keeping as far as possible beyond the reach of her tongue. She had laughed at Mrs. Grier's attempt to set her in her right position, and had consented only after much elaborate discussion to take her place at the head, instead of at the side of the table. But further than that she interfered not at all in the management of the household, which went on precisely as it had done before she came. True, Annie Donald had become her bond-slave, flying to wait upon her will, whereas to her former mistress she had been a slow and sometimes disobliging girl. But as that was a question of temperament Christine did not trouble herself about results.

'I don't think I can do much, mother, but I'll speak to Christine. If only she would come into the kirk on Sunday I wouldn't mind all the rest, for we are happy enough in the house.'

'Ye must make her come. When I think of the way your father disciplined his folks, both inside the house and out of it, I'm amazed at you, Alan. It's a good thing he didn't live to see the day.'

'He had not to deal with Christine,' said the minister, involuntarily by his admission giving away the key to the situation.

His mother sat back in her chair and looked at him fixedly, her eyes glowing in her head, her face set like a piece of marble. That she felt the importance and

magnitude of the matter which they discussed was evidenced by many signs of strain as well as by the tense accents of her voice.

'She has bewitched you, Alan, and when a man permits himself to be bewitched by any woman he does but little more good in the world. How much of your book have you written since you were married? It can never be ready now to be published in the spring. When I go past the study door and hear you laughing and talking with her I sometimes shake my fist at the door. And when I shake it I mean it,' she added with the faint flicker of a derisive smile. 'She's an enemy to work, to sober living, to all the ordinances of God. If ye dinna come to some understanding wi' her and if things dinna change, there will be a judgment, Alan, as sure as I sit here.'

'Oh nonsense, you are making mountains out of mole-hills!'

'No, I am not, and well you know it. But first of all her heart must be changed. It's a heathen heart, Alan, that has never humbled itself to the God that made it. That's what Christine must get—the changed heart which will abase itself in the dust and understand that it is a poor thing and that God is a jealous God who will have His due from the creatures He has made.'

From this austere creed Grier had in some measure revolted, but it still had a power over him, and his heart chilled as his mother's warning words fell upon his ears. He could not help feeling that she had right upon her side and that Christine failed in many respects, that at present she lived a perfectly useless life except in so far as that she was the light of his own eyes. Could it be his duty to quench that light, to try to repress the happy gaiety which made so many of his hours delightful, to try to mould Christine's free spirit into a pattern his mother could approve? It was true that he had done little or

no work since his marriage, and that Christine grudged the time spent on his sermons and urged him to shorten them, belittling their power and meaning and influence. He had perhaps been too weak. Once or twice lately he had found himself wondering whether, after all, his efforts to expound the Scriptures to a handful of hill and moorland folks were not futile and absurd, when what most of them needed was one with a healthy, strong human hand to keep them in the right way and a wise and kind heart to give them advice and help for their daily toil.

Such was the insidious poison Christine had dropped into his ears, and perhaps it was beginning to leaven his life. And if that were so—if hers were the stronger will and she should lead him into the careless pastures where her heart apparently was at home, what could the end be but disastrous, and what would become of his high place among his fellow-men?

'I'll need to go, mother, or I shall never get to Cleish this side of four o'clock. If Christine comes in, tell her where I have gone and ask her to come up the road and meet me. I shall not be more than half-an-hour inside the shepherd's house, even if I stop to drink a cup of tea with them.'

His mother answered nothing, but when he had left the house she walked to the end window that commanded a view of the hill road he must take to Cleish, and she saw him meet his wife at the cross-roads and stop to talk to her. Then they turned together to face the moorland road in the wind and the rain. Christine had a long coat of rough Harris tweed and a bare head. That bare head was no small part of Mrs. Grier's grievance against her son's wife. A married woman and a minister's wife, she had told Christine, should be more fittingly attired. But Christine only laughed at her and roamed the moorland roads with no escort but Tyke, the Scotch terrier, who was one of her devotees and who slept outside her door,

watching her every movement and even the very expression of her face while she was in the house.

'I'll come,' said Christine, 'but not inside, Alan. I'll wait at the bottom of the little hill till you come out again.'

'We'll see when we get there,' answered Grier as he put his hand through her arm to help her over the rough stones. 'When are you going to wear a hat, Christine? You look like a wild thing.'

'I feel like one to-day, and if the wind and the rain had not come, I should have had to go out to seek them.'

'Nonsense! I wish you were a little less of a wild thing, Christine, and I'm going to lecture you this afternoon.'

'I knew it whenever I saw you. Your mother's been at you about me. She has been very nippy to me all day. It's one of her bad days—the days when she and I are better apart.'

'My mother has been good to you since you came, Christine. There are not many women who would have stood aside as she has done.'

'I never asked her to stand aside. I told her on the first night we came home—what ages ago it seems!—that I hoped she would carry on precisely as if I were not in the house, that I was not to count at all.'

'That was impossible, my dear, and you knew it.'

'Well, we have managed it not so badly. Sundays are the worst days. I should be reconciled to my lot if it were not for the Sundays.'

'If you would spend them better, Christine, and try to take an interest in my work you might be a happier woman. Don't you think you might give that way a fair trial, seeing the other has failed?'

He spoke a little banteringly, for, though they had now lived together six months as man and wife, he was by no means sure of her and never knew just how far he could

venture. And it is astonishing how a woman of a certain type, holding herself aloof, can keep a strong man in such bondage and make him weak in all sorts of unexpected places.

As a wife Christine was very aloof and surrounded herself with all sorts of mystery and glamour, so that the freshness of her husband's passion was not yet spent nor his judgment concerning her as clear as it might otherwise have been.

'Alan, I don't believe a word you say in the pulpit, and it is all so dreary,' she replied calmly. 'I am a far better woman when I come in from my walks on the moor or down by the loch than after listening to you in the church on Sunday.'

'But the example is bad, Christine, and I am afraid I shall have to insist on your coming to church once a day at least for the example's sake and to shut people's mouths.'

It was not a good line of reasoning to take with Christine. She withdrew her arm from his and stepped out a little rebelliously with her head in the air.

'You have not the right to speak to me like that, Alan. I told you what you must expect.'

'I did not take you seriously then.'

'That was your fault—not mine.'

'But surely you can see for yourself how incongruous it is that the minister's wife, being in perfect health and having nothing to hinder her, should absent herself every Sunday from public worship. It brings dishonour not only on the man who delivers the message but on the message itself.'

'But if the message has no meaning for her, why should she make a hypocrite of herself?'

'It might have a meaning one day, Christine. Oh my dear, you don't know what you are talking about. It is a mightier force than any poor human will that you are flouting.'

'When I have proved it to be mighty I will bow down to it,' she replied steadily. 'But all the best people I have known have had nothing to do with kirks. Look at my father—he rarely went to church. But nobody would dare to say that he was not a good man or that the world was not a better place because he had lived in it.'

'What is expedient—or even lawful—for one is not so for another. Your father had the right within limits to please himself.'

'And I have not—is that what you would say?' she cried rebelliously.

'Well, you have others to consider and you took certain vows upon yourself.'

'I listened to the vows being spoken to me, but I did not subscribe to them. It was only because you insisted that I had that sort of marriage at all—that it was a religious ceremony, I mean.'

'And it will be because I insist that you will attend the church every Sunday, Christine,' he said gently but quite firmly.

She stole a glance at him, and in his face she saw for the first time a strong resemblance to his mother. The mobile curve of his mouth was lost in severity, his jaw was set hard, he looked straight ahead of him with the air of a man whose mind was made up. The woman who loved would have gloried secretly in that strength, nor would she have sought too long to pit herself against it, knowing that her strength lay elsewhere. But it only roused in Grier's wife a strong resentment.

In this mood they came to the little farmhouse of Cleish—a handful of tumble-down buildings, huddled together in the lee of a hillside, with a drystone dyke about them and a few sparse birch-trees already casting their leaves before the wind. The path to the door was sodden with the rain and the tread of cattle-beasts and sheep who roamed unherded in the immediate vicinity so

that the feet of the minister and his wife sank at every step.

'I'll stop out here,' said Christine. 'I suppose you won't be long.'

'There's Hamish Duguid at the door, looking out for us. You had better come in, Christine.'

'I don't want to go in. I don't mind seeing the house and the little bairn another day, but I'd rather take a walk up to yon cairn and be ready for you when you come out.'

'I wish you to come in,' he made answer steadily; and without more ado she followed him, smoothing her wet hair with rebellious hand as they reached the low doorway where the shock-headed shepherd, dressed in his best, awaited them with an awkward smile.

The odour of peat reek and of many folks gathered together in a narrow space without ventilation met them as they crossed the low threshold.

Christine gave a little gasp and threw open her coat.

The company were all ready for the simple service. A clean cloth was spread on the table whereon were arranged an old-fashioned soup tureen filled with water and a Bible on a clean towel, while all the bairns, likewise attired in their best, sat in awed silence round the place. The wife and mother, a poor frail shadow, rose up from the creepie at the fireplace with the latest addition to her many burdens in her arms. Christine felt a rush of pity for her, and with a very natural and womanly instinct for which Grier blessed her, took the white bundle in her arms, speaking at the same time a word of sympathy and greeting to the pale-faced mother. It was so sweetly and naturally done that he could not help thinking what a tower of strength, what a help she would be to him if only her strange prejudices could be removed. 'Prejudice' was the word he used in his mind, not being alive to the fact that it was something far deeper.

'It seems no time since I was here at a baptism before, Hamish,' said the minister with a smile. 'How many olive branches have you now?'

'Seevin at hame and Andy and little Moira out at service, whatefer. It iss a handful, but the good Lord sends the bite and sup wi' the lambs, so I'm no mindin'.'

Christine could not for the life of her help glancing at the mother's face which, however, remained quite impassive with that look of dumb endurance that she had seen on many faces since she began to go out and about among the houses in the Glen.

The minister began the service by offering up a prayer, to which the shepherd said a very loud 'Amen.' Then, after the necessary reading of Scripture and a few words to the parents enjoining them to bring up the fresh addition to their flock in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, he sprinkled the water on the baby's face, giving to her the name of Mary.

Then the children were sent outside while the shepherd's wife brought out a tea-tray for the minister and his wife, setting out her scones and shortbread with pride. Christine with the baby in her arms followed her into the back place.

'You look so weak and spent, Mrs. Duguid. It is a shame that you should wait on us. Aren't you tired, looking after so many little bairns?'

'Whiles maype I might feel a little that way, but it iss oor number we hef to have, whatefer, and it is the Lord's will.'

Christine pondered on these words after they had left the house, and when her husband asked why her face was so serious, she spoke out that which was in her mind with the frankness of a nature which could not long harbour a secret resentment.

'It is the hardness of destiny for the women of this place that eats into my heart, Alan. How I pity these

poor people with so many children and so little to do with. It is all wrong. That poor woman's face and eyes will always haunt me.'

'But why should they? Mary Duguid is a very happy woman. She will tell you that if you ask her. Hamish is a sober man and kind to her too—you could see that even with all his uncouthness.'

'But she says everything is the Lord's will—even those poor little mites whom nobody wants and who, when they grow up, will want themselves least of all. It is horrible, I think, and wicked as well.'

Grier's countenance darkened as he looked down into her passionate face, and all the glow that had warmed his heart on seeing her in what he called her natural element in the shepherd's hut faded quite away.

They returned to the Manse gate in a silence which could be felt.

CHAPTER XV

AT THE ROUND HOUSE

'How are you going to get to the Round House to-night?' asked Mrs. Grier at the breakfast-table next morning.

'In Maclaren's wagonette, of course,' replied the minister a little shortly. 'There's nothing else.'

He looked furtively up the table at Christine as he spoke. She was pouring out the tea, her face impassive as usual, and a little pale.

'I suppose we must go? I don't feel much like a dinner-party,' she said, feeling that some remark was expected of her. 'It's so long since I was at one that I have forgotten how to behave.'

'Lady Hope Farquhar won't expect much,' said Mrs. Grier, intending to be comforting to her daughter-in-law whose disinclination for high society she sympathetically shared. 'And besides she's a little queer herself, isn't she, Alan?'

A little tremor of laughter quivered for a moment on Christine's sensitive mouth, and, forgetting the shadow that had fallen between her husband and herself, she glanced down the table, wondering whether he saw the little unintended joke. But Grier did not smile or even meet her glance.

'I haven't seen her already, have I?' she then inquired with that fine indifference which so exasperated her mother-in-law.

'No. She has only just come back since the shooting

tenant left. It was explained to you before that the Round House had been let with the shooting since July, and that the family were abroad before that.'

'Who are they? Is there a Lord Farquhar?'

'A Mr. Hope Farquhar. He married a lord's daughter, but the Farquhars are not needing any titles. They have been Lairds in Cassilis and in the Round House back to the times of Bruce, haven't they, Alan?'

'I really don't know the antiquity of the family, mother, but it is pretty considerable,' replied Grier, thus directly appealed to, but he did not speak cordially and seemed anxious to devote himself to his breakfast.

'Why are we asked to dinner?' inquired Christine as she buttered for herself a very small piece of toast.

She had already been up the moorland road, but the healthy young appetite that usually waited on her in the morning seemed to have deserted her. She noticed, however, that Grier seemed to have forgotten to offer her any portion of the loch trout that lay temptingly enough in the dish in front of him. She would not remind him. The small rebellious curve was still lingering about her sensitive mouth.

'Lady Farquhar is always attentive to the Manse, isn't she, Alan? She asks us once or twice each time she is in residence at the Round House in the autumn. The family generally stop here till Christmas, when they go to Cassilis, and the house is always full of folk.'

'Will it be full to-night?'

'There will be somebody there, no doubt. Haven't you seen any of the Round House machines about with the shooting men and sometimes with the ladies for lunch when you are trapezing about the moors?'

'I may have seen them without knowing them,' replied Christine; and she suddenly stopped eating, she could not tell why.

'Alan, your wife has no fish,' called out his mother

sharply, surprised that he paid no attention to her wants, which was unusual enough to cause remark.

'I beg her pardon. Can I give you a bit, Christine? It is very good.'

'No, thank you. I don't seem to need breakfast this morning.'

'She does, Alan. She was out on the back of seven, and it's nine now. Make her eat a bit—she's only playing with that morsel of toast.'

There was a certain solicitude in Mrs. Grier's manner which at another time might have pleased her son, but which he scarcely noticed this morning.

'She dresses very queerly and she has a terrible sharp tongue which they call cleverness. The Laird himself doesna speak much,' went on Mrs. Grier with a garrulity which relieved the tension of an uncomfortable breakfast-table. 'Things get evened out, don't they? I have often noticed that a speaking woman gets a man that is pleased enough to be quiet—and the reverse. It's a good thing. If there were two in a house with high, squealing voices like Lady Hope Farquhar's, my! what a house it would be.'

Christine laughed then, sitting back irresistibly tickled.

'I begin to feel interested in the Round House. Well, if she dresses queerly she won't notice my plain, shabby frock any more than my other idiosyncrasies. Very probably she won't notice me at all.'

Grier pushed back his chair and rose. He knew very well that Christine could not be in any company without attracting attention, and when the invitation to the Round House had come a few days before he had expressed the pride it would be to him to show her off. But something had evidently changed his outlook, and he retired to his study immediately after breakfast and addressed himself by sheer force of will—though without joy—to his long-neglected desk.

'The minister has turned the key in the lock. That means that he's no to be disturbed till dinner-time. He'll be going to take a spell at his book. It's the first time he has done that since you came, Christine.'

'Is it? I won't disturb him,' replied Christine languidly.

'But you'll no be vexed with him for it,' said the mother, anxiously peering across the table at her daughter-in-law's grave face. 'It was bound to come sooner or later—ye must ken that. A man canna stop aye newly married. There are other things in the world besides his new wife.'

'A great many,' observed Christine gravely as before.

'And it doesna mean that he feels different, but just that his work has to go on—and the book was promised for the spring. The publishers have been writing about it, I'm sure, for I have seen their envelopes lying about.'

'What is the book about that he is writing?' asked Christine not interestedly, but because some answer was expected of her.

'Has he no told you all about it, lassie?'

'No. I never heard of it till this moment.'

'Oh well, I can tell ye. It's a history of the Kirk for generations wi' some explanations about doctrines. It's for the young folk, they're so gi'en ower to reading light rubbish that they require something solid. It has needed a terrible lot of reading up. Before you came I have often heard him go to his bed on the back of three o'clock and be up again to it by seven or eight.'

'It doesn't sound very interesting. Will anybody read it, do you think, when it is written?'

'Well, it is expected that it will be read, I believe,' replied Mrs. Grier drily. 'That's the reason books are written—isn't it?—that they should be read.'

'I can't picture any young person poring over such a tome,' she replied lightly. 'But I have never been young.'

What are you going to be about to-day? I want to help you.'

'It's the bramble jam the day. There's fifteen pounds. It needs a lot of steerin', and ye canna trust Annie Donald any further than ye can see her. It would be stickin' to the pan in a jiffey.'

'I'll come and "steer" it—as you call it,' said Christine quietly but quite pleasantly. 'Will it take long?'

'Depends on the fire,' said Mrs. Grier, rising with a business-like air. 'Well, if you'll stir the jam I can go to the beds wi' Annie. I'm near certain she doesna turn the mattresses every day, though I'm sure I have dinned it well into her ears. Come to the kitchen.'

Mrs. Grier trotted off nimbly, happier about the Manse affairs than she had been for some time, and in no doubt that her word in season had begun to bear fruit.

Christine dutifully and quite successfully stirred the jam, and was initiated into the mystery of its setting on a plate before it was turned out. Then, having earned her mother-in-law's approval, she was free to go about her own affairs.

'You could rest a wee bit now, Christine, if you like. I doubt you're not very well, as ye didna eat ony breakfast. Can I get ye something? And the paper has come. Annie Donald has seen to the dining-room fire, and the study door is locked yet.'

This to remind Christine that she should not disturb the labours of the minister. But had she seen him sitting with his elbows on the desk, staring moodily in front of him, his manuscript not so much as taken out of the drawer, her high hopes would have been dashed to the ground. He gave a great start presently when about eleven o'clock he heard Christine calling Tyke who, half mad with joy, leaped upon her, almost tearing her down as she walked along the avenue to the gate. He watched her from behind the curtain and saw the red October sun

giant on her bare head, turning its wealth to gold. His heart hungered for her—he longed to go out after her and crush her in his arms and tell her that nothing in the world except love mattered at all. But he suppressed these impulses and tried to adhere to the stern programme that he had mapped out for himself. Christine was to be broken in, to be made to understand that, though she herself was idle and useless, she could not be allowed, like ruthless poison, to sap the spring of usefulness in others. It was the hardest task Grier had yet set himself, but something of his mother's dour temper had awakened in him and he was determined not to give in.

They met at the early dinner-time again, and Christine, apparently unconscious that anything was wrong, chattered on about what she had seen out of doors and showed the rowans she had picked ripe and red from the tree beside the White Cottage gate.

She tucked a bunch of the rowan berries in her black evening gown at her breast just where it bared to show the whiteness of her throat. It was a very simple frock, but it hung about her figure in straight, elegant folds, and she had draped about her shoulders a scarf of Eastern stuff, all red and gold that matched the flame of the rowans. Grier had no evening clothes, and his best clerical coat was shabby, though it had been considered good enough for another winter in the Glen. Suddenly, however, he felt himself country-bred and badly dressed, and he became aware that there was a physical gulf as well as a mental one betwixt his wife and himself.

He wrapped her up with his accustomed carefulness and piled the rugs about her in Maclaren's open trap from the Glen of the Ford, but she laughed and said she never felt the cold. It was a fine, clear, bracing night with a touch of frost in the air, and the moon the reapers love was high in the starlit heavens. Seasons were tardy in

these high latitudes, and on many hillsides they could still discern the scattered stooks.

'How far is it to the Round House, and why is it called that?' asked Christine as they turned away up the moorland road and left the shimmer of the loch behind.

'It's three miles just the other side of Cleish, where we were yesterday, and it's called the Round House because it's built round with all the doors opening on a circular hall. It's a queer-looking house outside, but comfortable within. I'm surprised that you have never seen it.'

'We did not come much up this way when we lived at the White Cottage. Father liked the lower glen best.' Then after a moment she added, looking straight across at him rather defiantly, 'Will she patronise me and talk to me from a pinnacle, the Lady Hope Farquhar? If she does, I won't promise to be on my best behaviour.'

'She won't do that—she calls herself democratic. And you never saw such a tribe as she sometimes entertains here. The Laird doesn't like it, but he's a very hen-pecked man.'

'Will he take me in to dinner and talk about the grouse and the slaughter his tenants have made? That's what Highland lairds usually talk about, isn't it?'

'He won't talk much at all unless you draw him on, and then there's no saying what might happen,' answered Grier a trifle grimly. Thereafter they were silent.

Eight o'clock rang from the clock tower of the Round House as they drove up the short avenue through the birch and the spruce firs to the house which made a cheerful blaze of light in the darkness.

Grier helped his wife out, gave the man directions to be ready at half-past ten, and followed her into the house. He could not but admire the grace of her movements, the perfect self-possession of her mien, when they stepped into the big circular hall, where already some guests were gathered about a blazing fire. Lady Hope Farquhar—an

elderly woman of somewhat imposing appearance, with high cheek-bones and a prominent nose—came forward, her stiff satin gown of royal blue rustling behind her.

‘So this is the new wife?’ she said affably. ‘I’m glad to see you, my dear. I have heard of your father. I’m sorry he’s dead, poor man. He’s the only man that could paint the Glen of the Ford as it really is. You’re very welcome to the Round House. Are you looking about for the Laird, Mr. Grier? He has never been known to be in time since he was born. Will ye go upstairs, Mrs. Grier? There’s a woman on the landing who will take your cloak, and then, perhaps, we shall be all ready.’

‘If some one could take it here,’ said Christine, as she slipped it unconcernedly from her shoulders, ‘I need not go upstairs.’

‘That’s right. I like a woman that has no nonsense about her hair and what not. Leave it on that chair and they’ll take it away. Have you had a cold drive? This is Captain Cassilis, my husband’s cousin, and his sister Lady Pairman, and here’s the Laird. What have you done with Mrs. Prentice, Ludovic? I believe you have been haranguing to her on the landing.’

Christine heard the name, and she gave a little start; but in the rush of the introductions she had hardly time to wonder whether it was merely a coincidence.

The Laird was a small, thin man, with a sharp, clear-cut face and grey side-whiskers, his figure too insignificant to set off the kilt, which nevertheless he wore ostentatiously in season and out of season whenever he was in the north. It was a part of his religion. He had a very kindly smile as he shook hands with Christine, and he wished her joy of her new life and said it would be a pleasure to him to take her in to dinner.

‘Now we’re only waiting for Carlotta. Why can’t she be in time, I wonder?’ said the loud, harsh voice of Lady Farquhar. ‘You would think—wouldn’t you?—that a

woman who has to speak at meetings at a given hour would know the value of punctuality. I can't make it out, and the trouble is that she'll come down smiling presently, as if nothing in the world mattered. Then nobody could scold her. Have you a captivating smile, my dear?' she asked, suddenly swooping down upon Christine. 'If you haven't cultivated it already, you'll have a chance to-night to study the best model. Here she comes.'

Christine involuntarily stood up and looked towards the side staircase which a tall imposing figure in black was descending in a leisurely fashion, as if a few minutes more or less were of no importance in a country house.

Christine's face paled, then flushed, and her eyes positively shone.

When Mrs. Prentice, smiling in the very manner presaged by her hostess, caught sight of Christine she paused amazed on the lowest step of the stairs.

'You, you! Is it possible that this is what has become of you, Christine?'

She pressed forward, took both Christine's hands, and kissed her with a demonstrativeness of affection which surprised the minister and did not please him.

'So you two know one another? We haven't time to redd it up here,' said Lady Farquhar. 'Will you take Mrs. Grier, Ludovic? Mr. Grier will take Mrs. Prentice as probably they would like to make one another's acquaintance. The rest of us will sort ourselves out as seems best.'

They were ten in all, and Grier found himself at the bottom of the table between Mrs. Prentice and his hostess, who devoted herself to her companion on the left—a very deaf old gentleman to whom she had to bawl to make herself heard.

'This is very strange,' said Mrs. Prentice, turning her keen eyes searchingly on Grier's somewhat forbidding

profile. 'How long, may I ask, has my young friend been your wife, and why did she not let me know what had become of her?'

'I'm sure I couldn't answer that, Mrs. Prentice. We were married last March——'

'Last March! And had you known one another long before that?'

'Several years.'

Grier spoke jerkily, and with evident effort. Christine, in an agony of unrest, watched her husband's strained expression and was hard put to it to reply to the well-meaning, innocent observations of her kindly-intentioned host.

She had the feeling that there was something sinister in that meeting, and her nerves became quickly strung to the highest pitch.

'Well, you have won a prize, Mr. Grier. Your wife is a woman in a thousand. I mean she is not cast in the common mould,' she said keenly, unable to make anything of this dour Scotsman who did not seem to have a smile nor a light word in his whole repertoire.

'I'm fully aware of that, Mrs. Prentice,' he answered, and she looked up from her soup-plate, trying to gather from his face what she could not gather from the tones of his voice.

'Don't speak as if it were a matter for condolence,' she said, a trifle maliciously. 'She has great gifts. She's very beautiful to begin with and she has vastly improved.'

'I am glad to hear that.'

'But I can't understand this marriage yet. I thought the last time we met and talked together that matrimony was the one theme furthest from her thoughts. That is how women cheat one another, Mr. Grier. As I explained to Christine, they go off at a tangent when you least expect it, and so our ranks are in constant need of replenishing.'

'Your ranks?' said Grier politely and inquiringly.

'Christine hasn't told you anything about me, then? I'm one of the leaders of the Woman's Movement, and I thought last time we met that perhaps I should have the satisfaction of enrolling your wife among us. But I suppose that's out of the question now, eh?'

She smiled upon him with a little archness of expression which he fully understood, but did not respond to.

'My wife's duties lie in another sphere,' he made answer stiffly.

'Oh yes. But it's possible to do one's duty in any sphere and still spare a little sympathy and help for those outside,' she said spiritedly. 'I suppose the primitive ideas prevail here, though I have a very good friend and supporter in Lady Farquhar.'

'Eh, what's that, Carlotta?' said the old lady shrilly. 'Trying to convert Mr. Grier? You needn't trouble. He's the bluest of the blue, and he has a mother who would refute all your arguments for the suffrage in a few telling sentences. Wouldn't she now, Mr. Grier?'

Grier smiled.

'My mother certainly has little sympathy with that sort of thing.'

'That sort of thing, Carlotta!' repeated Lady Farquhar in evident enjoyment. 'That's how your outrageous views are estimated by the average man. We are in a state of heathen darkness in the Glen of the Ford, Mr. Grier, and Mrs. Prentice has come to convert us all. Do you think we could have the school for a demonstration?'

'That's a matter for the School Board entirely, Lady Farquhar,' replied Grier, his gravity unimpaired. 'But I think they are not very particular about the purposes for which they grant it, and a word from you would go a long way.'

'Better than ever!' cried Lady Farquhar in glee. 'Now you have met your match, Carlotta,' she added,

bending forward. 'A mere man who has no doubts at all that the weaker sex was predestinated to darn the stockings and bring up the babies!—Predestinated—that's the word. We're strong on doctrine in the Glen of the Ford, aren't we, Mr. Grier?'

She had a caustic tongue, and she would have her fun even when its indulgence left a sting. Mrs. Prentice had a larger nature, and she saw that the subject had been pursued far enough.

'My cousin has small reverence for any cause, Mr. Grier,' she said, flashing her beautiful smile on him like a beam of the sun. 'But tell me about your wife and her connection with the Glen of the Ford. I suppose this is the place she mentioned to me in which she had an interest and a house. Her father painted many of his pictures here, did he not?'

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CHAPTER XVI

THE CANDID FRIEND

It was a lengthy dinner of the old-fashioned sort, and when the ladies at last trooped out to the hall-place, Mrs. Prentice immediately claimed Christine, laying a detaining hand on her bare arm as they passed under the arch of the dining-room door.

'My dear, I can't tell you how surprised and interested I feel to meet you here of all places in the world! Why, I have been visiting here off and on for the last ten years—very often in the late autumn, however, when I suppose you would have gone from your summer quarters.'

'Are you related to Lady Farquhar, then?' asked Christine breathlessly.

'She is my cousin, and we saw a good deal of one another in our younger days. You know she has been married to Mr. Farquhar for only eleven years.'

'I did not know. When I used to come to the Glen with my father, we did not know many people. We always had Edinburgh friends about us,' replied Christine, as she followed Mrs. Prentice to the farther side of the great hall where an inviting settee seemed to lie in wait for them out of reach of listening ears.

Christine was looking radiantly beautiful. The flush was high in her cheeks, her eyes shone with a suppressed excitement, but a little jerky movement of her hands as she adjusted her scarf about her shoulders indicated nerves on edge

'Come, tell me here and now why I have never heard from you, and why you took the most momentous step in a woman's life without so much as letting me know. I somehow had a very different idea about you. I at least was interested.'

'Oh, so was I in you, but things seemed to be forced upon me, don't you know,' said Christine feverishly. 'When I came back to the Glen my uncle died suddenly—was drowned in the loch, in fact—and I seemed to be left a forlorn creature with no choice left to me.'

'This big husband of yours with the deep eyes and the iron will made himself indispensable, I suppose, at the time, and you felt you had no alternative. It was an unfair advantage to take.'

'Oh no,' replied Christine quickly with the woman's natural desire to defend her action and her choice. 'I was quite willing, I assure you, and the marriage is what my father wished.'

Mrs. Prentice, with her head slightly on one side, studied the girl's sweet profile attentively and read her soul like an open book. She had a wonderful intuition and a heart so truly kind that it would not wound, even when to wound was the easiest course.

'Well, he's a big, handsome man, and he has character, which one always admires in a man. We hate weaklings. A little austere he may be—but I haven't come all these years to Scotland for nothing, and I begin to understand and appreciate the national idiosyncrasies. But tell me, how do you order your life in this quiet glen? What outlet have you for your undoubted powers?'

'No outlet,' replied Christine unexpectedly. 'None at all.'

'But you must find one, my dear, and that speedily.'

'I am seeking it. I have begun to write. I carry my tablets to the moor and try to scribble down my thoughts, but all my expression hitherto has been inadequate.'

'Or you think so. Tell me, did you ever know your father satisfied with any picture he painted?'

'Oh no. He used to cover each picture up on the easel for days at a time and become a prey to the deepest despondency, when every one else—even the most competent judges—assured him it was a fine piece of work.'

'There you are! This divine discontent is the hallmark of the truly fit,' she said, patting Christine's arm. 'I hope you have a wise counsellor and sympathiser in your husband. One can get so much inspiration from one's immediate environment.'

'I have never told him anything about it. He does not even know that I have the desire to write. I am sure he would not approve of it. He holds the old-fashioned ideas about women, Mrs. Prentice.'

'Ah, but part of your life-work must be to imbue him with the new ideas, my dear. I am sure you are making a mistake. He is an intellectual man, Christine, and would appreciate your aspirations. I counsel you to confide them to him without delay. Let me give you a word of advice—there is nothing a man resents more than hearing from others about his wife's achievements and desires. He wishes—and that is natural—to be their fountainhead.'

'Oh, but that is impossible!' cried Christine. 'I mean, my desire to write has nothing at all to do with him. It has always been there. I used to write little poems for father, and old legends of the hills, and he loved them; but that was different.'

Mrs. Prentice was not in the least puzzled, she gauged the entire situation with unerring correctness, and her soul was filled with a yearning unspeakable over the girl at her side who was predestined to suffering as surely as the sparks fly upward. She would seek to avert part at least of that suffering by counselling her against wilfully increasing it.

'This is not a good place to talk in, Christine. I see my cousin getting a little uneasy,' she said, sitting back stiffly. 'Where and when can we meet again to discuss this matter? It is worth talking over, and, believe me, dear child, it is in the right spirit I would seek to counsel you. I have thrown over the traces myself—as they vulgarly say—but it is the last, the very last thing I would counsel any woman to do—you least of all. And I greatly fear from what you tell me, but most of all from your expression, from an indefinable something about you, that the seeds are already sown.'

At that moment their hostess walked towards them.

'You are frightening this poor child into fits, Carlotta,' she said severely. 'I can see it in her eyes. Never mind her, my dear. Carlotta is a crank and has always been. Half of what she says is nonsense, and the other half is heresy. Pay no attention to her, but come and talk to me. I am a comfortable person without any mind, and I'm so well satisfied with the conditions of women's lives—the theme Carlotta is always hammering at—that I have had two husbands and would have another, if necessary. Come.'

Christine rose a little reluctantly, yet inwardly relieved. Her heart was in a turmoil of excitement, and the fevered colour still blazed in her cheeks.

Lady Farquhar, very comforting and motherly in her manner, made Christine sit beside her near the fire and sent Lady Pairman to talk with Mrs. Prentice. Lady Pairman's daughter Adela, deep in a book, looked across sympathetically at Christine from the depths of her lounge chair. They were the only young things in the house, and Adela herself was afraid of Mrs. Prentice.

'That's my niece Adela,' whispered Lady Farquhar. 'Doesn't she look demure and prim? But she had five offers last season, and she seems in no hurry to accept any of them. These demure, kittenish girls who have no

ideas on anything in particular, but who know how to do their hair, and put on their clothes, are the sort men like best. A man never likes to be made to feel inferior, and why should he? A little diplomacy is all that's needed, and a woman has all her own way. Flattery is her most powerful weapon. You may take it from me as gospel, my dear, for I have had a good deal of experience.'

'But why should it be necessary?' asked Christine frankly. 'I mean, why can't people be themselves and speak the truth?'

'Are you one of the truth-tellers?—an uncomfortable sect who advocate living day in and day out in a palace of glass? My dear, you may take it from me—and I'm sixty-five—that, while we all admire truth in the abstract, it is the last thing we want to practise. We have to go on deceiving one another and ourselves from the cradle to the grave.'

Christine laughed aloud at this, and the musical sound caught Grier's ear as he came out of the dining-room in the rear of his host. When he saw where Christine was he looked relieved. He had fully expected to find her monopolised by Mrs. Prentice. Lady Farquhar beamed upon the gentlemen and invited them to find places as near the fire as possible.

'We ought to have a little music now. That big husband of yours looks as if he could sing. I admire his voice in the pulpit—it is so sonorous. Do you sing, Mr. Grier?'

'No, unfortunately, Lady Farquhar. I am afraid I have very few drawing-room accomplishments.'

'You leave these to your wife—and very properly too. Will you sing for us, then, my dear?'

'Yes, if you desire it. But I have nothing of importance—only the old ballads my father loved. He gathered up some of the verses from the old people in the Glen and set them to his own music.'

'And you sing them! How altogether delightful! That is a piano behind the screen. I always have it placed there to be convenient, because we never use the drawing-room in this house. I don't know why. Do you play your own accompaniments?'

'Yes.'

'Then, will you sing now?'

'If you like.'

She rose at once with a grace that was sweetly natural, her readiness surprising no one more than Grier, who was not even aware that she could sing. She accorded so perfectly with her luxurious surroundings, and she was so conspicuously at home among the folks of a higher station that the sudden ache at his heart quite overpowered the natural pride he might have felt in a wife so acceptable and so gracious.

He stood back, while Captain Cassilis escorted her to the piano and adjusted the stool for her. The hum of talk ceased when she struck the chords, and, after a moment, her voice, trembling a little, but very clear and delicious, filled all the spaces of the hall and laid an immediate spell upon their hearts.

It was really an exquisite voice with that wonderful, sympathetic, penetrating quality which peculiarly fitted it to interpret the music of her choice.

Christine's voice had never been trained. Otto Breck, possessing a fine ear for music, preferred it in its natural state, he himself giving it all the training he deemed necessary.

All the folk-songs of the glens and the waters are set in the minor key, and the one Christine had chosen was no exception. She seemed to forget her audience and was for the moment the love-sick maiden bewailing the loss of her lover in battle, and again the crooning mother who sees her sons go forth one by one from her side and knows she will see them no more. Captain Cassilis, standing

closely by watching her face, wondered whether a really happy woman could infuse such profound and moving pathos into song. After the first thrill Grier seemed to hold his breath. Music had never had any part in his life, but he was by no means unaffected by it. The thing that surprised and held him most, however, was the fact that his wife possessed such a gift and that he now heard her singing for the first time. A little resentment mingled with his natural pride, and when the chorus of thanks and applause followed the momentary silence as she rose, his voice was silent. Christine glanced at him timidly, seeming to ask whether she had done well. Mrs. Prentice observed the glance and pondered on its significance.

'Why, you are a great acquisition! I have never heard anything so exquisite,' said Lady Farquhar. 'Arthur Cassilis, you are a judge of music—can you beat that in your London halls?'

'We can't. In its way it is perfect, and here it has its fitting setting,' returned Cassilis heartily enough, and Christine, flushed and a little excited by the unwonted praise, laughed nervously and begged them to say no more.

During the few minutes that remained before their trap was announced she was much made of, and Grier heard Lady Farquhar impressing upon her that she must come often to the Round House while they were there. When he came forward to say good-night, she shook a much-beringed finger at him playfully.

'You naughty, clever man, how did you ever dare to entice such a splendid creature to your Manse of Strathardle, and how are you ever going to live up to her?'

He shook his head. It was the question he had been asking himself in the last half-hour.

Lady Hope Farquhar herself helped to arrange the scarf about her young guest's head and gave her a kiss at parting.

When Christine crossed the hall to say good-night to Mrs. Prentice a hurried word was sufficient to make an appointment for the morrow. A few minutes later, her husband and she were driving down the short avenue once more and ere long came out on the open road whereon the moonlight lay in a white splendour.

'You enjoyed the evening, Christine?' Grier asked at length when she seemed in no haste to break the silence.

'Yes, I think so. I am not sure,' she answered a little unsteadily. 'I did not quite expect it would be like that.'

'You did not know Mrs. Prentice was in this neighbourhood?'

'Why do you ask me that? Would I have kept such a thing from you?' she said with a wounded note in her voice.

'You have kept many much more precious things from me, Christine,' he answered almost passionately. 'Your gift of song, for instance. You almost stunned me to-night—was I not worthy even to share that?'

She was silent a full minute. Then she spoke in a low voice but quite clearly—'Alan, I think you don't quite understand. I don't do things on purpose. There simply never was an opportunity for speaking about my singing. Your mother does not like music, and I have seen it bore you in other places. Besides, we have no piano.'

'There will be a piano before I am many hours older,' he said between his teeth.

'Not this year—we can't afford it,' she reminded him. 'What a dear, funny old lady she is—Lady Farquhar, I mean. She was so very kind to me that I feel quite ashamed.'

'And you will go again, I suppose, when we are asked?'

'Yes. I could even go to the Round House without being asked, I think.'

'Lady Hope Farquhar might not like that. Big folks

are kind in their own way, but they don't like presumption.'

'But why would it be presumption? I am every bit as good as they are, and so are you. I assure you I should not have any feeling of that kind, and I know that she was quite sincere.'

'Well, I dare say you know better than I. It would be the last thing I should think of doing.'

'You make yourself too cheap, Alan. I thought that to-night. You are the minister of the parish, and you are intellectually superior to all the men who were there. That is the only thing which matters.'

Her rare appreciation took the edge off his raw discontent, but her next words renewed his vexation.

'How did you get on with Mrs. Prentice?'

'I prefer not to say,' he answered, and silence again fell between them like a shadow of the night.

Next day Grier had to attend a Presbytery meeting at the neighbouring town and left the Manse soon after breakfast. At eleven o'clock Christine met Mrs. Prentice on the Ardle Moor just at the cross-roads between Cleish and the Round House shooting.

'Isn't this a glorious morning? The heather is quite dry—let us sit down. Did you meet Lady Farquhar? Her carriage dropped me here and she drove on to Cleish.'

'That was the opposite direction,' replied Christine. 'I can't believe it is really you, Mrs. Prentice. You don't seem kin to Lochardle somehow, and I could not sleep for the wonder of it last night.'

'You got home all right? How is your husband this morning?'

'Quite well. He has gone to Kinellan to a Presbytery meeting.'

'You do not accompany him to his clerical functions, then?'

'Oh no. It is a meeting of ministers to discuss parish

and church affairs. Women do not attend, and even if they did, it is the last thing I would think of doing.'

Mrs. Prentice sat down on a boulder, planted her shepherd's crook in the heather, and from under the brim of her flop hat regarded the young face before her with a mingling of feelings.

'This life suits you physically. I never saw a more perfect and beautiful embodiment of health than you are at this moment. I hope it indicates a sound mind in a sound body.'

'I hope so. Did you, or do you, see any signs of mental aberration?' inquired Christine amusedly as she pushed back a strand of hair blown by the fresh breeze to her eyes.

'I shall not tell you all that I see, but I want you to take a sensible interest in the pursuits of your husband, Christine. It will be worth your while.'

'They don't interest me in the least. I have never had any part or lot in churches.'

'But what about duty? Is he not disappointed?'

'If he is he has not said so,' answered Christine, but she turned her head away. 'And I warned him well beforehand. He was willing to take me with all my faults, and I told him that I should always be myself—that even in Strathardle Manse I never could conform.'

'Christine, I perceive what is the most serious thing of all—you don't love the man.'

'Do I not? What are the signs and symptoms of this love of which I have heard and read and which, it seems, can completely change destiny and even nature?'

'We needn't enter into that. I say you don't love the man, or there would be none of this talk. My dear, my dear, how did you come to make the very mistake against which I warned you?'

'I told you last night. I have nothing to add to what I then said, and we get on quite well.'

'That will not suffice now or at any other time, and it will be worth your while to reconsider the situation and see how you are going to mend it.'

Christine sat silent a moment, looking down on the brown heather tops. Then she said in a low voice, 'Mrs. Prentice, this is the very last advice I expected you to give me.'

Mrs. Prentice nodded.

'I know what you expected. It was that, because you had a little discontent, I should counsel you to take irrevocable steps. You are thinking of my case. That was vastly different. You have married a clever man who needs a woman like you to develop him on the right lines. He has a big heart, and when his eyes are opened, he will take big views. I married a parochial person who made self the pivot of existence and who stifled the soul beside him with a senseless cruelty. There is no parallel between the cases. You have a chance to make a success of a marriage whose failure or success is trembling in the balance. I beseech you, pleading as one woman to another, don't throw that chance away.'

'But Alan and his mother are so narrow!' cried Christine in a great burst of anguish. 'God in heaven, between them they will stifle my soul—not in cruelty, but in blindness! I cannot bear it! You must help me, or I can't be responsible for the future.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE COUNSELLOR

NEXT day happened to be the October Fast, still kept rigidly in the Glen of the Ford. Grier returned from Kinellan accompanied by the Rev. Dr. Logan, one of the fathers of the Church and Moderator of the General Assembly who had promised to assist him at his Communion services. To receive this distinguished ornament of the Church stupendous preparations were made in the Manse, the spare bedroom being swept and garnished, though its habitual condition was one of immaculate cleanliness. Every bit of muslin and lace was renewed, and the best that the linen cupboard could furnish brought forth for its adornment; towels trimmed with exquisite crochet lace which, Christine learned, Effie's nimble fingers had wrought, and an embroidered bed-spread of fine linen from the same hand. Mrs. Grier surveyed the finished picture with a conscious and pardonable housewifely pride.

'Yes, it is lovely,' assented Christine. 'It looks almost too good to sleep in, and I hope the old gentleman will appreciate it. However does Effie find time to do all this lovely work? It must take ages.'

'She's very clever at it, and she finds time because there isn't a lazy bone in her body. None of the Griers are lazy.'

'Except the foreign importation,' said Christine with a laugh. 'Well, is there anything else I can do this morning?'

'Everything is done but the scones, and that I *can* leave to Annie Donald,' replied Mrs. Grier. Then she looked at Christine with a sudden wistfulness. 'Christine, surely you will go to the Communion on Sunday, or Dr. Logan will not know what to make of it, and it will be very humbling for Alan.'

'Don't ask me, dear. It would be much more humbling for him if I went, feeling as I do.'

Christine spoke so gently that Mrs. Grier had courage to go on.

'I wish ye would let Dr. Logan speak to you. He's a very godly man besides being clever. And he's the chaplain to the Queen, and they say there is nothing she likes better than a lang crack wi' him when he goes to Balmoral to preach. He was there last Sunday.'

Christine shook her head and escaped the subject by running away.

She felt interested in the visitor when he arrived, however, an elderly man of noble presence and with fine features on which sat a certain kindliness and majesty which duly impressed her.

His greeting was a fine mingling of courtesy and fatherly kindness, and when he blessed her, she was conscious of a curious soft pang at her heart.

'I never met your father, my dear, but I knew his work of course. A great artist such as he was belongs to us all.'

Her face flushed softly, her eyes shone, and her demeanour, which had been slightly distant, instantly altered. Grier had never seen her manner so perfect, or her charm so strikingly displayed as at the table when they sat down to the late dinner that with some travail had been prepared for their coming. Dr. Logan addressed a good many of his remarks to Christine and she responded readily, always finding the fitting word. Mrs. Grier listened with a sort of chastened approval, though it must

be said that she thought Christine presumptuous at times and forgetful of the status of the man to whom she spoke with all the freedom of an equal.

When Grier and his guest retired to the study for a smoke, which was the one personal indulgence the Doctor permitted himself, he laid his hand on Grier's shoulder with a genial touch.

'I must congratulate you, Grier, on your beautiful and attractive wife. She not only possesses charm, but she has intellect and heart. You are a very fortunate man.'

A glow gathered about Grier's heart and some part of the load lifted from it. This man, one of the princes of the Church, possessing many statesmanlike qualities and, moreover, a citizen of the world, could not mistake Christine's character and personality. Perhaps, after all, her faults were only part of the waywardness of youth, which experience would tone down if not utterly eradicate.

Dr. Logan possessed the rare gift of being able to enter at once into the life of any house he visited and of making its affairs his own in so far as tact and sympathy permitted, and he now proceeded to question Grier as to his progress with the work which he had been largely instrumental in putting in his way. He was encouraging and stimulating, and when Grier went upstairs that night rather late, it was with a sense of awakened and conscious power.

Christine was in bed, sitting up with a shawl about her shoulders reading a pamphlet, while others were scattered on the bed. He glanced at them, and the frown gathered deep and fast on his brow.

With a wave of his hand he swept them to the floor.

'You mustn't read that pernicious rubbish, Christine. What have you to do with free-thought and all its lies? I will not give such reading house-room!'

He walked to the fireplace, laid the papers in the empty grate and set them alight with a match. She did

not speak, but she tossed him the leaflet she had in her hand and watched the flame until it died down in a little heap of charred embers. Grier, after a few uneasy steps across the floor, sat down on the front of the bed.

'Wife, why will you rend my heart like this? Don't you see how sharply you wound me—how keenly I suffer?'

'I too suffer,' she answered quietly. 'I suffer more than you know.'

'But why? I have done my best, dear—have I not? The fault has been that I have been too indulgent all along.'

'I am not a child—even if you are a schoolmaster,' she answered drily. 'I am a full-grown woman entitled to my own opinions and to liberty of action and speech.'

'You take it, Christine,' he responded sadly, 'and without the smallest regard for decencies or the feelings of others. But I will say that I am obliged to you for being so charming to Dr. Logan to-night. It made a great difference, and I was by no means easy in my mind as to the reception you would give him.'

'It was quite easy to entertain him—he is charming, a perfect beau-ideal. But then he has lived and seen the world. Did you explain to him about this naughty child and ask his advice how to treat her?'

Grier rose, wounded, and turned away.

'I shall never discuss you with any outsider, Christine, whatever happens. You are too sacred to me for that.'

She was rebuked, for she had not observed the same fine reticence. She had spent a whole hour that very morning discussing her husband's shortcomings with another woman.

'What about to-morrow? I hope you will attend the service or, at least, part of it. I don't want to have the scandal of the house laid bare just yet to the Moderator. It will damage me in every quarter.'

'I am going to lunch at the Round House at one o'clock,' she answered quietly.

'Have you been there to-day, then?'

'No.'

'Did Lady Hope Farquhar write and invite you?'

'No. I met Mrs. Prentice outside, and she brought me Lady Hope Farquhar's invitation.'

'You have seen Mrs. Prentice—she has incited you to all this?' he asked with the storm gathering again in his eyes.

'I have seen her, but she didn't incite me to anything. She lectured me quite properly and almost as severely as you or your mother could have done.'

Grier listened, wholly unconvinced. Rightly or wrongly the conviction was rooted within his mind that Mrs. Prentice was entirely responsible for the greater part of Christine's contradictoriness, and nothing would persuade him to the contrary.

'Of course you will not go to the Round House tomorrow,' he said decidedly. 'I will myself write a note and send Donald over with it first thing in the morning. Lady Farquhar ought not to have asked you. She will understand. It simply means that she has forgotten that it was the Fast-day.'

'Even if I don't go to the Round House I may not go to the service, Alan. I will speak to Dr. Logan—he would understand. Why can't you take large views like him? Now, he could win a woman to do anything, just because he is so lovable and so wise.'

'I forbid you to speak to Dr. Logan, Christine. He will not stay the night here anyway, and I will see that you have no opportunity of speaking to him. He is going for the rest of the week to Castle Howard, and will drive over here for the services on Sunday.'

Christine made no reply, but lay down as if worn out and anxious to sleep.

THE COUNSELLOR

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In the early grey morning before any one was astir she was awake, and dressing hastily, ran down and went out by the garden door at the end of the hall, the bolt of which slipped back easily and made no noise to disturb the sleepers in the upper rooms. In spite of his cold anger and evident perturbation her husband had slept soundly all night whilst she had scarcely closed an eye.

It was very beautiful and still on the moorland road, and the silver sheen on the loch, glittering through the mystic veil of the morning mist, laid a soothing hush upon her spirit while her appreciative eyes revelled with all an artist's keen enjoyment in the incomparable panorama unfolded before them. There was such purity and peace everywhere that it seemed hard to realise what a sordid thing life can become in the hands of men. Grier, who had all the habits of the student, usually sat far into the night, and he had never in all the years which he had spent in Strathardle seen the sunrise on the hills or the morning glory on the loch. He did not know what he had missed.

Christine was not aware how long she had lingered on the moor while she was gathering strength to return comforted to her home. As she neared it she saw in a bend of the road a tall figure with a plaid about its shoulders, which she had no difficulty in recognising as that of their guest.

She approached to meet him quite eagerly. The mere fact that he was on the road in the early morning, lured by the beauty of solitary places before the new day had been soiled or worn, filled her with a quick joy.

'I thought I heard some one go out about an hour ago,' he said as he raised his cap to her. 'Had I known who it was I should have made more haste to be out of doors.'
'I am sorry 'f I disturbed you, Dr. Logan,' she answered a little shyly. 'I have always been an early bird. Sometimes my father used to paint before sunrise, and I always

went with him. Is it not lovely here—so still and peaceful?’

The old man took his cap from his head and looked round with reverence.

‘The heavens and the whole earth declare the glory of the Lord. We shall have a splendid Fast-day, and the country folks will flock in from the hills. It is what I like to see. It is a good many years since I was in Strathardle at a Communion season—not indeed since your husband has been minister here. You like the life in the Glen, I hope. The country certainly has many advantages which town-dwellers miss.’

‘But there is life in towns!’ cried Christine so unexpectedly that he paused in the road and glanced at her with a little apprehension. There was a note in her voice that he could not mistake.

‘You find it a little dull perhaps?’ he said anxiously. ‘And I can understand that in winter you are very much cut off from—what shall we say?—the ordinary commerce of life which helps most of us along. But you have compensations surely? The heart that finds joy in scenes like these can never be wholly without resource.’

‘I am never dull in the accepted sense,’ she replied. ‘But—’

‘But what? Unless you are in a hurry come up the road a little way with me again. I think we’ve a good half-hour till breakfast. But I know what country manses are,’ he added with a smile. ‘Perhaps you have to take your part in preparing it.’

‘Oh no. I never do anything of that kind. My mother-in-law looks after everything,’ she answered and turned with him willingly enough.

He noted her reply, and it gave him the key to the situation as he thought. But presently he discovered that the mischief was more deep-seated than any caused by insufficient occupation.

'I want to tell you what a high opinion I have of your husband. His gifts are of a very special order, and he has never dissipated his powers in that eager haste to get on which has spoiled so many promising careers. Here he is content to nourish his gifts which will yet bring him to the forefront. We had a long talk last night, and I must say that he delighted me.'

'What are his special gifts?' asked Christine. 'Forgive my ignorance, Dr. Logan, but Mr. Grier does not talk to me very much about his work, though his mother has told me he is writing a book.'

'Is that all the length you have got?' he asked with a little twinkle in his eyes. 'Well, perhaps the subject-matter of the book would not interest you very deeply, but it will be a valuable addition to the literature of the Church. We have too little of it. I looked over what he had done last night, and it pleased me very much. But he must make more rapid progress, and you will help him, will you not?'

'I! Oh, I don't know anything about churches—' and care less' she was about to add, but she restrained herself.

Suddenly she stood still in the road and looked frankly at him.

'Has Alan told you what a heathen I am, Dr. Logan—that I do not care for kirk services and never go to them unless I am obliged?'

'No. When he spoke of you at all it was in a way that showed me how deep is his regard for you,' was the quiet reply.

'Well, I'll tell you myself then. I am a pagan. I don't believe in anything really, and I don't see why we need all this formalism and compulsory observance when we can worship as our souls dictate under an open sky, where there is nothing to come between us and God. It does not make me a better woman—it makes me a worse one—to go to church, but I cannot get my husband to

understand that, nor can I pretend to be other than what I am. What he would like is that I should stifle my feelings and conform for decency's sake. That is how we stand.'

Dr. Logan, though he felt surprised, suffered no sign of disapproval or dismay to manifest itself in his demeanour. He could discern in the woman by his side a strong, difficult nature, a passionate woman's heart ripe for guidance in the right way, and he prayed for wisdom to speak the fitting word.

'My dear,' he said with great gentleness, 'the human soul in its pilgrimage through a world of stress has to pass through many phases of emotion and experience. The true religion is generally revealed to us in times of deepest need. Tell me, when your father left you was there no uplifting of your heart in the direction whither he had gone?'

'But where has he gone, Dr. Logan? He did not know himself. Does anybody know?'

'If he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ he is with Him now in glory, we cannot doubt.'

'But I don't think he believed anything. He never went to church, though he was the best man I ever knew—or ever will know. I feel as he did about these things, though I am far more selfish and stubborn. What I wish to ask is this, Dr. Logan. Has Alan the right to force these church observances on me, and if I refuse to be coerced, am I to be considered outside the pale?'

'Let us look at the matter from a lower standpoint. If you love your husband as he loves you, you would wish to be a help to him and not a hindrance. Your common-sense will teach you that for you to openly flout and despise the ordinances to which his calling pledges him and in which his reverent soul delights must create confusion and end in disaster. Married life could not indeed long stand such a strain.'

'I wish I had not married,' she said gloomily. 'It was a mistake.'

'No, no. You speak in haste, and because you are depressed at present. My counsel to you, my dear, is that you conform as far as in you lies. Possess your soul in patience and wait upon the Lord. We never know whence or when our Pentecost will come. You have taken certain vows upon yourself. You cannot, without detriment to your nature, disregard the letter or spirit of them. And remember that all life is a discipline, and that just in so far as we accept that discipline and bow to it, we shall find happiness. No human heart ever yet found peace in the open road of rebellion against spiritual laws.'

'There is my husband coming, Dr. Logan,' said Christine a little hurriedly. 'You will not mention to him what I have spoken to you?'

'Surely not. I would not so poorly interpret my own function, my child.'

'To-day I had an invitation to lunch at one of the shooting lodges and I want to go,' she went on quickly. 'Must I stop at home and attend the Fast-day services?'

'Most certainly you must. There isn't the shadow of a doubt as to the direction in which your duty lies on this particular day.'

Christine had scarcely composed herself when Grier came up with them, pleased to see his wife and their guest apparently on such good terms. Dr. Logan's tranquil manner betrayed nothing, nor gave any hint of the sharp passage that had marked the last ten minutes, and they returned to the Manse together, talking of commonplace things.

At the gate they met Donald, the minister's man, on his bicycle, and the minister stopped and purposely spoke in a clear and rather loud voice.

'Make sure that the note is delivered into Lady

Farquhar's own hand, Donald. Don't leave the Round House without seeing that it is.'

Christine passed into the house with her colour slightly heightened, and her head in the air. But there was no more said about the Round House, and to Grier's great satisfaction he found Christine dressed at twelve o'clock ready to accompany them to church. She even went decorously into the Manse pew, and sat with his mother throughout the entire service.

Dr. Logan had been invited to give a Communion address by way of preparing the parishioners for the solemn services of the coming Sunday. But his words were winged towards the slight, erect figure in the Manse pew, and to her they were spoken. He went a little out of his way to dwell upon the difficulty certain souls found in humble acceptance of the great doctrines of revealed religion, and pointed out that the only way to peace was to lay aside all fighting accoutrements, and simply wait for the voice of God in the evening's cool.

It was a wonderful sermon, spoken with an impassioned earnestness which left no doubt in the minds of his hearers that he spoke of the things he knew. Christine drank in every word, but she made no remark and she avoided any further speech of a private nature with their guest, who left soon after the afternoon meal for his drive across country to Castle Howard. Before he went, however, he took the opportunity of seeking a private word with Grier.

'I am an old man, and I will take an old man's privilege, Grier, to meddle with your private affairs,' he said kindly. 'It is against all my principles and habits, but I had a little talk with your wife this morning, and I perceive that things are not so well with you as they might be—as they will yet be, please God.'

'So it is to you I owed the satisfaction of seeing her in the Manse pew to-day?'

'Well, partly. This is a crisis which will require all

your arts and all your grace to master and to engineer, Grier. Your wife's nature is a difficult one. She possesses the artistic temperament developed to a degree. She cannot be coerced, but she can be reasoned with, and she can be impressed by the beauty of harmony. You must not be harsh with her. That would be quite fatal, I am sure.'

'But what of the scandal, Dr. Logan? Already my wife's Sunday vagaries are the talk of the parish.'

'Let them talk meanwhile—it will not harm them or you. One other thing—I don't think she is fully occupied, or that she has sufficient responsibility in the affairs of the house. You know what a high respect I have for your mother, as every one must who knows her, and I admire your filial discharge of your duty to her; but your first duty is to your wife meanwhile, and I think some other arrangement should be made, whereby you would have your home to yourselves for a time, your wife taking over the full charge of the Manse affairs. That is a suggested material remedy for a spiritual crisis, but I am very certain it would be a step in the right direction.'

Grier listened in silence, not knowing how to answer, yet in his heart of hearts convinced that the Moderator was right.

But how to alter it? His mother, now wholly convinced that she was more than ever indispensable to the Manse, and reconciled to Christine's presence, would get a great shock were she informed that in the interest of all parties she must find another home, if only for a time.

A sensitive man and averse to changes, Grier viewed the situation with dismay.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GULF FIXED

FOR the first time in several months Grier sought speech with his mother concerning his wife. Christine invariably went to bed early and rose early—an excellent habit, of which her mother-in-law would doubtless have approved more heartily had she made better use of her time.

When Mrs. Grier entered the study as usual to bid her son good-night she was surprised when he asked her to close the door and sit down for a moment.

'Mother, how do you think Christine is getting on here?' he inquired without any attempt to disguise his anxiety. 'Do you think she is more contented?'

'Yes indeed, I think she is. It was a comfort to see her at the service to-day. I did not feel sure about her yesterday. And at least it kept us right with the Moderator.'

'It was wholly due to him that she was there,' was the unexpected reply. 'Now you will not misunderstand me, mother, when I say that it is absolutely imperative that Christine should take a more active part in the housekeeping—in fact that she should take it over altogether now.'

Did the Moderator say that?' inquired Mrs. Grier in some bewilderment.

No, but he thinks as I do—that she has too little to do.'

May be you would like me to leave the Manse, Alan,' said his mother, quickly wounded. 'I'm ready to go any day, if I am no longer needed.'

'Mother, don't misunderstand me,' said Grier hastily. 'This is a far more important matter than you have any idea of. It affects our whole future—Christine's and mine.'

'And what about mine?' she asked jealously.

'I shall never forget what you have done for me. God forbid that I should, but my first duty is to my wife now.'

'Then you wish me to leave,' said Mrs. Grier with dignity. 'I never thought this would come from you, Alan, and I don't believe Christine has any hand in it.'

'You are right as far as she is concerned. To have you leave the Manse is the last thing Christine wants, I believe. You save her a lot of care and work. But she must not be saved in this way any longer. She must understand that there are certain duties and responsibilities to be realised and performed; she will never realise them so long as you are here.'

'She is improving,' said the old lady eagerly, for her heart quailed at the prospect. 'You would be surprised if you knew how willing she is to help now, and she is even quite interested in the cooking, and she allowed Annie Donald to give her a lesson in the making of scones the other day. I think you must have a little longer patience, Alan. I warned you well beforehand, but at the same time I must now be just to Christine.'

At another time Grier might have smiled at this ingenuous reasoning, but his mind was very full of gloomy forebodings. He therefore only impatiently shook his head.

'You quite miss the point, and in spite of all you say we must make a fresh arrangement for a time at least. Couldn't you go to Effie for three months say—or even till Christmas—that's just two months and a half? You yourself suggested such an arrangement before Christmas came.'

'What would I do in Effie's lodgings at Lanark?' she asked dully. 'We never agree at the best of times, Alan,

and to be shut up there in two small rooms—it would be terrible. I like Christine better than Effie. She never worries me, and her tongue's aye gentle. I am sure I will never leave the Manse wi' her will.'

'I know that only too well, mother,' said Grier desperately. 'That's why I have spoken to you first. When I tell you that it may be our last—even our only—chance of happiness, will you understand? There's a battle to be fought and we must fight it out by ourselves.'

'Nonsense, Alan, you are spyin' ferlies,' she said sharply. 'And if ye canna live at peace wi' Christine, it just shows that Effie must be right after all and that I have spoiled you. Gie the lassie time, and she'll come all right.'

She left the room quite abruptly with that word, as if afraid of further discussion, leaving Grier, of course, wholly unmoved. Strong in his belief that he had in his own power the whole solution of the difficulty he broached the subject to Christine next morning when he found her tying up some branches of a rose-tree that a wind in the night had blown down.

'Christine, I think it would do my mother good to go on a long visit to Effie, and I think she should go soon before the weather gets too wintry. Then she can come back with Effie at Christmas. I think you said she had promised to come to us then.'

'Yes, she promised. But Lanark is the last place on earth your mother wants to go to, Alan, and especially at this season of the year and with her rheumatism! Besides, she and Effie don't get on. I don't believe she wants to go at all.'

'As a matter of fact she doesn't, but I want her to go, and go she shall, Christine. The time has come for you and me to be alone.'

'What do we want to be alone for?' she asked calmly. 'I should hate it mortally. I like your mother, and we get on together. We can now bear even the long silences

cheerfully. Why should you want to upset everything just when we are getting along comfortably?'

It was a strange speech for a bride of a few months' standing, and for the moment Grier felt himself at a loss. She continued tying up the rose-tree as if that was the first business of existence, and he could not but admire the contour of the arm bare to the elbow, which held back the refractory branch.

'I think it quite time that you should occupy your own position as mistress of the Manse, Christine,' he said with that singular lack of tact which many good persons display at critical moments.

Christine simply laughed.

'I don't bake and darn and dust enough to please you! Well, I shall see that your mother rests more and that I do my full share. Go away, Alan, and don't look so horribly glum. It doesn't become you in the least, and there's hardly anything on earth worth pulling such a face about. Now I'm going to get ready for the Round House. I suppose I may keep my engagement to-day as a reward of merit.'

Grier's face fell still further at this announcement.

'I don't want you to go there, Christine, and you ought not to want to go,' he cried unreasonably.

'Why, if I was unreasonable yesterday—though I don't admit it, mind—you are much worse to-day. Tell me, pray, why I may not go to the Round House? Is it on account of Mrs. Prentice?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I may tell you quite frankly, Alan, I want to see as much of her as possible while she is here. She will remain only a few more days at the Round House, and, I assure you, you are vexing yourself with quite groundless fears. She is a model adviser. If you could only hear her your one wonder would be that I do not profit more by her good counsel.'

The softness that had crept in spite of herself over Christine under the genial and delightful influence of the Moderator had wholly disappeared and left her apparently harder than ever.

'I don't want you to go, Christine, and that should be sufficient,' he said rather sourly. 'Besides, they will not be expecting you.'

'That doesn't matter. Lady Farquhar gave me an open invitation, so one day is as good as another,' she replied. 'Besides I want to explain to her that I should have come yesterday had I been allowed.'

'Christine, you would never say that! It was quite sufficient excuse even for Lady Farquhar that it was the Fast-day and that we had Dr. Logan at the Manse.'

She smiled, and when Christine smiled in a certain way, she could be very aggravating. Grier coloured a little, understanding that the smile was caused by his reluctance to give offence to the hostess of the Round House, though his wife did not express her opinion in words. Hitherto of placid temper, simply because he had had very little to cross or ruffle it, he was astonished—even a little dismayed—at the sudden heat that sprang upon him, urging him to hasty speech.

'Christine, understand that I wish you not to go to the Round House to-day.'

She dropped the branch that she held in her hand and turned to him, quite undisturbed.

'Why, Alan, nobody has ever spoken to me like that before! I have always gone where I wished. How would you like if I were to say to you, "You can't go to Kinellan to-day, or you spend too many hours in the study? Come out and give me the key?" Would you obey quite cheerfully?'

'The cases are not parallel, Christine. A man is different—he may do things a woman may not, I mean.'

'And why may not a woman do things?'

She looked at him quite straightly as she asked the question, quite conscious of its significance and deciding that perhaps the battle had better be fought now, and the final issue be determined between them.

'Your common-sense should tell you. A woman's duty lies at home. Most good women find happiness at home, and are not always seeking outside for some new thing. Don't look at me like that, Christine! I don't want to be harsh with you, God knows. It hurts me far more than it hurts you. But I am afraid lest I fail in my duty and that through that failure our last state may be worse than our first.'

She stood straight up on the gravel path on which the sere leaves of autumn had been scattered by the night wind, her hair a little ruffled on her brow, but her eyes perfectly serene.

'I want to understand you quite, Alan. You would deny me the liberty of action you claim for yourself. You want to order my life as well as your own. Don't you see that that is quite impossible? Moreover it is not honest, for I told you exactly how I felt about things, and warned you how I should behave. I can't change my very self just to suit you. I don't like your way of life. Much of what you do seems to me quite futile and useless, but I have never asked you to alter it—at least, not seriously. And there must be fair play all through—don't you see?—if we are to get on at all.'

'But I don't see where or how it is going to end, Christine. Are we to go on all our lives pulling in opposite directions and never coming any nearer to a solution of our difficulties?'

'As to that, I don't know,' she made answer. 'All I know is that I can't conform to your mother's pattern. I admire her, and I think I am beginning to love her, but we are as opposite as the poles. The sooner you compre-

hend that your wife and your mother are two different women, the better it will be for you.'

She turned back to her rose-trees as if the matter was settled, but though she was outwardly calm her heart was beating a little rebelliously, and hot words burned very near her lips.

The futility of unconsidered speech, and the danger of unnecessary words had often been forced upon Christine since she had come to Strathardle Manse, and she had learned a great deal of self-control. It was not very natural to her, however. In the old days at the Eyrie it had been the habit of each member of the coterie to speak out that which burned in his heart, thus preventing all possibility of further misunderstanding. Christine, however, had learned that there are different standards of conduct in the world and that the method which had secured harmony in her former condition of life created only confusion in her present one. The prospect of a never-ending succession of years spent in such petty and undignified squabblings certainly appalled her and gave an expression of absolute dismay to her beautiful mouth.

'Then you will go to the Round House to-day to lunch, in spite of me, Christine?'

'I will go to the Round House, of course, Alan, not in spite of you—as you express it—but because I don't see the shadow of a reason why I shouldn't. If you could give satisfactory reasons why I shouldn't go it would be different; and I must have something to relieve the grey monotony of my days. I have not been a night out of Strathardle Manse since I came to it, and though I have not grumbled, I begin to feel its limitations irksome.'

Though there was a certain measure of truth in her words, she had no idea of the proportions to which Grier's jealous imaginings could swell them. He turned away with a frown as dark as night on his brow, and locked

himself in the study, not to work—as his mother fondly imagined—but simply to pace the floor and fight with himself regarding what seemed to be the hideous problem of his life.

He loved Christine. Never had she seemed more adorable than that very morning when, standing in the path, she had openly defied him. But something of the spirit of the old reformers awoke in him—a stern spirit which forbade him to indulge his natural affections at the expense of his conscience. His wife was in a perilous mood. She could not be allowed to become a law to herself in all the relations of her life. It was his absolute duty to guide and direct her to a better frame of mind—yet how? That was the problem which he had to solve. She would never storm, or rage, or sulk, but she would calmly meet his disapproving gaze and ask him to explain himself, which was not always easy. He would not, even in that moment of supreme misery, face the true reason for the widening gulf between them—that his wife's heart was cold to him. Love indeed is the only worker of miracles we have left in this mundane sphere, and Christine's heart was not yet in love's thrall. She was a woman who would make unconditional surrender when she gave love admission to her heart.

From one of the bedroom windows Mrs. Grier had watched this little colloquy and, when she had heard her son shut himself in the study, she ventured out into the garden for a word with Christine. She found her standing against the gable-end of the house with the yellowing branches of the rose-tree about her, her arms hanging listless by her side and her eyes upon the loch, a narrow glimpse of which could just be obtained from where she stood. Her face wore a blank expression, and though she gave a little start when the step sounded on the gravel, she did not smile. Her movement indicated that she resented her solitude being broken in upon at that moment.

It seemed as if nowhere within the limits of her home could she be secure from interruption and interrogation. Mrs. Grier looked at her appealingly, and had Christine been a little less absorbed by her own indignation, she might have been touched by an appearance of perturbation visible in her husband's mother.

'Christine,' she said a little eagerly, 'I saw you and Alan talking together very earnestly. Has he said anything to you about—about my leaving the Manse?'

'Yes,' answered Christine almost fiercely, 'and, though I did not say it to him, I say it to you—if you go I go too. I will not stay here without you.'

A fluttering spasm crossed the old lady's face.

'Oh my dear, I never thought to hear you say that! And if you'll let me stop I'll do more and more for you. I couldn't live there at Lanark with Effie.'

Christine suddenly became aware of the tragedy and pathos of the life of this woman who had staked her all upon one slender possession. She laid her firm, strong young hands on the frail shoulders, and she looked straight with her sweet, fearless eyes into those which hard work and secret tears had dimmed.

'Dear, I don't want you to go. I will never, never let you go! I could not live here without you, and I am grateful for your kindness, though sometimes I feel cross and out of sorts. I'll try to be different; only you must promise not to leave me, whatever Alan may say. If you do, something dreadful will surely happen.'

'No, no, my dear, I winna go,' said Mrs. Grier, trembling with an altogether unwonted emotion which her natural habit of repression tempted her to crush down. Yet even through the emotion there sounded a note of triumph, for surely now Alan would be convinced that she was really wanted at the Manse.

'To please the minister we will sort out the work together, you and me: but I'll take the heavy end of it,

Christine, as I have ever done, and we'll all get on fine and be as happy as the day's long.'

Like a bird of passage a little wintry smile flitted across Christine's grave mouth, and the episode of unwonted emotion was over.

About an hour later Grier, watching from the study window, saw his wife leave the Manse, sending back Tyke with his tail between his legs, and he understood that she was on her way to the Round House. For him the day's work was spoiled. He did not speak a word at the early dinner which he and his mother partook of alone, and she, wise woman, knew when to hold her tongue.

Her husband had been a man of dour and passionate temper, though quick and generous to make amends when his anger was past, and thus she had learned the wisdom of silence. She did not mention Christine's name.

'Mother,' he said as he rose from the table, 'I have written to Effie at Lanark this morning to tell her to expect you on Monday.'

'But Christine does not want me to go to Effie, Alan. She told me this morning that she would not stay here without me.'

'Christine is not the judge of what is fitting or best in the Manse, mother, nor can we allow her to be so. I must be the head of the house, or there will be confusion worse confounded. You need not misunderstand me. I don't want you to leave. I intend indeed that you shall end your days with us, but in the meantime something to put an end to the present state of matters must be done.'

'You are making a mistake, Alan. Let me——'

'If it is a mistake I shall take the burden and the consequence of it,' he interrupted with a wave of his hand, 'and I don't want to say another word about it.'

Thus overpowered and set aside, it was needless for Mrs. Grier to protest further.

How strangely were the tables turned! The minister's mother was now his wife's chief champion, nor was the motive of her championship altogether a selfish one. The sterling worth of Christine's nature—in spite of its undisciplined waywardness—had impressed itself upon the heart of her husband's mother, where it lay hidden like sweet leaven to await the fulness of time.

In the course of the day, just after darkening, a groom on horseback brought for the minister a note bearing the Farquhar crest. When he read it he simply crushed it up in his hand and threw it into the fire.

'They are keeping Christine at the Round House for a few days, Lady Farquhar says, and she wants a bag sent back with some of her things. I have a good mind to refuse. But there is no use proclaiming our sorrows from the house-tops, so please get them ready.'

This occurred on the Wednesday evening, and on Friday afternoon between luncheon and tea Christine arrived home, having been driven in the luggage brougham which was conveying Mrs. Prentice to the station to begin her journey south.

When she entered the Manse she found it quite empty save for Annie Donald, who came forward to receive her joyfully.

'Where are your master and Mrs. Grier, Annie?' she asked.

'Mrs. Grier is away to pay a visit to Miss Effie, and the minister has gone as far as Aberdeen with her. He will maybe not be back to-night, he said, but would maybe stop at the Manse of Inverarity w' Maister Caldwell. If he wass not back by aicht o'clock I wass to go for my father to sleep in the house.'

'So,' said Christine, and she took a long breath as she crossed the threshold and stood there a moment, watching the receding carriage rolling through the dust of the white road.

'Annie!' she called. 'Do you know anything about the trains at Linboyne station going either south or north?'

'Yes, ma'am, there's one for somewhere at the back of six o'clock, I know.'

Christine smiled at the vagueness of the reply, which yet sufficed. 'Somewhere' was the goal of her hope at present—somewhere that would mark an unbridgable distance between herself and Strathardle Manse.

'Go down to the Inn of the Ford, Annie, and bid them have the wagonette up here by five o'clock, and then get me some tea and a new-laid egg.'

'You will not be leavin' too, whatefer,' asked Annie wistfully, wholly at a loss to account for all these sudden journeyings which were convulsing the ordinarily quiet routine of the Manse life.

'Yes, I am. Go quickly, Annie, and don't ask any questions.'

She spoke in a tone which the damsel had never heard her mistress use before and which reduced her to abject silence.

Contrary to her expectation and greatly to her relief, her master arrived home late in the evening, having driven from the Junction station nine miles distant in order to sleep the night under his own roof. Though he did not admit it to himself, it was fear lest Christine should have returned in his absence and be alone in the house that had hastened his home-coming.

There was a feeling of strain in the air which sadly disturbed his usual composure and which augured ill for the peace that he hoped for. He tried to brace himself for the coming battle—the scene which was inevitable when Christine learned what he had done.

But it would surely be for the best in the end. She loved strength in man or woman, and she would respect him for what he had done.

The blank silence of an empty house met him at the

door, and when Annie Donald came running out of the kitchen to greet him he perceived that she had been crying.

'Your mistress?' he asked eagerly.

She nodded as she dashed another tear from her eyes.

'She hass been pack, sir, but she hass gone away again, whatefer.'

'Gone away! Where?'

'In the train—maype the train to Linboyne; and she hass taken a lot of clothes wi' her in a pig trunk, and said that maype, most likely she would nefer pe pack.'

'Nonsense, Annie Donald. You are letting your imagination run away with you,' said the minister harshly. 'She has only gone to pay a visit in the south and will not be longer than a week or ten days. Go and get me something to eat, and try to be as sensible a girl as you can till she comes back.'

He went into the study and shut the door, looking round in frantic eagerness for some message or token of farewell. But there was none.

A desolation and a silence as of death settled down upon the Manse of Strathardle.

CHAPTER XIX

THE OUTSIDE VIEW

CHRISTINE arrived in London on the evening of the following day.

She was very tired, and she simply directed the porter to convey her luggage into the hotel at Euston where a room was immediately made ready for her. She had eaten nothing all day except a slice of thin bread and butter at her afternoon tea, and was conscious of utter exhaustion which, however, a good dinner quickly dissipated. The hotel dining-room was fairly full. There is nothing more amazing and suggestive than the constant stream of the travelling public hurrying hither and thither, one unit disappearing only to be replaced by another. Christine lingered a good while at the table, there being nothing to hasten her departure. She had had a long quiet day in the train, but had found herself curiously disinclined to consider her situation or the consequences likely to result from the hasty, ill-considered step she had taken. Her uppermost feeling—though that was likely to be an evanescent one—was relief at finding herself free to act and think and speak as she felt inclined. She had escaped from bondage—that was her one exultant thought. What she was going to do with her future she had no idea—she supposed something would turn up.

The dining-room presently began to thin, many hastening away to spend an hour at some place of amusement; by half-past eight it was almost empty. Christine

ascended in the lift to her bedroom, and after a moment's hesitation put on her hat and the long coat of Harris tweed which covered up her black silk dress. She had changed her gown on entering the hotel, hating the idea of sitting in the tweed skirt and flannel blouse in which she had travelled. Gower Street was but a stone's throw distant. She decided to take a walk as far as the hotel of Mrs. Prentice and inquire whether she had yet arrived from Scotland. She was by no means sure, however, that Mrs. Prentice would approve of her appearance there or of the step she had taken.

She descended the stairs leisurely, fastening her gloves, but on the bottom step she suddenly paused, for there in the vestibule in front of her was her cousin Ted talking to a man whom she had observed joining the train at Preston. She would have hastened back, for she had no desire just then to see any of her relatives, but it was too late. Ted had seen her and, with an expression of mingled surprise and pleasure, he advanced to greet her.

'Christine, whatever are you doing here? I can't believe the evidence of my own eyes. But perhaps you're returning from your honeymoon. Is your husband with you?'

Christine laughed. The idea was so supremely ridiculous that she could not help it.

'No. I'm quite alone, and I'm going out just now, Ted. Don't let me keep you from your friend.'

'He isn't a friend. He's only a business acquaintance whom I had to wait in town to see to-night, as he's going on to Lyons to-morrow morning, and can put a bit of business through for us. I have finished with him. Just wait till I say good-night. Don't think you're going to escape from me like this. Why, we've simply ached to see you!'

He stepped back and had a hasty colloquy with the man who somewhat interestedly watched them, wondering who was the distinguished-looking lady with whom

young Hedderwick seemed to be on such terms of intimacy. Then Ted, familiar with the interior of the hotel, drew Christine into the drawing-room and sat down in front of her. He was looking well, bronzed and happy, and had an air of manliness which struck Christine very forcibly.

'Now will you please tell us why you treated us all so beastly badly, Christine?' he said in the old boyish fashion. 'Of course I know we're rather a rum show, but we thought you didn't like us so badly on the whole. The mater was awfully cut up when she heard quite accidentally through somebody in Edinburgh that you had actually got married without so much as letting us know. Why did you do it?'

Christine shook her head.

'I never know why I do things, Ted. I begin to think I got cast into this world by mistake before I was ripe or ready for it. I'm always doing the wrong thing—I believe I'm doing it now.'

Ted regarded her with a sort of tender ruefulness. She was looking very beautiful, though thinner and older, and she had certain curves about her mouth he did not remember to have seen before.

'I've forgotten his name, Christine; in fact I don't believe we ever heard it. What must we call you now, when we have to be on our best behaviour?'

'Mrs. Grier,' she answered in an even monosyllabic tone which conveyed nothing.

'Christine Grier—not nearly so pretty as Christine Breck. The names don't run well together. And how do you like it up there, summer and winter, eh?'

'Not at all.'

'Oh, come, it's very nice in summer. Don't speak like that, because after all you needn't have done it, you know, unless you had wanted to, and nobody wished you to leave London. You might have been living at the Laurels yet—the admired of all admirers.'

'Don't let us talk any more about my affairs, Ted. Tell me about yourself, and Aunt Lizzie, and all the rest. How are they?'

'Everybody's ripping,' said Ted enthusiastically. 'I tell you you wouldn't know the place. But say, why don't you come out to-night? I'll take you. We can drop in at Tulse Hill on the way out and see Edie. That's where I live. Yes—we've got the rippingest little place there, and Edie's very well and the little maid. You never saw such a bouncer as she is! They're simply crazy about her at the Laurels—even the governor condescends to take notice of the baby.'

'Then it's all right, Ted?' said Christine a little wistfully.

'Why, yes. Of course it is—couldn't be better. That was a good turn you did us, Christine, for our happiness all dates back to the time you came to us. There are hardly ever any rows now, and it would do you good to see the governor and the mater. Why, she looks simply years younger, and is far prettier than Betty.'

'Oh, I am glad! I was always overwhelmed with the possibilities everybody neglected. It is delightful to hear that everything is going on so satisfactorily.'

'Well, come on and let me take you out. If you're here alone, it's my duty to take you. The governor and the mater would feel it awfully if they knew you preferred a hotel to their house and that you were here all alone. But er, why—why are you here alone, Christine?'

'Because I am.'

'But where's Mr. Grier?'

'At Strathardle.'

'And what have you come up for then? It seems queer for a woman to be careering about alone without any object. Have you an object, Christine?'

'At present I have no object.'

Ted looked still more perplexed and distressed and rose uneasily to his feet.

'Of course I know all right that I shouldn't ask questions; but, hang it all, I can't help doing so, Christine, I'm so awfully fond of you. We all are, and Edie's simply dying to get to know you and to thank you. I want to tell you something, dear. We called the baby Christine, because we both felt that we owed everything to you.'

A sudden mist swam before Christine's eyes, and she rose hurriedly and resumed the fastening of her glove.

'That's right. We'll get out as quickly as possible,' said Ted tenderly. 'I know all the trains. You needn't bother about your stuff. I can see about getting it sent to-morrow. My mother will lend you all you need for to-night. I tell you they'll be simply wild with delight when they see me bringing you in.'

Christine finished the last button of her glove and then straightened herself and looked her cousin full in the face.

'Ted, dear,' she said very gently, 'you mean it kindly, I know, and, believe me, I do appreciate your kindness far more than I can tell you to-night. Things are all wrong with me, and at present I don't see any chance of their being righted. But nobody can help me. I have got to fight my own battle, and must be left alone just now, do you understand?'

Ted nodded.

'I understand of course as far as you have told me, but don't say it's going to be always like this. I suppose it's some trouble with the husband, but it will blow over. Why, it must—you haven't been married more than a few months.'

'It seems like a hundred years. But whatever happens to me, Ted, I can never make the troubles of my private life a subject of talk, as I have heard other women do. I am sure that is wrong and not even decent.'

'I quite agree with you of course, but there's no harm in a friend or a cousin in the background willing to help and able to hold his tongue, is there, Christine? We simply can't let you drift. None of us can—you did too much for us, and it has really hurt us awfully that you never answered any of the letters.'

'I haven't behaved well, I know. . I haven't, but I was always hoping that things would improve and that I should learn to be like other people. Don't look so miserable, dear boy. I'm really not worth troubling about, and I am quite able to look after myself.'

'Oh, I don't doubt that in the least,' he answered impetuously. 'But it isn't the thing, I tell you—it isn't the thing, Christine. Any woman will tell you that when once you are married you and your husband have got to stick together unless some terrible tragedy has happened?'

His slightly interrogative air provoked a reply.

'Only the tragedy of the infinitely little.'

'Well, then, it *will* come right. Come out and see mother. She's a dear little soul when anybody's in trouble—you know she is. She'll understand everything in a jiffy.'

'Ted, I can't go out to Aunt Lizzie to-night. I simply can't. I'm not ready. I have got to face this thing by myself. Let us say good-night now.'

'I won't budge an inch, Christine, until you promise that you'll let us know where you are, and that you won't disappear like a wraith the moment I leave you.'

'I'll promise to write, and even to come and see your wife in a day or two, and when I promise I don't break my word, Ted. You may rely on me.'

'Well, that's something, but I don't feel comfortable in my mind, Christine, and upon my word I can't bear to leave you here.'

'You must. And one thing more—you will promise

to say nothing about having seen me to your father. I know what he is. He will not give me a moment's peace, but will be wanting to heap all sorts of kindnesses on me. I don't need them—not yet at least—and I do promise that if ever I should be in need I shall remember where to find my friends.'

'That's something, but not enough,' said Ted.

'Write down your own private address there, see, on my tablets,' she said, removing her chatelaine, 'and don't worry any more about me. Nothing is going to happen to me, and above all, don't forget that you have promised me to say nothing to them at home.'

'Christine, where were you going when I saw you just now?'

'Out to pay a call at Gower Street. It's only nine o'clock now. I can go yet.'

'Well, I'll walk so far with you—not up to the door, if you don't want me to. Don't think I want to play the spy, dear. I know how you would resent that, but you belong to us, you know. Your father was my mother's brother. Nothing can alter that fact, and there is something after all in the tie of blood.'

'We choose our friends,' murmured Christine inconsequently.

'But our relations are given us for our sins,' added Ted unexpectedly. 'Yes, I've heard that before, and it's only cheap cynicism. I'm sure you'll find that the family is the only solid foundation after all.'

Christine shivered as if a cold wind had passed over her.

'Is Ted also among the prophets?' she said, a trifle mockingly. 'Who would have thought matrimony would work such a change?'

Ted did not say anything, but he stood aside to let her pass out by the door. The night air was very cold, and a fine rain was beginning to filter through the fog that had gathered after dusk. It softened the glare of the

lights in the Euston Road, and there was something in the throng and life which stirred her pulses and gave a certain spring to her step.

Her tall figure, carried with the grace which is peculiarly the heritage of the Highland woman, attracted several admiring glances. Ted took her arm and walked by her side manfully with the air of one who would protect her at every hazard. He was more seriously distressed concerning her than she knew; in spite of his youth he had a good knowledge of the world and sufficient experience to know that the position in which his cousin had placed herself was altogether impossible. He even had it in his mind that he would write before he slept to the unknown husband in Strathardle, who, unless he were wholly unlike any other human being, must now be in the throes of a maddening anxiety.

'I suppose you don't forbid me to tell Edie that I have seen you?' he said as they approached Gower Street Station.

'Oh no, so long as she does not talk to the others.'

'She won't. Edie's a ripping good little sort. Will you come out to Tulse Hill to-morrow afternoon and see her and the baby? If you will, I'll call for you here at the hotel about four o'clock and take you out. I can easily get away.'

'I think not to-morrow—my own plans are too immature,' replied Christine hurriedly. 'Everything depends on the lady I visit to-night in Gower Street, but I'll write to-morrow without fail.'

'All right,' said Ted, but the cloud did not lift from his face.

Suddenly Christine stood still.

'I'll say good-night here, Ted, and thank you for all your kind interest in me. It has been very nice seeing you again, and I take back what I insinuated about relations. They are a comfort after all.'

Ted stood still and planted his strong young foot on the kerb and squared his shoulders. He was about to say something which Christine might resent—and probably would resent—with all her might.

'Christine, don't get angry, but may I ask you something? It means an awful lot to you, you know. There isn't another fellow in it, is there?'

Christine laughed—a laugh so genuinely and spontaneously merry that his ghastly fears were scattered like the mist before the rising sun.

'No, no, dear; I'm not that sort. Don't you ever forget that your cousin Christine though a fool in many ways will avoid that particular brand of folly.'

Ted joined in the laugh, though a little shamefacedly, and, somewhat comforted, suffered her to depart. Christine continued her way along Gower Street until she arrived at the door of Whitefield's Hotel. She pushed the swing-doors open, and seeing no one about, tapped on the glass sliding-door of the little office. A girl, eating her supper from a small table in the background, came forward and pushed back the slide.

'Do you know if Mrs. Prentice has returned from Scotland yet?'

'No, miss, not yet; but we expect her in the morning. What name, please? She is very particular about getting the names of the people who call to see her.'

'It is of no consequence. I will call again in the morning. You need not even mention that I have been here.'

'Oh, all right, miss, thank you,' replied the clerk and closed the slide.

As Christine turned to leave the place some one else came through the swing-doors—a woman whom she recognised as one of the guests at the luncheon party, but whose name she could not recall. The recognition was mutual, and the tall, angular Miss Braithwaite held out her hand, though without much cordiality.

'I remember you, though I have not heard your married name. You are married, I think?'

'Yes. I am Mrs. Grier.'

'Are you staying here, then? I have come to see Mrs. Prentice on important business. Perhaps you can tell me whether she has returned.'

'She has not, but she is expected to-morrow,' replied Christine. 'I have just been inquiring.'

'Ah, then, I may go back the way I have come. These frequent absences of our president are rather trying, as there are always cases arising which require either her advice or decision. But she is not at all strong, though she looks so. She requires to look after her health.'

'I think she is very well now. I saw her in Scotland yesterday.'

'Yesterday! But you did not travel down with her?'

'No. She left before me—on Thursday evening, I think. I have travelled from Edinburgh only to-day.'

'I see—which way do you go?'

'I am staying at the Euston Hotel.'

'I live at Hammersmith and have to go from Gower Street Station, so we can walk together,' said Miss Braithwaite as they descended the steps. 'I suppose you don't take any active interest in the suffrage, now you have married and settled in Scotland?'

'Oh yes. I am as interested as ever,' replied Christine vaguely. 'How is the Cause getting on?'

Looking at Miss Braithwaite's eager face, she remembered that Mrs. Prentice had not so much as mentioned the Cause during any of their discussions at Lochardle, the only allusions to it having been in the good-natured chaff of Lady Farquhar at the Round House. She could not help wondering, with one of those sudden intuitions which seldom err, whether Mrs. Prentice used it chiefly as a means wherewith to fill up an otherwise

empty life or as a cover to a deeper interest in something else.

'The Cause itself is progressing of course, as it is bound to do. Its triumph is only a question of time, but we are torn by internal strife at present, and the last two meetings of the Executive have been very stormy. We really can do nothing without Mrs. Prentice, who is so calm and wise and who yet is dominating without being offensive. So few women are that. I myself always lose my temper, or I should speak oftener than I do.'

'But to lose one's temper in a good cause might be beneficial to that cause,' suggested Christine.

'Well, I don't know. A certain amount of enthusiasm of course is needed, but a level head and a calm temperament are best. Mrs. Prentice unites all the necessary qualities in her own personality. That is why she is quite indispensable, and she has a sense of humour which most women lack and which places them at such disadvantage in fighting with men.'

Christine inwardly smiled at this matter-of-fact statement and at the assumption that warfare with the opposite sex was not only inevitable, but that it pertained to the natural order of things. She was glad she had met this odd woman, whose obvious devotion to the Cause was written on her eager, anxious face.

'We had simply chaos at the meeting on Thursday, and Lillah Carteret adjourned it till we could have the president with us. It was not the regular procedure of course; but Lillah doesn't care a fig for procedure. She merely said that we were fools and could do nothing without Mrs. Prentice. Of course it is Lillah's money that counts, and we can't afford to offend her; otherwise she is of no use. I am feeling rather anxious because just of late Mrs. Prentice has seemed to be somewhat lukewarm.'

'Are there many rich women interested enough to give funds to the Cause?'

'Well, we have several, but rich women are of course conservative. It is the poor ones who have nothing to lose who provide the enthusiasm. Lady Carteret has a cousin—also a rich woman—whom we all very much want to join us. She is exceedingly clever, and she has most of Mrs. Prentice's qualities plus the riches. Her name is Mrs. Ovenden of Polesden Abbey, near Medwyn.'

'Why, I know Mrs. Ovenden, but I was not aware that she was interested in the Cause.'

'She is—after a fashion, but she says that the time isn't ripe for Women's Suffrage and that, when it is, its coming will be as irresistible as the roll of a big wave to the shore sweeping everything before it. But she ought to remember that it is the little cumulative currents which unite to create the big wave. We represent the little currents, and we can't afford to be idle even for a day.'

'I am very interested to hear about Mrs. Ovenden. Does she come much to London to attend meetings?'

'She is often staying with Lillah Carteret, and on these occasions she attends our meetings. Sometimes she even speaks, and then everybody is charmed. She doesn't get on very well, however, with Mrs. Prentice. She did not quite approve of her behaviour at Medwyn, I believe. I suppose you know the story of Mrs. Prentice's life?'

'Yes; and I have met both her husband and her daughter at Medwyn.'

'Have you indeed, and what is your opinion then?'

'I am wholly in sympathy with Mrs. Prentice.'

'Are you? Well, of course I have never been married, and I am not likely ever to be asked in marriage, but it seems to me that there's something wrong somewhere. I am not an extremist on every theme, and though it is necessary to fight men on the suffrage question till they are educated up to conceding the vote, I don't believe in

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attacking the foundations of society of which marriage is the chief. As far as the status of women is concerned, to abolish marriage, or to treat it as anything but a life-contract, would quickly reduce that status to confusion. If a woman makes a vital mistake where marriage is concerned she has to abide by it, just as a man has. Lots of men have got bad matrimonial bargains, and they have to make the best of them. But here's my station. Good-night, Mrs. Grier. If you see Mrs. Prentice before me to-morrow, pray tell her that she must get a private secretary to relieve her of the drudgery of the work and that she must stay in London more than she has hitherto done, or we shall go smash sure as I stand here.'

With this laconic deliverance she disappeared into the bowels of the Underground, leaving Christine to ponder on her words.

Twice in the space of one hour her action had been condemned by persons occupying totally different points of view. What next?

CHAPTER XX

THE COLD LIGHT OF REASON

CHRISTINE passed a bad night. A room had been given to her which overlooked the entrance to the station, towards which there seemed to stream an endless succession of traffic all night long, not ceasing even with the dawn of another day. Confused cries, mingled with the hoarse roar of continuous traffic from the outer road and the shrill whistles of arriving and departing trains, filled the air. Towards morning she slept somewhat heavily from utter exhaustion, and she awoke about nine o'clock, unrefreshed. When she turned upon her pillow to face the new day she had to confess herself without much hope. She had taken an irrevocable step; and what its consequences were likely to be she could not even imagine. She only knew that for the moment she felt herself a forlorn and stranded unit on a cold, if not altogether unfriendly, shore, the sense of exultant gladness over her freedom having entirely vanished.

Realising, however, that this was a mood which must on no account be indulged, she rose hurriedly and began to dress. A time-table, hanging on a peg at the back of the door, informed her that the Scotch night-express had come in a couple of hours ago. Mrs. Prentice was probably breakfasting in her own rooms by now or engrossed with her correspondence. It was a brighter and better London because she had come back to it. Christine had not realised till now how largely her future had woven itself about Mrs. Prentice.

She felt better and stronger as she dressed, and when she went down to breakfast, cheerfulness and courage had wholly returned. Once more life was interesting and full of possibilities. At Strathardle the days had been marked by intolerable monotony, their precious hours being dissipated in a thousand unconsidered trifles.

At breakfast she was asked whether she gave up her room or would stay another night, and was thus reminded how completely a bird of passage she was.

'Another night certainly; but is it necessary to answer this question every morning?' she asked a little sharply.

'Oh no, madam; but we are likely to be very full up to-night and rooms have to be reserved. It is the week of the Cattle Show.'

'Oh yes. Well, I reserve my room for to-night. A little later in the day I shall be able to tell you about to-morrow.'

It was about eleven o'clock when she descended from her room once more, fully dressed, to call on Mrs. Prentice. It was a fine winter morning with an astonishing mildness in the air for December. The sun was shining, and a cheerful activity, born of the pleasant conditions of the weather, seemed to distinguish the throng of the streets. After the silence that could be felt on the Ardlie moors Christine was exhilarated by the bustle and the stream of life surrounding her. Her pulses answered to it; she also would be busy and full of affairs. It was the surest way to content, if not to absolute happiness.

Her thoughts were fairly pleasant as she walked the short distance to Whitefield's Hotel where, in answer to her inquiry for Mrs. Prentice, she was at once invited to walk up.

'I can announce myself, thank you,' she said to the German waiter, dismissing him at the bottom of the stairs.

She ascended quickly, but hesitated a moment outside

the door of the sitting-room, her heart beating a little more rapidly. So much would depend on her reception. If by any chance Mrs. Prentice should fail her in this crisis what would become of her? It was a thought she dared not dwell upon, and somewhat hastily she tapped at the door, entering before the clear voice within had accorded permission. Mrs. Prentice was already busy with the masses of her correspondence, but she turned her head expectantly as if quite ready to receive callers.

At sight of Christine she leaped to her feet.

'You here!' she said almost shrilly. 'Why, what does it mean?'

'That I have followed you—that is all,' replied Christine, not certain whether to be gratified or repelled by her reception.

'But I don't understand. I thought we agreed that you should continue your quiet life in Strathardle and devote yourself to the work of your pen. What is the meaning of this sudden escapade?'

'*Escapade* is an undignified word,' said Christine, biting her lip in momentary chagrin. 'Won't you sit down and let me explain?'

'That is what I am waiting for. Believe me, I am seriously disturbed by this step of yours, which cannot be a wise one, unless indeed'—and here her eye brightened—'your husband happens to be with you, in which case this sudden journey can be quite simply explained.'

'Oh no—I came alone. Let me explain.'

Mrs. Prentice sat down, wheeling round her desk-chair for the purpose. Christine drew a chair to the middle of the floor just opposite her, and proceeded to talk. But the story she had to tell, viewed in the light of cold day and from another person's standpoint, seemed strangely unconvincing. There was not, indeed, any story to tell.

'So you see, I am neither needed nor wanted there,' she said triumphantly. 'I am an alien element resented

by both, and it was the greatest kindness to all parties, besides being the only course open to me, to withdraw myself at once and for ever.'

'At once and for ever,' repeated Mrs. Prentice slowly as she rested her penholder on her lips. 'Child, you can have no comprehension of the meaning of the words you use.'

'Oh yes, I have. I made a mistake—that was all—and I am doing my best to rectify it. It was quite wrong for me to marry Mr. Grier, feeling as I did. He had no place in his life for any wife—least of all for me, who am such a disturbing element. The only remedy is for me to efface myself and let the old order of life return to the Manse.'

'That is impossible, and even while you are saying it, Christine, you know that it is impossible.'

'Well, but he has not kept to his bargain,' she said hotly, and her colour began to rise in face of this unexpected opposition. 'He wishes to mould me into a different pattern—to make me a household drudge like his mother. It can't be done, and rather than go on quarrelling about it, I have left him. Life is made hideous by discord. I will not live where it is.'

'Then you will have to leave this world, my dear, for discord is its chief element. But tell me, is he a consenting party to this extraordinary arrangement?'

'No. I have just told you that when I left he was away with his mother, whom he has driven from what is really the home of her heart. It will kill the old lady. But he does not care, and that indifference shows him to be a thoroughly selfish man and not at all what a preacher or a leader of the people should be.'

'Let us leave discussion of him out of the question altogether for the moment,' said Mrs. Prentice quietly, 'though I am bound to say that I don't agree with you. I talked with your husband only once, but, in spite of

the fact that he took no pains to make himself agreeable to me, I arrived at a very different opinion of him than you seem to have formed. Well, now that you have taken the bit between your teeth, I suppose you have counted the cost.'

'I haven't counted anything,' replied Christine frankly. 'I left because I found my environment intolerable, crippling—even degrading. It seemed the only thing to do.'

'From your point of view perhaps it was. And what was your idea in coming to London?'

'Well, to speak quite frankly, *you* embodied London to me. I should like to be near you always, and I hoped you would help me.'

'The best way in which I could help you—and the thing I should like to do—would be to drive you back to Euston and put you into the Scotch train.'

'I should come out of it again,' said Christine calmly. 'Besides, I have other friends in London.'

'I am sure of that. Wherever you go people will be interested in you, and that is why the problem of your life is so complicated. But now let us go once more over the old, old ground. You remember the words of the marriage service—"for better, for worse"?''

'They were not used at my marriage, which took place in a drawing-room and was performed according to the Presbyterian form, which does not include the service.'

'Well, anyhow there must be some formula to which you subscribed—you must have taken a vow of some sort.'

'Oh, I suppose so. There was a good deal said, but I did not listen closely. I was occupied in wondering whether my father could see me and would approve the step I was taking, mainly at his instigation.'

'Poor Mr. Grier, he deserves pity if ever man did! I

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think you have not treated him honestly or fairly, Christine.'

'Oh yes, I have. I explained everything to him and promised nothing. He agreed to take me with all my faults, and undertook to alter nothing. So it is he who has been unfair.'

'I suppose he hoped that there might be a few atoms of common-sense stowed about you somewhere, but upon my word, my dear, I doubt it.'

'You are hard on me!' cried Christine, rising rebelliously. 'I am sorry to have troubled you with my affairs. I will go now, and I will not come back.'

'Sit down, and don't be silly, child. Don't you see I am overwhelmed—positively overwhelmed—by the magnitude of what you have done. You don't realise what is involved.'

'But I do. And see how happy you are, how free and able to follow the bent of your own will.'

'I am neither wholly free nor conspicuously happy, Christine, and as I pointed out to you, my case is entirely different. Your husband is a man that any self-respecting woman could look up to even if she did not care for him, and I could conceive of many women caring desperately for him. He has everything to win a woman, and you had a great chance of happiness. You have thrown that chance away. What do you propose to put in its place?'

'I did not expect you to talk like that, Mrs. Prentice.'

'My dear, I am nearly twenty years older than you, and I have been educated in a hard school. I know what I am talking about. You have done a foolish—I had almost said a wicked—thing. Will you not go back even yet? I will go with you, if you like, and if it would be any help.'

'No no, that is the very last thing I could or would do. It would kill me with humiliation. If he wishes me

he can seek me. I will never hold myself so cheap as that to any man, even though he is—or has been—my husband.'

Mrs. Prentice looked at her perplexedly. How well she understood her point of view, how she could follow her step by step on the thorny way!

'Well, let us suppose that the step is irrevocable, though I do not take that view, remember. What is it you propose to put in the place of the destiny on which you have turned your back?'

'I have turned my back—not on destiny, but merely on an episode,' replied Christine lightly, feeling that the worst was over. 'Well, there is surely something I can do here. I could devote myself to the Cause, help you perhaps—without payment, of course. I have still the small income which I told you about before. With strict economy could I not make it do and begin my life on fresh lines?'

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Prentice, 'I suppose you could—at least you must now try. I have said all I wish to say—all indeed that I can say. I think you have been unwise and that very soon—sooner probably than you think—you will regret the step you have taken. But I don't wish to banish you from my side, and just at present, as it happens, you can be of immense help to me. I have no secretary, and look at that huge pile of stuff. What you had better do first is to return to your hotel and bring your luggage here. If you will touch that bell I shall inquire whether you can at once have a room.'

She laid aside the grave, pleading, half-tender manner, and once more became a practical woman of affairs. The change delighted Christine, and her spirits rose. There was no difficulty about the room. One on the same floor with Mrs. Prentice was offered, and terms were quickly arranged. In view of the fact that Mrs. Prentice had

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been so long an inmate of the house these were moderate. Christine saw herself with a margin left when her weekly board should be paid. But, above all, she saw herself once more an independent person with definite work to do, some call to usefulness in the world, in a far more congenial sphere than any she had moved in since her father's death. Her dreams were indeed roseate. As she was about to leave the room to fetch her luggage from the hotel, Mrs. Prentice detained her by a question.

'I suppose you left a message for your husband before you quitted the Manse?'

'No definite message,' she answered with some slight confusion. 'I told the servant I was going away for a long period—that was all.'

'You did not give any thought to his anxiety—perhaps you do not even believe that he will be anxious?'

'I did not think about that. But he will not be anxious, for of course he knows that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.'

'That is not the point, but there—I will let Mr. Grier know that you are here.'

'You will write to him?' said Christine, looking dismayed. 'I don't know that I particularly wish him to know my address.'

'I will at least let him know that you are safe and that I am looking after you. So much is due to the man, even if he were the worst husband in the world instead of being, as he is, a very good one,' she said good-humouredly. 'I know what you wish to ask—it is how I behaved in similar circumstances. Once more I have to say the case was totally different. Our arrangement was of mutual consent after years of unspeakable misery, badly endured. There was neither surprise nor anxiety—hardly even a regret on either side.'

Christine felt herself dismissed and went somewhat soberly downstairs. She had achieved the summit of all

her immediate desires, and was now practically under Mrs. Prentice's care, pledged to her service.

But the innate conviction that Mrs. Prentice disapproved of her action somewhat took the edge off her satisfaction.

The moment she was left alone Mrs. Prentice filled up a telegraph-form, and rang for a messenger to see to its immediate dispatch. It was for the minister of Strathardle, and it merely said that Mrs. Grier had arrived at her hotel, and that a letter was on the way. It was a Christian and a womanly act, for which the heart of an agonised—almost despairing—man was deeply grateful. A sentence, added as an afterthought, prevented him from setting out at once for London. That sentence was 'Wait for letter.' He did wait, and it reached him at noon next day. It was not from Christine—as he had half-expected it would be—but it was from the woman whom he had blamed in the first instance for unsettling his wife's mind.

Years after, Christine saw that letter and shed some tears over it. But it was long before she even knew that it had been written.

The letter ran as follows :—

WHITEFIELD'S HOTEL,
LONDON, *December 19—.*

DEAR MR. GRIER,—Long ere this you will have received my telegram relieving your immediate anxiety concerning your wife. I write these few lines to supplement that telegram, though it seems strange that I should interfere. This is so grave a matter, however, that one cannot be guided by the ordinary rules of conduct, which of course forbid interference between husband and wife. In a crisis much can be forgiven.

I was immensely surprised when Mrs. Grier arrived at my rooms this morning; for, when I left Strathardle two days ago it was in the belief that her brief discontent had passed, and that she was going to settle down to a fresh view of life and work. She has told me what has happened in the interval,

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and though it seems of course all very small to me, I readily understand that it was easily exaggerated by a temperament like Christine's.

I have not very much to say, and that I will say quickly. I think you should leave her here meanwhile. To rush after her will, I know, be your natural impulse, but it is necessary that she should be made to feel the brunt of what she has done, and that she should realise the value of all she has turned her back upon. Her nature, though fine and capable of great things, is wholly undisciplined, and nothing but an experience which has some bitterness in it will teach her. If you will intrust her to me for a little while I will see that, if possible, she is disillusioned regarding what she calls the independent life. It is not the life for women like her—it is only for those who have lost all else. That is the view I take. It is a life in which an unhappy woman may find solace, but not one which will ever fill up the empty spaces of the heart. Christine's heart is not yet awakened. She knows nothing of life or duty or responsibility, and she must be taught. I look forward to the day when she will return to you a better woman. Very probably you have made some mistakes in your dealing with her—the mistakes that would be natural to a man like you, educated in a certain groove and unwilling to accept new conditions. These new conditions, however, have come to stay, and all the relations of life will have to be adjusted to meet them. But the new era will not destroy home life—it will make of it a nobler, wider, and more beautiful thing. It is for that I and my comrades work. Christine will never stand the life of struggle and stress as it has been known to me and others—she craves too much for beauty and light. She will quickly learn, however, that these are to be found—not in the arena, but by the fireside and in the quiet places from which heaven is more easily approached.

I hope that I make myself clear, and that I appear to you something better than a member of a shrieking sisterhood, seeking chaos and selfish advancement, or than a mere visionary with her eyes on the clouds. I am a woman who has suffered very much—who in the dearest relations of her life had been cruelly disillusioned; and it is because I know the limitations of a lot such as mine that I will shield Christine. She shall return to you some day. Try to wait for that day.

Your silence at this juncture will be better for her than any pleading on your part. She must find herself.

Forgive the length at which I have written. One other matter, and I have done. Don't send any money. If it is required I will not fail to let you know. She has enough for necessities, and it is not wise just at present that she should live in luxury. She must be allowed to know the ugliness of life for those who have little to live upon. That is part of the price she must pay for the freedom after which she is wildly groping with both hands outstretched. Poor child, she has to be convinced that none of us are—or ever can be—free, and that the inexorable law of life is that we should depend one upon the other from the cradle to the grave.

I repeat that your wife will be safe here, and that, while I must walk warily before her, I am wholly on your side, and that whatever service I can render to you shall be rendered as whole-heartedly and faithfully as if you were my brother. This requires no thanks. It is no more than part of the daily duty knocking at the door.—Yours sincerely,

CARLOTTA PRENTICE.

Grier, wide-eyed and haggard, read that letter in the garden at the Manse and again in the study with the sheet spread out before him, conning every word as if it had been a living evangel. Such, indeed, it was to him in that moment of his desperate need.

When the old postman returned with Jess for the Manse bag, he received both a telegram and a letter. In the letter Grier poured out his heart to the woman whom he had misjudged, misunderstood, and despised.

Mrs. Prentice read it at the breakfast-table that she shared with Christine, smiled a little unsteadily, and slipped it in silence into her pocket.

'That is one difficult matter satisfactorily disposed of, my dear. Now we must make haste. We are due at a meeting at headquarters at half-past ten. It will be a lively one, I promise you, for they have all been at logger-heads while I have been away.'

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CHAPTER XXI

A WOMAN GROWN

THE headquarters of the Women's Union were in Essex Street, Strand, whither they drove in a cab. Mrs. Prentice spent her money freely on such small luxuries, realising—what most women are slow to do—that in certain circumstances small economies prove most expensive. Mrs. Prentice had arrived at an age when she had to husband her strength.

'I want you to listen, observe closely, and take notes where you think it necessary—especially where any facts and figures are concerned,' she said to Christine. 'I can no longer trust my memory. They are going to find fault with me to-day. I have had a hint from Lillah Carteret.'

'Why?'

'Well, they think I am too long and too often out of town, but it has become increasingly necessary for me to have respite from these affairs and relief from my comrades. My soul demands it.'

'Your soul?' said Christine hesitatingly.

'Well—I get overtired. You saw from our work last night what an immensity of detail one has to grapple with in a Society like ours. And unfortunately not one item can be ignored or postponed.'

'But if you had help—capable help, I mean—the work would not be a burden. I am sure many of the members would be only too glad to come to the rescue.'

'I know that, but I have hitherto preferred to work alone. It is better—if not necessary indeed—for a woman of my temperament to be a good deal alone. I like women. I have given up my life so far to them, but—between ourselves—there are moments when I get very tired of their limitations, their almost parochial outlook.'

She spoke with a little twinkle of the eye which almost belied the serious import of her words. At times there was a curious air of detachment about her, as if she were beckoned by other and graver interests and regarded present duties merely as a means of filling up time.

When they reached Essex Street, however, and the meeting began, her energies seemed to become more alert, and she quickly dominated the women who were present. She and Christine were a few minutes late, and Mrs. Prentice with a word of greeting to her comrades immediately took the chair.

When the minutes of the last meeting had been read and approved, Miss Braithwaite rose to move a resolution that a small sub-committee be appointed with absolute powers to deal with any urgent affairs which might arise during the frequent absences of the president. The motion roused a good deal of heated discussion to which Mrs. Prentice listened in perfect silence, leaning back in her chair, her strong, fine profile thrown into relief against the clear greyness of the winter day. Christine once more observed the air of detachment, but the moment she rose to speak it passed, and her languid interest was quickened into life.

She touched lightly yet with deft sureness on the weak points of the resolution, while admitting that it was not wholly uncalled-for.

'My faults are those of my character and temperament, and I cannot alter them even if I would,' she said frankly. 'I will not, however, be a figurehead, and if the sub-committee be appointed by your majority then it will

have full powers to conduct the whole work of the Society. I cannot be called to account for every trifling aberration from the set rules of the Society. I was born a free-lance, and a free-lance I must remain. I am willing to resign—more than willing indeed—for of late I have felt myself unable to overtake all the duties which pertain to the office of your president. Hard work—which used to be the wine of life to me—has become something of a burden. If you accept my resignation you may rest assured of my continued and deep interest in the affairs of the Women's Union. But in the near future the struggle is likely to be severe, and it is probable that a younger president—one more amenable to methods and traditions—would more successfully pilot the barque of progress through difficult waters. I beg to tender my resignation to-day, though I may add that I am perfectly willing to act until a suitable successor can be found.'

The announcement, so quietly made, evoked a perfect storm of dismayed protests. It had been totally unexpected. Even the younger set, jealous of Mrs. Prentice's power and resentful of her always arbitrary ways, realised the irreparable loss her withdrawal would be to their Society. In fact the idea of her severance from them was not to be entertained for a moment.

An indescribable hubbub ensued, excited voices filled the air, and it was some time before the members composed themselves to listen to any sane utterance. It came from Helen Braithwaite, who after much travail of soul had moved the resolution which practically amounted to a vote of censure on their president. She was an admirable speaker, who never lost her head or wandered from the point. Christine was filled with admiration for the graceful and effective way in which she handled a difficult situation and evolved order out of chaos. The discussion ended, as was to be expected, in the complete rehabilitation of Mrs. Prentice.



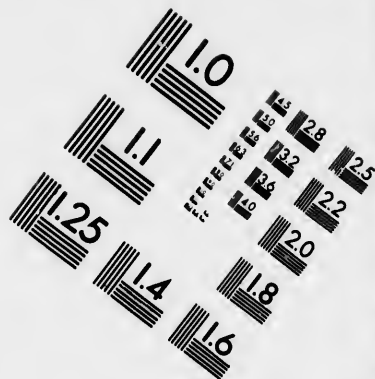
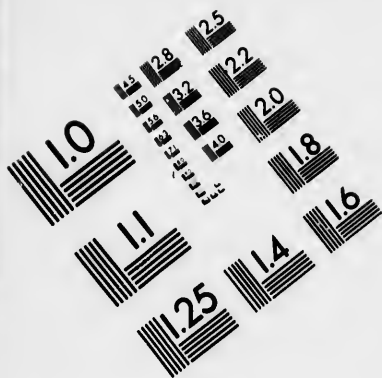
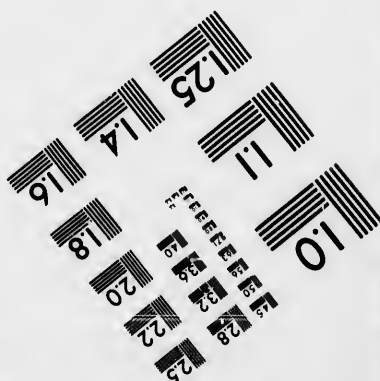
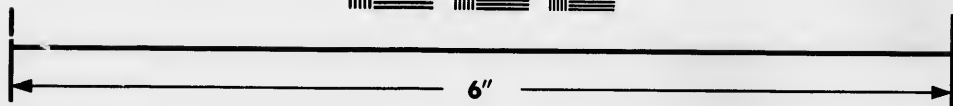
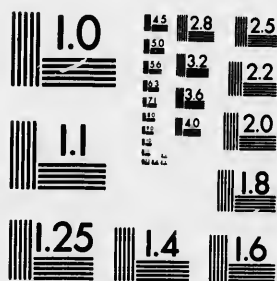


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The business of the Society was then proceeded with and disposed of item by item in the methodical manner which made Mrs. Prentice in her best moods so admirable a president.

Christine, taking no active part, had an opportunity of studying the faces surrounding her, the types interesting her beyond telling. It seemed a very cosmopolitan, and in a sense representative, gathering. The well-dressed, the fashionable, the aristocratic were there side by side with the dowdy little person whom society ignores. The professional working woman, conspicuous by her strenuous looks, and the young, unattached girl, attracted to the movement by that spirit of restlessness characteristic of the age, were also present. It was a group of ordinary, intelligent women, differing very little in appearance from those who might any day be seen flocking out from a *matinée* or a concert, and Christine realised that the day of the freaks was over and that the Women's Movement had already permeated all classes of society and become a part of its life.

It was one o'clock when the meeting terminated. Several of the leaders stayed behind to congratulate Mrs. Prentice and to assure her that the Society without her able headship could not exist for a moment—a statement which she received with a mere shake of the head.

'If I thought that, Lillah,' she observed to Lady Carteret, 'it would make my resignation take form without the loss of another day. But you don't believe what you are saying. Who is this?—oh, my new secretary, Mrs. Grier, who is stopping with me at Whitefield's.'

'Where have I seen her before?' inquired Lady Carteret in a puzzled voice.

'At my hotel when you came to lunch with me after my return from abroad in the spring. Don't you remember she was Miss Breck then?'

'Oh yes, of course. Well, bring her with you to my

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reception. I'll send her a card—Mrs. Grier is it? I'll write down the name, as my memory is quite shocking.'

When Lady Carteret had bustled away, Mrs. Prentice, who seemed tired, asked Christine to gather their belongings together.

'We'll go and lunch somewhere at hand. Then you can go home. I have an engagement in the Regent's Park,' she said as she pushed her fingers through her short hair—a habit of hers when her mind was tired after much strenuous thought.

They walked out into the Strand and entered Gatti's restaurant, where Mrs. Prentice seemed to be known and to have a special seat.

'I might have asked Lillah to lunch, but I have had enough of them all for one day. Well, what did you think of it all?'

'It interested me immensely, of course. What a wonderful power you have over them all! What a triumph it was for you!'

'Did you think so? Well, I am in doubt myself. I don't suppose I shall be much longer with them. I have other claims upon me. The moment these become insistent the Society must release me. It is only a question of time.'

'But it would be a shame to leave them after to-day when they were all so loyal to you. They are only anxious to save you—did you not see that?'

'Oh yes, that was right enough—but there is a section to whom I am anathema. Jealousy?—well, I suppose it is. It is a very feminine and forgivable quality. And the younger women must have a chance. It would be quite fatal for any cause to be wholly invested in one person. It could have no real hold on the world in that case, I mean. Granted that one person may inspire the beginnings, that is an honour I have never achieved, though I have kept it alive and made it a power, I believe.

But you can see for yourself how it is spreading and what a new force womanhood is becoming in the world.'

'About this election at Borehampton—will you really go there?' asked Christine quickly.

'Why, yes. That is merely a part of the day's work. We shall go down, probably on Monday, and spend four days there, returning in time for Lady Carteret's party to the Labour leaders. I won't see the election out. I only wish to take a small part in it—to put the Women's Cause in evidence, as it were. Do you comprehend?'

'Yes.'

'I disapprove of the plan, greatly advocated by Helen Braithwaite—that we should make ourselves a nuisance, demanding consideration at every point. By such a course we should alienate the very people we want to attract and should put back the clock a good many hours.'

'Miss Braithwaite seemed to think to-day that every other method had failed,' said Christine, looking somewhat anxiously across the table at her companion's face, which seemed unusually pale and tired.

'She's wrong. It's education that women want on this particular point—the power to realise responsibility. Then quieter influences will do their work, as they have done through every crisis in the world's history. The braggart and the sword have undoubtedly done a good deal for England in the past, but who shall write the record of the power that makes no noise?'

This style of deliverance was so different from that to which Christine had listened in Edinburgh a year ago that she could not help wondering what had happened in the interval to change Mrs. Prentice's point of view. Then the note had been militant, if not triumphant—a real trumpet-call to arms, if women were to obtain the justice and the recognition which they sought in the political sphere.

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Prentice quietly. 'And you are right. I am leaving them behind. It is what every soul must do here—go on by stages until the last is reached. I shall, I foresee, soon withdraw myself from the active part I have taken in the Women's Movement and leave its forwarding to others.'

'But why, for surely you are still interested?'

'Of course, and always will be; but as I said before, other claims will become insistent. Perhaps you will be able—who knows?—to take my place.'

'I! Oh no,' said Christine hastily. 'I could not imagine myself talking like Miss Braithwaite. Besides I am too ignorant. I did not comprehend the half that was said to-day.'

'It was a strange tongue to you,' said Mrs. Prentice, leaning her arms on the table and looking across at her. 'Yes, thank you, I have eaten all I want. My material needs seem to be easily satisfied at present. It is so when the soul is in a tumult. I wonder what your destiny will be, and through how many epochs your soul will pass to peace.'

Christine looked a little startled. The woman of affairs was once more merged in the visionary, who seemed to gaze into the future with the eyes of a seer. She perceived that she knew very little of this strange woman, who travelled in circles totally unfamiliar and undreamed-of by the person of ordinary mind and experience. A sort of awe seemed to creep over Christine, such as one might feel in the presence of a person about to be called to some experience beyond human ken.

Seeing that look of bewilderment, Mrs. Prentice recalled herself with an evident effort from the abstraction of her thoughts and tried to induce Christine to eat a good luncheon. A little fish, a morsel of bread, and a glass of water, however, made the sum total of her own meal.

Very soon they found themselves in the Strand once more, where Mrs. Prentice called a hansom and gave an

address in Avenue Road. It was a long drive, during which Mrs. Prentice did not speak much. When they stopped in the quiet road before a tall house, enclosed within walls which hid it completely from the public gaze, Mrs. Prentice alighted hurriedly and with the air of one who was in haste to enter.

'The cabman will take you right home. I will pay him now,' she said quickly. 'If you have anything you would like to do this afternoon just leave the things in my room and go out. I don't know when I shall return, but probably it will be late.'

Christine assented, and she leaned out of the cab as Mrs. Prentice approached the door in the wall. Then she saw two words written above the gateway—Theosophical Society.

She was conscious of a singular feeling of isolation and loneliness as she continued her drive to Gower Street. For the first time a doubt of her wisdom in having thrown herself so entirely on Mrs. Prentice crossed her mind. She had been kind and interested, as an old woman might be in a younger one to whom her personality somewhat appealed. But that in itself did not constitute sufficient claim on her. Christine's face flushed a little at the thought that she had made that claim insistent—had presumed too much on what was, after all, a very slight acquaintance. Mrs. Prentice had no real need of her services, but had merely created a post to suffice for the time being. And they were actually far apart—not only in experience, but in outlook and aim.

She had that day obtained a glimpse into a mind whose depths she could neither fathom nor share. Christine had heard of Theosophy. Its tenets had sometimes been alluded to, if not actually discussed, at the gatherings of the Clan; but beyond the fact that it was a philosophy having for its aim the propagation of some form of the higher thought, some claimed advance on present-day belief, she knew nothing of its doctrines or its devotees.

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She now surmised, however, what Mrs. Prentice had meant by her allusion to other claims, and she had no doubt that her total absorption by the Theosophists was only a question of time.

Carlotta Prentice was a woman outside the sphere of ordinary experience—one who could not even be judged by ordinary standards. Once in a while such minds are created, but what their actual achievement or ultimate destiny may be we are not permitted to know. Though actuated by the highest motives and always prepared for sacrifice, they can never be happy souls. In their flight from pinnacle to pinnacle of experience, searching for truth, they doubtless accomplish something for the benefit of the race which shall hereafter be revealed. All this was so new and painful to Christine that the feeling of isolation and estrangement grew.

As she was whirled through the throng of the streets a species of terror of London seized her. It was so vast, so cruel, so unheeding, and she so small an atom that surely she must inevitably be crushed. She was at the moment like a small craft without rudder or compass or any means of determining her ultimate haven.

The atmosphere of the residential hotel was not much calculated to dispel this feeling of loneliness. No one saw her enter, but as she was on the stairs the German waiter came out of the dining-room, rubbing a glass with his towel and stuttering some message for her.

'A gentleman called for me!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'Are you sure? I am not expecting any one.'

'Yes, madam. His card is on the table in the sitting-room. He said he would call again after lunch.'

She hastened upstairs and grasped the piece of paste-board lying on the edge of the table. Then a smile of genuine relief and pleasure overspread her face as she read the simple superscription of one of her oldest friends—James Dudley Grant, R.S.A., Edinburgh.

'Jimmy!' she exclaimed joyfully. 'How has he come here or found me, I wonder? It is unbelievable.'

She was joyously excited and, throwing off her jacket, stationed herself at the window to watch for him. She was quickly rewarded. In about ten minutes' time she beheld the small, weird, slouching figure of the artist crossing the road in a slanting direction. A few seconds more and he was in the room.

'Jimmy, how in the world did you find me here?'

'Quite easily. I went to Emily Wickham and got Mrs. Prentice's address, guessing she would know where you were.'

'But how did you know I was in London at all?'

'Why, because Grier wired to us to ask whether we knew anything about you.'

Christine looked blank as she dropped into a chair.

'Why should he wire to you, asking where I was?'

A slow grin flitted for a moment across Jimmy's face.

'Well, I suppose he wanted to know where you were, and we were one of the mediums. May I smoke here, or is it anathema?'

He looked round uncomfortably, as if in need of something to enable him to feel at home.

'This is not my room; but I dare say Mrs. Prentice won't mind, and anyhow she won't be home for ever so long. When did you come up?'

'Arrived this morning at seven,' answered Jimmy laconically. 'Didn't sleep and feel beastly tired in consequence. Well now, what's the meaning of this? Maclure would have come with me, but he's doing a portrait and had his last sittings this week. Man from Melbourne, a Scot, mad on things Scottish—happily for Maclure on Scottish artists too, giving him five hundred for the job. But it's good, you bet it is—the best thing Maclure has done.'

Jimmy was undoubtedly nervous—it would not hide.

Christine leaned against the end of the hard settee and looked at him, half delighted, half afraid.

She was so glad to see him that she did not know how to express herself, but she was also a little afraid. Another catechist awaited her and she did not know how she was to find answers for the numbers as they came.

'Grier seems demented, Christine,' said Jimmy with the little catch in his voice which threatened to become a stutter of emotion. 'What did you do it for anyhow? Hang it all, even the ordinary family jar doesn't end like this.'

'There wasn't any jar,' replied Christine calmly. 'But I had had enough of it, and I thought a change would be good for all parties.'

'Oh—but Christine—it won't wash—work, I mean. And you know it. That's the worst of matrimony—it has to be gone on with. You remember we tried to point that out to you beforehand, but now that you have done it you have got to stick to your guns.'

'But why?'

'Why, because it isn't respectable to do anything else,' said poor Jimmy desperately. 'So I have come to take you back.'

Christine set her shoulders rebelliously.

'No, you haven't, Jimmy. I didn't remain out in the world long enough, but that was not my fault—it was his. He took a sort of mean advantage of me when Uncle Davie died. I mean he knew I was feeling upset, and he promised that everything should be right. Well, it didn't turn out as he promised, and he wouldn't let me live as I liked.'

'Christine, I don't want details. Besides being unnecessary, they're generally dull. They are apt to shame us when we look back. Avoid them when possible. It's the fact we're concerned with—Maclure and Hately and Jeanie and me. Jeanie's down with pneumonia, or she would have been here instead of me. But we're all of one mind on the point that you have got to go back.'

'I won't—not till my own time comes; and if he wants me he can come after me.'

It was so wholly a woman's speech that Jimmy smiled under cover of his stubbly moustache.

'I don't think he will. He hasn't got that dour jaw for nothing, and besides it isn't his place to make the first advances. You're the aggressor in this case and will have to give in. Can you be ready to-morrow morning, and we'll make a night of it at one of the theatres and have supper afterwards at the Savoy for old time's sake?'

'I'd love the theatre and the Savoy, but I don't buy my liberty at the price, Jimmy. It's good and dear of you to come after me like this, and I love you for it. But you might just as well not have come as far as I'm concerned. I have got to fight this thing out myself.'

'But we have the right to have a look in, Christine. Your father left you to us.'

'No, he didn't,' replied Christine promptly. 'He left me to Alan Grier.'

Suddenly she put her hands before her face and burst into a passion of tears.

'Why did he do it? It was to please him I married Alan Grier, Jimmy, and look at me now! Everything's gone wrong, and I'm the most miserable girl in the whole wide world.'

Three more days did Jimmy Grant stop in London with the object of persuading Christine to go back. She eluded him on the third by departing to Borehampton with Mrs. Prentice on an electioneering campaign, the excitement of which was sufficient to banish her own troubles from her mind for the time being.

Jimmy returned to report to the Clan—a sadder, if not a wiser man.

'She's a woman grown, lads,' was all he said, 'and we can't do anything for her now except stand by, and if need be, step in if there should be a desperate chance.'

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CHAPTER XXII

THE FLEETING SHOW

'I DON'T feel equal to Lady Carteret's party this evening, Christine, and you will have to go alone,' said Mrs. Prentice as they were driving from King's Cross to Gower Street on the evening of their return from Borehampton.

'I should not care to go without you. It is of no consequence whether I am there or not. You certainly look frightfully tired. Why will you work so hard? What end was served at Borehampton this week?'

'Oh, some good will come of it. We had a good hearing, and I think people are beginning to realise that we are something a little higher than a shrieking sisterhood. How stale the old words are becoming! Our opponents will have to evolve some new phrases. How did you like the experience on the whole?'

'I did not care for it,' replied Christine with her accustomed frankness, 'though I see quite well what fascination it might have for a certain type of mind.'

'You would be a power, Christine, if you joined us. You have striking and winning looks, and I am certain you could speak well. I should like to see you enrolled with Lillah Carteret, Mary Lancing and the rest. If you had a definite post in the Union it would make a great deal of difference to your feeling in the matter.'

'I am not ripe for any such post, Mrs. Prentice, and I fear I never shall be.'

'Then I have not imbued you with any enthusiasm?'

Well, in the circumstances perhaps I am not much surprised.'

There was a momentary silence. Then Mrs. Prentice spoke of an entirely different matter.

'Did you notice a man on Captain Digby's platform last night; sitting on his right hand—a clean-shaven man with rather a strong face and a peculiar depth of expression in his eyes?'

'Yes, I noticed him.'

'I should like to know his name. I hoped he would have spoken. I don't think much of the average politician, and Digby's supporters were of the conventional type. That man, however, was different. I want to know who he was.'

It will be rather difficult to learn anything about him now, I am afraid.'

'Oh no, we shall meet. One always knows these things. He has some part to play either in your destiny or in mine—probably in yours.'

Christine turned to look with some incredulity at her companion's face, but she was unrewarded. Its expression was quite impassive.

'How strangely you speak! Do you really believe in the sort of thing you are hinting at? Have you ever proved that destiny is foreshadowed in that fashion?'

'Why, yes. Our own connection, now, is a case in point. That night in Edinburgh after we met at Emily Wickham's house I said to her, "I shall have some power over that child's life." But I assure you I had no desire to exercise it. We can't escape, however—it is destiny.'

Once more Christine felt a cold chill repelling her and driving her heart to a quick rebellion. It was freedom she had sought and boldly claimed, but if this woman's experience was worth anything then the quest was absolutely futile, since freedom, real and tangible, did not exist.

'You must make yourself smart for Lady Carteret's

to-night, and you will enjoy yourself. She likes you, and she will pay you some attention. I shall lie down for an hour when we reach home, and then we can dine together. I expect some one to come and see me this evening, and I shall be happier thinking of you at Lillah's than sitting in your own room.'

Dominated in every particular by the stronger will of Mrs. Prentice, Christine dressed herself with some care and about nine o'clock drove off in a hansom to Lady Carteret's house in Great Cumberland Place.

She had somewhat recovered her spirits, and she looked forward to the new experiences she was about to encounter with the liveliest interest. The last week had been so full of novel happenings that she had not had a moment in which to brood upon her own affairs. She was always conscious of discomfort when the thought of Locharde Manse obtruded itself, and she was feverishly anxious to have her time and thoughts so fully occupied as to preclude such obtrusion. But Jimmy Grant, in spite of the doleful failure of his mission, had implanted several stings.

There was no throng about Lady Carteret's house, such as there is at a great house entertaining in the season. Christine was hardly aware that the London season, as understood of those familiar with the cycle of the months in the fashionable world, had ended with the summer and would not begin again until February.

Lady Carteret, who loathed the quiet of the country, lived most of the year at her town house and entertained in the winter all sorts and conditions of persons. She was intensely fond of thus exercising her hospitality, and being rich, had full power to indulge herself in it. She was a dabbler in many arts, wrote a little for the magazines, painted an occasional picture which was never refused admission in whatever quarter she wished it exhibited, and took an interest in politics, speaking now and then on public platforms in aid of the Women's Cause. Her

first husband, Sir Edward Carteret, had been an ambassador at one of the smaller European courts and had died abroad. After a few years of widowhood she had married a rich commoner—by name Garrett Hawkes—with whom she lived in perfect amity, retaining her title. They were very happy together, interfered not at all with one another's pursuits, and presented to the world a picture of matrimonial felicity.

Her house was the rendezvous of all sorts of people—political free-lances, literary and artistic Bohemians, philanthropists and faddists of different kinds, and was also the social headquarters of the Women's Movement. She was good-natured and generous and never refused the use of her rooms for any cause that needed assistance.

Christine was astonished at the grandeur of the house when she stepped within the marble portico and was received by a magnificent personage in livery. The lower hall was crowded, and the beautiful staircase presented a kaleidoscope of colour and movement. It was some considerable time before Christine was able to make her way to the upper landing, where Lady Carteret was receiving her guests, Mr. Garrett Hawkes—a benevolent-looking elderly gentleman—by her side.

She was magnificently attired in black velvet with trimmings of costly lace emblazoned with many jewels. But though her appearance was that of a *grande dame* her manners were very cordial and sincere. The moment she saw Christine approaching she smiled her brightest.

'I am very pleased to see you, but where is Mrs. Prentice?'

'She was too tired to come. We came up from Borehampton only at six o'clock. She sent her love and begged to be excused.'

'I'm disappointed—indeed I am. Garrett, let me introduce you to Miss—no, Mrs. Alan Grier. That is the name correctly, isn't it? Quite a triumph for me to

remember it who am a natural idiot at names! Talk to her for a little, Garrett, and don't let her get out of sight. There are heaps of people I want to introduce her to presently when I am released.'

Mr. Hawkes smiled and, stepping to Christine's side, asked her a few pleasant questions about her sojourn in London, making himself agreeable with the ease of a man of the world who also possessed a kind heart. While she was talking Christine kept watching ascending guests, fascinated by the scene, and contrary to her expectation, feeling herself quite at home in it. She saw one or two familiar faces of women who had met at the Essex Street headquarters and noted how trying to the appearance of some of them were the bright lights and the elegant attire of the majority of the guests.

Helen Braithwaite saw her presently, and with a nod made her way to her side.

'How do you do? We were wondering whether you had come up from Borehampton. What sort of a week have you had? Is Mrs. Prentice here?'

'No, she was too tired. We only came up this evening.'

'Well, she has spoken a good deal as we saw from the papers. What was your reception like—not so hostile as you expected?'

'No, it was not hostile at all, except at one or two of the open-air meetings. But there is nothing to be hostile about, is there?' she asked. 'It is a perfectly reasonable and legitimate thing we are asking.'

'So we think, and to that point of view we are trying to educate the world,' replied Miss Braithwaite. 'How did you get on with the candidates? Did you meet them privately?'

'Mr. Letchworth only—not Captain Digby.'

'Oh, Letchworth is all right—at least he has promised fairly. It is a pity you didn't get a chance of speaking

to Captain Digby. I know him a little. He is against us, of course—he has all the traditions of his race behind him.'

At that moment Christine could only give her a half-divided attention, for her eye was arrested by a man on the stairs whom she seemed to recognise, though for the moment she was puzzled to recall where she had seen him.

He had a well-built figure though not very tall, and carried himself with a singular dignity and grace. His face, clean-shaven and keen-featured, was redeemed from sternness by a nobility of expression which created an immediate and favourable impression even on those who did not know him or who met him for the first time.

Attired in ordinary evening-dress, he had two orders pinned on his breast denoting distinguished service of some sort. Just as he reached his hostess, Christine remembered that he was the man who had accompanied Captain Digby to the platform at Borehampton on the previous evening and of whom Mrs. Prentice had spoken. Unconsciously she moved a step nearer their hostess, hoping she would be able to catch his name. But she was disappointed, for Lady Carteret, receiving him with evident pleasure, merely addressed him as John.

'Now I call this good of you. Your mother dined here, I suppose you know, and she said she had not heard from you and feared you were too much engrossed with your electioneering. How is Digby getting on?'

'Not so well last night, Lady Carteret,' replied the stranger. 'I think Letchworth will get in.'

'Ah, that's a pity. Well, don't get lost, for I've heaps to say to you. Ah, here is somebody I think you would like to meet, and she has just come up from Borehampton this very evening. Probably you travelled by the same train.'

She stepped towards Christine, beckoning her.

'Mrs. Grier, permit me to introduce Sir John Amory to you. He is the son of one of my oldest friends. I

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just missed being his mother, I may tell you, for his father and I were sweethearts when we were in petticoats. You must get to know one another. I think you would be friends.'

Amory bowed low towards Christine and smiled into her face a frank, cordial smile which chased away the gravity from his face. Her heart beat a little more quickly, for it was to her own kin she spoke, and in his grave face she could trace a likeness to the sweet childish lineaments of a pastel portrait which hung in an alcove of the drawing-room at South Plain. She felt pleased for the moment that he had no clue to her identity. It would be delightful to get to know him quite in the ordinary way and without prejudice.

'He's worth knowing, I promise you, Mrs. Grier,' said Lady Carteret, delightedly tapping his arm with her fan. 'He has just been knighted for some enormous service rendered to the Government in China. Make him tell you about it. Men are always most interesting—at their best, in fact—when they are on their own ground, talking about themselves. But he's too modest by half. I really believe, John, that you're blushing now.'

Amory laughed outright, and Christine's eyes smiled back. She felt immediately and comfortably at home with him and looked forward to the next minutes with intense pleasure. How interesting life had suddenly become—each hour instinct with possibility and actual experience; how dull looked the grey life of the far Scottish glen in comparison.

'Let us get a little out of the throng. I see an open room yonder not so crowded as the corridors and staircases. Where have we met before?'

'I don't think we have met,' said Christine frankly, 'though I have seen you.'

'Where?'

'At Borehampton.'

'At a political meeting! But I did not see you there, I am sure,' he said in a puzzled voice.

'Not at the meeting you are thinking of; but you looked on for a few moments at an open-air gathering that was being addressed by Mrs. Prentice. I was beside her. I am her private secretary.'

'You!'

There was no doubt about the surprise in his voice.

'Why do you speak in that tone? Do you disapprove?' asked Christine lightly. 'We thought you looked friendly, even though we knew you were supporting Captain Digby, who opposes women in politics.'

'I am not pledged on the question—I have an open mind,' replied Amory as he piloted her to a seat in a large room which was Lady Carteret's sanctum, but which had been thrown open to such as wished to talk a little removed from the throng of the reception. 'The Digbys are old friends—in fact connections of ours on my mother's side, and I promised to go down and see the fun. I am out of English politics myself.'

'You live abroad?' said Christine interestedly, all the time wondering with a somewhat quickly beating heart what he would say when he knew the relationship between them.

'Yes, in China. I was born in Hongkong, and I suppose I shall die there.'

'Oh, why do you say that? Most Englishmen who serve their country abroad look forward to the day when they will retire with well-earned leisure and recognition to end their days at home. At least I have always imagined they felt like that,' she added hastily, remembering how very little she knew about the subject.

'I am an exception to the rule, I suppose,' said Amory, looking down at her with a somewhat amused smile.

He admired her speaking face, her frank, beautiful eyes, the expression of lively interest and perfect natural-

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ness which was one of her greatest charms. Up till now Amory, paying his first visit to England since he became a man, had been disappointed in the women he had met. The majority of them seemed to him artificial, conventional, and uninteresting, though he had not ventured to express himself to such effect.

'Then you like China?'

'I love it, and the Chinese are a great people. There is no doubt that they will become more and more one of the dominant races.'

'You think so? How very interesting, and how ignorant we here are about them! I have always thought of them as savages.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to add that she marvelled at his high opinion of them after their base ingratitude to his own father, who had given his life to their service. But she restrained herself. It was a delicious excitement thus to play about on the surface of things and to reserve as long as possible the announcement that she was his cousin.

'You have spent all your life in China, then,' she said—not interrogatively but rather musingly, as if the idea puzzled and drew her.

'Yes. And this is my first visit to England.'

'And how does it all strike you? Do you feel at home here?'

'Yes, that is one of the privileges of being an Englishman, I suppose. I felt at home the moment I set foot on her shores. But I owe much to my mother, who has brought me up in the nurture and admonition of love for the mother country. I should like to introduce you to my mother presently, when you have told me something about yourself. Won't you tell me something?'

His manner was irresistibly winning. Christine began to feel the spell of it, and a sudden unaccountable joyousness seemed to pervade her whole being.

'Oh, I am nobody, nobody at all—a mere provincial here on sufferance.'

'Nay, Lady Carteret did not convey that impression,' he said gently. 'I want to know how you come to be a private secretary to a woman like Mrs. Prentice—an extraordinary person, one could see. I happen to know a little about her. She belonged originally to—or at least spent part of her married life in—a place where my father's people lived, Medwyn in Bucks. She has a strong, fine face, full of tragedy. Her life has been a tragedy, I believe. Do you happen to know her intimately?'

'Yes—fairly so, though I have not known her long.'

'Do you live in London yourself?'

'Yes—at present, but I have only recently come. Can you not tell from my accent that I am a Scotswoman?'

'Is that where the music comes from?' he asked with a smile. 'And you are in the thick of the Women's Movement, which to me is one of the most moving and inexplicable signs of the times. It all seems so strange to me, coming from a land where women occupy a different position.'

'Where they are slaves,' interjected Christine quickly.

'Well—at least they have less liberty, nor do they seek more. But you must not run away with the idea that the Chinese woman is without influence or status in her own sphere. Such an idea would be wholly wrong. In the higher ranks of Chinese society she has great power, and that power is increasing as Western ideas are beginning to permeate the masses.'

'And a very good thing too. I gather from your tone that you disapprove of the Women's Movement in England.'

'Disapprove is not the word. It merely perplexes me, and I do not see what is to be its ultimate goal.'

'Why, freedom and justice for women, of course.'

'But woman by reason of her womanhood is already entitled to these and wins them wherever she goes.'

'Oh no,' said Christine quickly. 'She suffers from all sorts of disabilities—legal, political, and social.'

'Social!' repeated Amory, looking meaningly round. 'I should say from my experience of social life in England—though that of course has been necessarily limited by the short time I have spent in the country—that woman is the centre of the whole social system. You would not call Lady Carteret a slave, for instance,' he added with a little humorous curve of the lips which made his face almost merry. 'Mr. Hawkes looks as if he existed merely to do her will.'

'Oh, the case of Lady Carteret and others like her doesn't prove anything. They are leaders of society to whom every gateway is open. It is for the great mass of working women we fight in order that their lives may be uplifted, and all the injustice under which they work and suffer removed.'

She spoke rather warmly and with a heightened colour. Amory, watching her intently, felt himself becoming every moment more deeply interested.

'You speak with some passion, Mrs. Grier. May I express the hope that you have not in your own experience suffered from the injustice of which you speak?'

Christine lifted her eyes suddenly to his face with a half-frightened gleam in them. Then they fell in confusion.

What could she say in reply to such a home question? It was impossible to lay bare to this man of all men in the world the half-tragedy of her life. She felt intuitively that he would disapprove, that it would not be to her that his full and warm sympathy would go forth. And she wanted to stand well with him, though why, she could not have told.

'Oh, I am nobody,' she repeated a little confusedly.

'I have not even the right to pass an opinion. I am merely a learner, a looker-on. Mrs. Prentice has been good enough to give me a little secretarial work at a time when I needed it. But I am immensely interested in the Women's Movement, and though I can't express myself very well, I do wish I could convince you that the Movement has been born of actual need. It is not a mere whim, nor is it a passing surge on the surface of things. It is a mighty current that is going to sweep all sorts of changes into our social order.'

'You are quite eloquent. I too am a looker-on open to conviction. I suppose I am opposed by hereditary and natural tendencies to changes of such a drastic kind, and I have been brought up by an old-fashioned mother for whom I thank God every day I draw my breath. I should like you to meet my mother. Will you wait here till I find her and bring her to you?'

'Yes. I should like to meet her,' replied Christine, but her voice was low and a little faint.

Amory looked down at her black dress, wondering greatly, yet afraid to ask a question. He hazarded a remark the answer to which would either prove or disprove his assumption regarding her position in the world.

'May I ask whether you are a widow, like my mother?' he asked hesitatingly.

'No,' answered Christine clearly, even a little hardly, 'I am not a widow.'

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE REAL THING

CHRISTINE'S heart was beating, her bosom heaving, when Amory with a word of apology left her to try to find his mother. Several persons, seeking a quiet nook, had discovered the room where she sat, but she took no heed of them. So far as she was concerned they did not exist. She was eager, yet reluctant, to see Amory's mother. She remembered every word that had been spoken about her by Grace Amory in her mother's room at Medwyn. Her son had spoken of her as we speak of that which is sacred, embodying all the best towards which our consciousness reaches; but in the same breath he had called her an old-fashioned woman. Christine now belonged by choice to the new order, and she wondered whether allegiance to its ranks carried with it forfeiture of the old privileges. There is no shrine in the open where the fighting goes on. Something new and disturbing, almost painful, stirred in Christine's heart. It must be sweet to be worshipped, to have voices lowered in tender accents of humility when one's name is mentioned, to kindle such light as she had seen in Amory's eyes when he spoke of his mother. She felt that she would like to shock him, to argue the question, to show him that she did not care.

Upon this strange tumult of conflicting thought Amory's voice broke again across a narrow distance, expressing his pleasure in finding her where he had left her. His mother was with him. Christine stood up to receive her. She

was a small, slight woman, gowned in black, soft and trailing, which gave a fictitious height to her few inches. A widow's cap, very small and soft and white, rested on her beautiful hair which had not a thread of grey in it. Her face was Madonna-like with large, soft eyes, an exquisite colour, a sweet, smiling mouth. She was the daintiest thing Christine had ever seen, and she made a picture as she leaned on the arm of her son, whose figure seemed to have acquired height and dignity by contrast.

For the first time in her life an unaccountable shyness seized upon Christine, and she could not find words with which to reply to Mrs. Amory's expression of pleasure at meeting her. She murmured the conventional commonplace while she stood aside to give her new acquaintance her chair. Amory stood by for a second only, and then, with an intuition which rarely misled him, left them together.

'My son and I feel ourselves strangers in a gathering of this kind,' said Mrs. Amory as she put up her lorgnette to glance interestedly round the pretty room. 'I suppose he has told you that to him at least England is something of a foreign country.'

'Yes, but he speaks appreciatively of China. He has enjoyed his life there.'

'It is the only life he has known, and for me—I should not care to live in England now. My heart has become too deeply rooted in China, though I have had many sorrows there. Do you know that I have been the mother of five children and that my son is the only survivor?'

'How terrible for you! And how can you speak so kindly of a land that has robbed you of so much?' cried Christine hotly.

'Sit down, and let us talk,' said Mrs. Amory with her sweet, compelling smile, as she made room for Christine on her settee. 'I perceive that some friendship between us will be possible. It has saddened me that I have

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found so few with whom my heart feels at home. I understand of course that I have become wholly detached from English ways, almost from English thought, and there seem to me to be great changes going on here.'

'I suppose there is bound to be progress,' said Christine—but listlessly, for it was of her own intimate experiences that she wished to hear Amory's mother talk—not of the trend of passing events. 'Won't you tell me how you have become reconciled to a place which robbed you of so much?'

'I have not been robbed, my dear—only denied for a little while the sight of my beloved. Three of my children died in infancy before they had time to entwine themselves about my heart. The other—my one girl—lived till she was fifteen. Her death was the greatest sorrow of my life.'

Her face assumed an indescribable expression of pathos, of yearning which would not be crushed.

'She was a lovely child with grace and knowledge far beyond her years, and of course she was very much to me, for we English women in China do not have many women-friends. She was at once my darling, my pride, and my heart's joy, and she gave promise of a lovely womanhood. Her father and I had just decided that in her own interest she must be sent home to her aunts in Medwyn when she was taken. It was a crushing blow to him; indeed I may truly say that his heart never fully recovered from it. Men do not have our buoyancy of spirit. I dare say you have noticed that, and the greater part of the mission of every true woman is to supply that need in those she loves.'

Christine listened breathlessly, longing to make her repeat these words which embodied an altogether new point of view, an undreamed-of litany of life.

'But you suffered too,' she said in a low voice. 'Surely you also needed comforting, and it would be the place of the stronger to give you that comfort.'

Something in Christine's tone touched a deep chord in the elder woman's heart, and she bent her sweet, grave eyes, now a little dimmed by recent tears, upon her earnest face. Something whispered that in the hot, young heart of the girl beside her there was need as great as any she had met and tried to relieve among the poor women in the land of her adoption.

'Suffering is part of destiny, and women by reason of their emotional temperaments have the larger share to bear. But it makes them strong, for when God made us like that He also ordained for us unseen and never-failing sources of inspiration which make the heaviest burden as nothing because of the joy of serving Him.'

Christine spoke no word, but sat leaning forward a little, her elbows on her knees, looking intently into the face of the woman before her. She had entirely forgotten that they were in the heart of a party of pleasure—among people who gave little thought to the morrow or the true meaning of life.

'You look perplexed,' said Mrs. Amory quietly and kindly. 'Have I said anything unusual?'

'I never heard any one speak like you, and I have to confess that to me it is a strange tongue—that so far as understanding it is concerned, you might be talking in Chinese,' she said bluntly. 'You have suffered horribly, yet all your life you have been good. I have heard about you from people who know—yet you are not exempt. It is a great injustice—that is what I think.'

Mrs. Amory was quiet for a moment or two, pondering these unexpected words.

'I suppose you know that I am a widow,' she said gently.

'Yes, and I know too that your husband was killed on those in China by the very people to whom he gave up his whole life. Yet you speak kindly of them, you have not turned your back on them. Yet I am sure that

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must have been the most terrible sorrow of all—to lose him, I mean.'

'It was. You are very young, my dear, and you will only learn day by day how possible it is for hearts to be so knit together that they are one. Part of me died that day when I looked on my husband's body stabbed with a hundred traitorous wounds. It has never lived again. I'm only a shadow now, waiting for the fuller light. But even in that awful moment I had my compensations. He was killed—not by his friends, but by his secret enemies, who hated him because he had done so much for the people that they were beginning to take higher views of life and to abandon many evil practices in which there was great gain for them. They killed him, but they could not kill the seed he had planted and watered with his blood. It is growing and flourishing out there in the wilds of China, and by the blessing of God and because of its being His seed there will grow up a new China which shall be consecrated to the service of the one God of all the races and nations of the earth.'

'You believe all that!' said Christine with difficulty. 'How wonderful it must be to feel and think like that!'

Mrs. Amory glanced round at the increasing throng and observed, though Christine did not, that they were becoming the objects of some remark. She laid her hand on Christine's arm with a little caressing touch.

'My dear, we have only met to-night for the first time, but I think it was destined that we should meet, and we are going to help one another. This is no place—as you can see—for such talk as ours. Tell me where and when we can meet again.'

'Anywhere. I am living just now at Whitefield's Hotel in Gower Street, but I only share a sitting-room with my friend, and she is a very busy woman. I am afraid I could not ask you there—we could not have any privacy.'

'Then come to us. We have rooms in Manchester Square in the house of an old friend who has been left rather badly off. We have taken the drawing-room floor for two or three months, and while we shall not be there the whole of the time we feel that it is a place where we can leave our belongings and be at home. Will you come there to luncheon with me to-morrow at two o'clock?'

'Yes,' replied Christine, 'I shall be glad to come.'

'Then I think we must be moving on. 28 Manchester Square—to-morrow at half-past one. Good-night, Mrs. Grier. I need not say I am pleased that we have met. That is a conventional phrase which does not express much. My heart has gone out to you, and I should greatly like to know you better.'

Christine did not reply in words, but her eloquent eyes spoke. As Mrs. Amory, with the smile still lingering in her eyes, moved away, Helen Braithwaite once more claimed Christine's attention.

'What a lovely face that woman has! Who is she?' she inquired, looking after Mrs. Amory with interest.

'Her name is Amory,' replied Christine with a little difficulty, wishing she could move away from Helen Braithwaite without appearing rude.

'Amory? Oh, she must be the mother of one of Lady Carteret's most distinguished guests to-night. Have you seen him—Sir John Amory? He is something in China, and has just been knighted for some big thing he has done out there—a very handsome man and much in request this evening of course.'

'Yes, I have seen him,' replied Christine so listlessly that Miss Braithwaite, adjusting her gold *pince-nez* straightly on her somewhat aggressive nose, took a second glance at Christine.

'You seem horribly tired. If you would like to go now let us share the same hansom. But we might have something to eat first. There's a refreshment room down-

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stairs, and Lady Carteret always does us well when we come here. There will be champagne; a glass would do you ever so much good. Will you come and forage with me ?'

Christine shook her head.

'No. I think I'll go right home. I am feeling a little anxious about Mrs. Prentice anyhow. She was very tired when I left her.'

Miss Braithwaite looked disappointed, but did not offer to accompany Christine downstairs. Lady Carteret had now left off receiving, and it was some time before Christine was able to make her adieux. She found her in one of the rooms, the centre of a very lively throng, and she felt thankful that Amory was not among them.

'What, going already? Nonsense! Have you had anything to eat? No—well, you must have something before you go. Come here, and let me find somebody to take you down,' said her hostess in the frank, breezy way which had always the effect of putting the most uncomfortable at ease. 'Let me get Mr. Hawkes—he isn't doing anything just at present.'

'No, thank you, Lady Carteret. I don't want anything, and I feel I must be getting back to Mrs. Prentice.'

'Ah well, of course you have to look after her. I know what she is. Tell her I was very vexed with her for not coming to-night and that she missed seeing somebody whom she was very anxious to meet. She can try to guess his identity as a punishment. Tell me, how did you get on with Sir John Amory? Quite charming, isn't he?'

'Oh quite.'

'And he was immensely interested in you. He came back and asked me all sort of questions about you which I couldn't answer. By the bye, who are you after all? It isn't enough to say you are Mrs. Prentice's secretary, for of course that isn't your chief rôle in life.'

'It is at present,' replied Christine truthfully enough.

'But you are Mrs. Grier, aren't you, and recently married, I think? Where is your husband?'

'In Scotland.'

Lady Carteret elevated her brows.

'In Scotland! Well, it is no business of mine. I'm sorry though, for Sir John is not only charming, but he is one of the most eligible *partis* of the younger set that we at present have, and he *was* interested. Good-night.'

Christine escaped gladly—even hurriedly—so afraid was she of encountering the Amorys again. She had readily accepted the invitation to luncheon, but on fuller consideration she decided that it was an engagement which she would not fulfil. It would be better so, she thought. She would post an excuse before she slept. She had been greatly drawn to Sir John Amory and his mother, but she knew that she could not meet them in their own temporary home without revealing her identity, which she was quite sure she did not wish to do because it would subject her to a great deal of cross-examination that she would not be able either to avoid or to meet satisfactorily.

She felt herself greatly moved—the very core of her heart being stirred by a thousand vague yearnings which she could not have put into words. She was frightfully unhappy, her life was chaos, and something told her that of all the people whom she had met since she came to London John Amory and his mother alone possessed the key to happiness and peace. But it was not a key of which she could possess herself because, as she knew, they would tell her that such possession involved renunciation, self-sacrifice, surrender of her will.

She was not ready for that, but a fierce unrest shook her, and for the first time there arose in her heart a strange, slow rebellion against those who had been responsible for her in her young years when her heart was fresh and impressionable. There had been none among them to show her the better way.

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She did not know how she reached Gower Street. The drive seemed at once too brief and yet interminable. She had no desire to meet Mrs. Prentice again, to hear her talk of the Cause, of all the matters of which her life was made up, but which possessed no interest whatever for Christine. She was merely a woman, conscious of the desperate need of her own nature, both spiritual and intellectual, crying out for the right to live. This was not life—this driving from pillar to post after elusive chimeras, even though their goal was the uplifting of humanity in the mass. As Mrs. Prentice had truly said, it was work for the woman who had been disappointed and cheated out of her own heritage.

She paid the cabman twice his fare without a murmur, handing up the coins in her purse like one in a dream, then ran up the steps and pushed open the swing-doors. Twelve o'clock rang out as she entered the hall, and a sleepy porter, looking aggrieved, immediately closed and locked the doors behind her.

The lights were low in the sitting-room. She turned them out altogether, and ascended the next stairs to the landing, where her own and Mrs. Prentice's bedrooms—which communicated with one another—were situated. She entered her own first, and, throwing off her cloak, tapped lightly at the communicating door.

Mrs. Prentice immediately bade her enter. She had a fire in her room, and the lights were turned fully up. She was not in bed—as Christine had expected—but was sitting in front of the fire attired in a dressing-gown and apparently deep in thought. She looked very tired, her face being quite pale and deep shadows under her eyes.

'I hope you have not waited up for me,' said Christine solicitously. 'I am sorry to be so late.'

'I have only just come up. I had visitors this evening—three in succession. The last only left after eleven. Did you have a pleasant evening?'

'I don't know—there was a large crowd.'

'Anybody interesting?'

'I think so. Lady Carteret was very kind in introducing me to her friends. But I do not think I care very much for London society. I could not help asking myself what it was all for. It seems so futile to collect crowds of people merely to look at one another and speak a word in passing.'

Mrs. Prentice smiled.

'You don't talk like a young person, my dear. You have been too quickly disillusioned. When I was your age I should have thoroughly enjoyed every moment of such an affair. You look charming! I am sure many admired you.'

Christine replied only by a swift shake of her head.

'And are you very tired? Can I help you to get to bed now?'

'No. I don't feel like sleep. I have had an exhausting night; but all is peace, now I have made my choice.'

'What choice?' asked Christine, struck by the words.

'I warned you, I think, some time ago that a change was impending in my life. I have reached another milestone in my experience, and in a few weeks' time I shall have withdrawn myself finally from my present position.'

'And what do you put in its place?' asked Christine with a quick intensity.

'It is too late for us to enter into matters fully to-night, but I am required elsewhere. The call has come.'

'And you will leave us all—you will leave me behind!'

'Only for a little while. And it is always open for those to follow who will,' replied Mrs. Prentice as she rose from her chair. 'I have been seeking peace for many weary years, Christine. I have sought it in the beaten track and in the byways. I have fought endless battles, and my poor spirit bears the marks of many a conflict. I have found it at last.'

'Where?' asked Christine intensely. 'Peace is what we all want—what I want most of all. I am frightfully unhappy! I don't know what is the matter with me.'

'You have had something said to you to-night which has disturbed you. Tell me, child.'

'I have met a woman who not only believes in God, but who lives for His active service, who by reason of her faith can not only bear fearful sorrows but rejoice in them. She has the key to everything worth living for. I want to find that key!'

Mrs. Prentice gravely shook her head.

'You are too tired and excited to talk more to-night, dear child. Go to bed and quietly sleep. You will find proportion come with the morning. We will talk of this matter again, but you have a long, long way to travel yet before you reach the gateway of peace. Such glimpse of the eternal is only vouchsafed to those who have bought their heritage as I have bought mine. Be content to wait till experience has done its work.'

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE PLAIN TRUTH

NEXT morning Mrs. Prentice was unable to rise, after a sleepless night following upon great nervous strain. Christine was thus furnished with a substantial excuse for non-fulfilment of her engagement at Manchester Square. She sent a note by special messenger, explaining the circumstances and expressing her regret.

She had a very busy morning, attending to Mrs. Prentice's correspondence and seeing persons who called. About eleven o'clock Mrs. Prentice fell asleep, and Christine, quite conscious of relief, went down to the sitting-room to have a little time to herself. She was not long left in peace, however. Just as she sat down to look at the morning paper, Mr. Ferradghi was announced. The German waiter made sad havoc of the name, but Christine, who had already seen him in Mrs. Prentice's company, rose to receive him without surprise.

'I had an appointment with Mrs. Prentice this forenoon at twelve,' he said in his musical, perfectly-modulated voice, bowing with that peculiar, almost serpentine grace belonging to the East.

'Mrs. Prentice mentioned it, and a message has been sent to the Avenue Road explaining that she is too tired this morning to receive any one,' said Christine. 'She is asleep now—I have only just left her.'

'Ah, I am sorry. She seemed so strong last night, so full of life!' he murmured, looking at Christine with deep interest.

He was an elderly man with a grave aspect and a singular benignity of expression. The inscrutability of the East seemed to dwell in his eyes, and there was a caressing softness and mystery about him which impressed Christine with a strange sense of discomfort. In a world of tumult he seemed to walk serene, immune from all that could disturb or dismay.

'I have been in the heart of London since sunrise, which explains how I did not receive the message. Will you make my regrets to our friend and tell her we hope to be ready, with all the arrangements made, by the fifteenth of January.'

'I will put it down,' said Christine, as she moved towards the writing-table between the windows. 'I have received so many messages this morning that I am afraid I may make a mistake unless I take a note of them.'

'Mrs. Prentice has dwelt in this uproar too long,' he observed, and his choice of a word caused Christine to smile suddenly. It was not that he did not command the English tongue perfectly, but he seemed to choose the word deliberately as most fitting to the case. It certainly described—if a little harshly—the constant whirl in which she had lived. Even Christine's restlessness had been so fully sated that she had begun to feel an insistent need of some quiet spot where she could possess her soul.

'She certainly works much too hard. I wished to send for the doctor to-day, but she would not allow me. She has not seen a doctor, she says, for over five years—she does not believe in doctors.'

'Say more correctly, that she does not believe in the existence of pain,' said Ferradghi with a half smile.

'Oh, but pain does exist whatever she may say—horrible pain of mind and body!' cried Christine in a voice whose tone admitted of no contradiction.

The Hindoo looked at her with a singular mingling of interest and sadness in his gaze.

'Submit yourself to be guided by her, my daughter.

She has chosen the path of wisdom, which compasses the ultimate solution of all the problems that baffle us. Submit yourself to her.'

With these words he left her abruptly, and Christine, not at all bewildered, but merely a little scornful and amused, returned to the contemplation of her newspaper. Her attention wandered, however, as she went back in thought, recalling the strange medley of persons she had met since she had come to share Mrs. Prentice's life. Cranks of every sort seemed to be welcomed in her rooms, and the Sunday afternoons had invariably brought a motley crew who discussed Christian Science, Re-incarnation, Buddhism, Theosophy—every cult, new and old, which allured the human mind from the beaten track of experience and promised new worlds to conquer. She had felt herself entirely, and even antagonistically, outside of it all, finding nothing in her nature responsive to the occult or the extreme. She was very sanely organised after all, and, in spite of her slight aberration from the beaten track, sound in mind and heart. She knew it by the quick response of all her being, as it leaped up to meet the reasonable theory of life presented to her by Mrs. Amory. She hoped to meet the Amorys again, to have further speech with them, but was glad that circumstances had intervened to prevent that meeting at so short an interval. She needed time to think over what had passed, to ponder on the greatness of the discovery she had made. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sounding of the gong for the luncheon in the public dining-room. She went down to it and spent about half an hour at a little table by the window, where she was assiduously waited on by a pretty Scotch girl who had been attracted to her by her voice the first day she had spoken to her.

'Well, how are you getting on, Jessie?' she asked kindly. 'Not homesick yet, eh?'

'No, mum, but I'm to get hame for the New Year, me and anither lassie that's in a boarding-hoose in Tavistock Square. An auld mistress o' hers is treatin' us baith wi' tickets for the week-end. We leave on next Friday week, till the Tuesday efter. It's a nuisance, though, that New Year fa's on the Sunday. There'll be less fun gaun, though they'll keep it on the Monday.'

Christine smiled and nodded, and Jessie passed on, her joy shining in her face.

Suddenly reminded of the near approach of Christmas she pondered on what manner of Christmas she was likely to spend. It was the season for family reunion, for the clasping of friendly hands, for meetings which would bridge the gulf of years and of distance. But for her, outcast and forlorn as she was, there could be none of these things—no warm family house yearned to receive her, the gulf she had created by her own act yawned menacingly and dividingly between.

It was not a train of thought in which it was wise to indulge; she therefore brought her luncheon to an abrupt conclusion, and retired upstairs to see how Mrs. Prentice fared. She was still asleep, apparently a dreamless sleep of perfect peace. Her face looked singularly beautiful in its repose, the harsher elements softened, the more gentle and winning brought into prominence. The loose, short hair, so soft and wayward, gave a strikingly child-like aspect to the face from which the years of stress and sorrow seemed to have passed. What deeps of experience were hers, who had stood so long in Life's fighting line that the white dove of peace had long since folded her wings and departed in sorrowful affright? What would—what could be the end for that stormy soul at war with all existing things? Hers was not a destiny any sane mind could crave. Even in these few weeks, during which Christine had been hurried on the tide of Mrs. Prentice's restlessness, she had proved the futility of it

all, its absolute inability to give ease even for a moment's pain. A constant whirl of activity can never satisfy the heart which, in order to fulfil its heaven-ordained destiny, must at times be

'at leisure from itself to soothe and sympathise.'

Christine withdrew softly, conscious of a great and increasing sadness. She had respect—even a species of affection—for the woman who had not refused her the hand of comradeship in her need, even though frankly disapproving; but disillusionment had already come.

Daily, hourly companionship, which brought little to relieve the strain of the dual life, had revealed all the weaknesses which are to be found even in the finest natures, and which only love can cover up and count as nothing. Christine of course had not that overpowering affection which makes light of flaws in the heart's idol, and she had had her moments of irritation, of disappointment. Doubtless she had likewise caused them to Mrs. Prentice, who beheld in her merely a raw, undisciplined human soul standing on the very threshold of destiny, very poorly equipped for all it offered. She had never had any intention of attaching Christine permanently to her side. Her temperament was such as to demand an almost unbroken solitude, and she had never been able to work amicably with any of her colleagues.

The problem of Christine's life had perplexed her greatly, and now, when she contemplated withdrawing herself wholly from public life, she was at a loss what to do with the girl who was in a sense dependent upon her. She contemplated suggesting to Grier that he should come to London and see what could be done by personal pleading to induce his wife to return with him.

Christine took a walk in the crowded streets in the early part of the afternoon. So long accustomed to life in the open, she often felt pent by her sedentary occupa-

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tions, and was even conscious of a physical languor most depressing. She walked through the crowded streets, feeling herself singularly detached from their hurrying tide of life. She had just then none of the womanly interest in shop windows, which at another time might have helped to lift her mind momentarily above morbid thoughts. Dress, and all the dainty unconsidered trifles which make up the sum of the happy woman's life, had no place within the environment to which Christine had voluntarily surrendered herself. She walked briskly, like one with a set purpose in view, returning to the hotel a little refreshed by her contact with the outer air. Meeting Jessie on the stairs, she was informed that Mrs. Prentice was awake and had been asking for her.

'I've just ta'en in her tea. Will I bring some for you to her room?'

Christine thanked her and said 'Yes.' She ran up quickly and entered the room, bringing a fresh and a cooler air with her from out-of-doors.

Mrs. Prentice was sitting up in bed with a shawl round her shoulders, enjoying her tea.

'I am glad you went out, dear,' she said with her peculiarly pleasant smile. 'How soundly I have slept since morning! I felt very tired, and now when everything is off my mind I suppose nature reasserted herself, and commanded the sun to stand still.'

Christine threw off her hat and sat down on the front of the bed to give Ferradghi's message. Mrs. Prentice received it in silence, merely inclining her head. She did not speak at all until the little housemaid had brought in the second tray and set it noiselessly down.

'I suppose you guessed from that message—or perhaps Ferradghi told you—that I am contemplating an immediate change in the order of my life?'

'I understood, of course, that something was in the air,' replied Christine.

'You are quite right. It is the most momentous step I have yet taken. I hope it will be the final one, so far as my temporal affairs are concerned. I shall sail for the East on the fifteenth of January.'

'What to do there?—teach the women of India concerning their disabilities?' asked Christine with a small, cold smile.

Mrs. Prentice shook her head.

'No, I have done my day's work so far as the women of my race in this country or any other are concerned. I shall henceforth be wholly engaged in acquiring learning myself. I go to sit at the feet of the wisest of the earth, from whom the secrets of the universe are not hid. It is the opportunity for which I have longed, and I consider myself most fortunate in having secured it so many months earlier than I expected.'

'You sail for India, do you say, on the fifteenth of January?'

'Yes, for Bombay; and early next week I shall probably go to the Avenue Road to spend the remaining days of my sojourn in England. I have many things to discuss with our head who has honoured me with her trust, far beyond my expectation.'

She spoke in a low, subdued voice with the reference one accords to some power far above the ordinary status of human affairs. Christine perceived that the break with the old life was complete.

'You do not expect to come back to England?'

'I don't know. I know nothing—and glory in that. The time comes when we cease our questioning and simply wait for the light. Until we reach that stage all our groping is in vain.'

'I don't believe that sentient human beings were sent into the world for any such thing,' asserted Christine coldly. 'My heart revolts against it. I want to live and to exercise my own ego. It is the right and heritage of every one of us.'

'You are very young, my child, and youth has the hot, restless heart. Doubtless the time will come when you too will be glad to lay your armour down.'

'What is it that you are going to India to study—by what name is it called?'

'It is called Theosophy here. I prefer to call it truth.'

'But why should truth be particularly invested in India? I can't believe that it is. We are further advanced here.'

'That is where you are wrong. All the wisdom of all the ages has its home in the East, where there is a great undisturbed calm. But it is too large a question to discuss here and now, and it would serve no useful end to do so. I must set my house in order before this change takes place. We shall have to part, Christine, in a few days' time; but first I must have my heart set at rest concerning you. Tell me what is in your mind now about yourself and your future? I have purposely abstained from asking any questions, or from even in the remotest degree alluding to it, preferring that you should have a fair chance to test the life in the open—as you expressed it to me on the occasion of our first meeting. Are you inclined to go on with it?'

'It would have very little attraction for me apart from you,' Christine answered with unhesitating frankness.

'I am not surprised. You are not the stuff of which reformers is made.'

'Am I not? Where do I lack?'

'Everywhere,' replied Mrs. Prentice with a slight smile. 'But my first indictment is your capacity for being bored, and you don't make the smallest attempt to hide it when you are—and that, believe me, is the unpardonable sin.'

'Oh, Mrs. Prentice!' cried Christine, colouring quickly—all too conscious that the indictment was true.

'My dear, ineffable boredom has been so often expressed in your face that I have ceased to wonder at it. The

Women's Cause doesn't interest you in the least. You haven't even yet grasped what it is all about. You must seek fulfilment of yourself elsewhere.'

Christine sat still for a moment with her head resting on her hand, almost terrified by the depth and keenness of this woman's observation. How seldom she erred in her estimate of men or things! How swift she was to lay her finger on the vital spot!

'I wish I knew why I had been born,' she said lamely. 'There does not exist a more wholly useless and futile person than I am in the whole world.'

'At the present moment I agree with you. But presently you will step out and find your niche. What about Scotland? What is your point of view regarding the old life now?'

'I will never return there,' said Christine with hardening face. 'Nobody could expect it—he least of all, since he has never so much as moved a little finger to discover what has become of me.'

'You have not been gone so many weeks after all,' said Mrs. Prentice quietly.

'Surely long enough to have made my absence felt, and it has not been felt, which proves that I was right in saying that there was no place for me in Strathardle Manse.'

'Of course he has known all along where you are and just how you have been occupied,' said Mrs. Prentice quietly. 'But for that he would not have suffered you to go your own way unchallenged.'

'That proves nothing except that he does not care,' Christine maintained.

Mrs. Prentice put up her hand to hide the smile which leapt to the corners of her mouth.

'Well, it is needless to discuss it further. We must arrive at some arrangement between now and next week, when we shall have to say good-bye. Would you not

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care to go on working for a time with Helen Braithwaite and Mary Lancing at Essex Street? There is plenty to do there if you are at all interested; and they both like you and would be glad to have you pledged to actual service.'

'I don't think I should care for it,' replied Christine doubtfully. 'But, as you say, we can think over it and arrange something. Don't suffer my small affairs to disturb you. I can easily take care of myself.'

Before Mrs. Prentice could reply there was a knock at the door, and the German waiter announced a caller in the sitting-room for Mrs. Grier.

'What name did he give?' she asked, a sudden fear clutching her heart that it might be her husband come to exercise his authority and take her back to Strathardle Manse.

'No name, madam,' replied the German waiter. 'He said it was of no consequence.'

'Go and get the name before I see him,' she answered a little haughtily.

She excused herself hastily to Mrs. Prentice, and closing the door, waited on the landing. She heard the man put the question and a voice she recognised answer immediately, 'Sir John Amory.' Her face flushed and she ran lightly downstairs. She still wore the coat which she had worn out of doors, but her hat had been discarded, leaving her hair in a somewhat loose tangle on her brow. The wintry sun caught its gleam as she appeared in the doorway, smiling a little tremulously at sight of Amory's grave face. She was so glad to see him that she did not know how to express herself. He looked none the less pleased, and they shook hands with a warmth of greeting which both felt.

'I am here by request of my mother to make another appointment. She would have come herself, but she caught a slight cold at Lady Carteret's last night and

was afraid to venture out. She was very disappointed you could not come to lunch to-day.'

'I could not leave Mrs. Prentice, and afterwards there was a great deal to do for her. She is not up yet, and I have to receive her callers and attend to all the messages that come. She is a very busy woman.'

'I understand that, but surely you must be considered too. My mother sent her kind regards and would like if you could lunch or dine with us to-morrow before we go out of town for Christmas.'

Christine shook her head.

'Please tell Mrs. Amory how sorry I am. But I can't make any appointments just at present. Mrs. Prentice needs every moment of my time. She will leave England next week, however, and then I shall be quite free.'

'I don't know when we shall return to London. We have a great many family visits to pay, going first to Clievdon in Somerset to my mother's people. Are you sure you could not spare us an hour to-morrow?'

He spoke with an eagerness which left Christine in no doubt that he himself greatly desired her acceptance of the invitation.

'I will see what can be done, and if I find that I have leisure to-morrow, may I come to Manchester Square and take my chance of finding your mother at home?'

'You may, of course, but I also should like to meet you. We left many things unspoken last night.'

'Oh, life is largely made up of unspoken things, of unfinished episodes,' she said, trying to speak lightly, but unable to veil the pathos of her eyes.

She was at a loss to comprehend or classify the feeling of well-being and happiness which seemed to envelop her in this man's presence. What sweetness was in her heart when his deep, kind eyes dwelt on her face; how safe and strong and good she felt in his presence! She told herself it must be due to the inner tie of blood, of which

he was yet in ignorance, though he was evidently conscious of a like feeling of kinship in his own heart.

Yet she did not tell him of this tie of blood. Something continued to restrain her.

He did not linger long, because obviously there was no reason for prolonging what could not be regarded as other than a formal call.

When he left the room, bidding her farewell regretfully, as a man parts from one who interests him and with whom his heart would hold further converse, she walked to the window and, pressing her cheek to the pane, watched him leave the house.

When she stepped back after he was out of sight she was surprised to find that cheek wet with tears.

CHAPTER XXV

CLOSING IN

CHRISTINE had no idea how largely Christmas entered into the life of people south of the Border, nor what a complete standstill of public business was caused by it. Most of those with whom she came in contact had made arrangements to go out of town, and the premises of the Women's Union were closed.

A meeting had been held on the 22nd of December to consider a letter which had been received from Mrs. Prentice, embodying her resignation and conveying the information that she was leaving immediately for the East. It came as a great surprise to most of the members, though one or two in the inner circle who had had an opportunity of meeting her often at close quarters had anticipated something of the sort, but perhaps at a later date. Christine, by request of Mrs. Prentice, was present at that meeting, and conveyed a faithful report of the proceedings to her. A vote of regret and gratitude was passed; she was spoken of with deep respect and appreciation. Christine on the whole was pleased with the tone of the meeting, though she reflected as she went home by the Underground that after all the strongest personality did little beyond ruffling the stream of passing events.

Mrs. Prentice listened in silence while Christine gave her a brief account of the proceedings, at the same time regarding her keenly.

'So that episode is closed, Christine, as many another

has been and will be. I have, I trust, done with episodes, and will soon be merged in the larger life which has stripped itself of all extraneous things.'

To Christine these were mere words, and she showed by her expression that they conveyed little except sound to her consciousness.

Mrs. Prentice feeling her unsympathetic, immediately descended to mundane things.

'I am going to Scotland to-morrow to bid good-bye to my cousin, Lady Farquhar. The family is at Cassilis at present, but it is not so many miles from your old home. Will you come back with me? It is what I should like, Christine, before I go—to see you reinstated there. Believe me, it is the only, as well as the best, solution of your difficulties.'

'No,' said Christine firmly. 'I will not go back, and I do not wish you to see Mr. Grier, or to tell him anything about my movements.'

The resolute tone caused Mrs. Prentice to smile. It was a new experience for her to be commanded. Hitherto in her relations with Christine it had been her privilege to say, and it was done.

'My dear, you cannot forbid me the liberty of action and speech you have so strenuously claimed for yourself,' she said good-humouredly. 'I shall certainly make a point of seeing Mr. Grier and telling him all I know. But may I ask whether you are going to spend a dreary Christmas here, in this boarding-house? You can have no conception of what an unspeakably dreary, ghastly experience that can be.'

'I will not do that. I will go to my cousin Ted, who is married, and lives at Tulse Hill, or to my Uncle Hedderwick at Sydenham. I am not totally without friends, and any of them will, I think, be glad to receive me.'

'Ah, that will be better. I could not well go away and leave you here over Christmas. Yet go north I must,

because I owe it to my cousin. I can, however, spare only a long week-end.'

Christine longed to ask whether she included Medwyn in her scheme of farewells, but she did not dare. During the last few days a little cloud had seemed to drop between them, and there was less of that intimate converse which Christine had so much enjoyed in the earlier part of their acquaintanceship. Also she resented the tone and manner Mrs. Prentice now frankly adopted towards her, as if she were a child or an irresponsible person who required to be taken strongly in hand. Altogether Christine was extremely miserable as well as totally at a loss regarding the future.

No more was said about the Christmas arrangements, and Christine saw Mrs. Prentice off at Euston, leaving her under the impression that she was going out to the suburbs next day.

Christine went back to Whitefield's and wrote a short note to her Aunt Grace, simply stating that she was coming down for the week-end—which would include Christmas Day—mentioning the train and leaving no time for a written reply. She gave no explanations of her presence in London at such a time and, assuming that they knew nothing about the strained relations of her married life, hoped that she might get through her little visit without catastrophe.

That done, she went out by train to Tulse Hill to seek out Ted. It was her first attempt at redeeming her promise to pay a call on his wife, and she chose an hour of the day when the chances of finding Ted himself at home were remote.

She found the house easily—one of a monotonous row of moderately-sized suburban villas, all alike as peas in a pod. There was a certain daintiness about number 37 which pleased her eye as she walked up the narrow path of coloured tiles and knocked at the immaculate door. The

exterior of the house proclaimed the careful, fastidious housewife whom no questions concerning destiny or rights troubled, but who realised that the first duty incumbent upon her was to make his home an attractive place to the husband she had won.

A small maid-servant, as neat and dainty as the house, answered the knock, and in response to her request to see Mrs. Hedderwick, ushered her in with a pleasant smile and an air of welcome. The dining-room was at the front of the house, and into this room Christine was shown. It was empty save for a baby's cot—a dainty thing, all pink silk and muslin and lace, which stood at one side of the fireplace, carefully placed so as to be immune from draughts and out of reach of the fire.

The room was small, but a pretty, pleasant place. On the table, the centre of which was graced by a great bunch of chrysanthemums, lay a piece of dainty sewing—a baby's frock indeed—half-finished, with the silver thimble and the scissors above it, and all was so pretty and homelike that to Christine it seemed more like a picture than a real place. She had spent the last few weeks in a very different place—one which possessed few indeed of the attributes of home.

She stepped softly across the floor, drew aside the muslin curtain, and looked down upon the baby enjoying her afternoon sleep. She was a beautiful creature, the child of two who loved each other dearly and who regarded her as the crown of their happiness. Plump, rosy, exquisitely coloured, with soft golden hair and a lovely dimpled face, she looked the most beautiful live thing that Christine had ever seen in her life. The picture fascinated her, and the fat, dimpled hand, lying outside the pink coverlet, seemed a very poem. Something stirred vaguely in her heart—a wild and impossible thrill of envy which horrified her. She had never wished for a child—she had often felt that she would not know what to do

with one, yet some magnet drew her to this baby—the little Christine, to whom they had given her name out of gratitude. She had not done much for others in her life, and it was hardly meet that so small a service should have been so quickly and gratefully recognised.

Her tumultuous thoughts were disturbed by the opening of the door. She turned quickly, smiling a little, to receive her cousin's wife—a creature so fair and dainty, so ridiculously young that Christine could not conceive of her as the mistress even of a small house, still less as the mother of the baby in the cot.

But though her manner was timid as she regarded the somewhat dignified lady in the long cloak, she showed a certain self-possession which Christine secretly admired.

'I am sorry, but my little maid did not bring your name,' she said, in a sweet, refined voice. 'She is very young, and though I have instructed her to ask the names of visitors, she generally forgets.'

'It doesn't matter,' replied Christine with a smile. 'I am only Ted's cousin Christine.'

'Oh, are you? How glad I am to see you!' She ran up to her and put up her face to be kissed in the most natural way in the world. 'Every day we talk about you and say "Perhaps she will come to-day." Ted will be so very glad when he comes home and finds you here. Come right upstairs, and take off your things.'

Christine returned the kiss with a warmth which surprised herself. She had been made to feel on sufferance a good many weeks, and the warmth of her welcome a little unnerved her.

'I have not very long to stay, dear Edie, and I came only to see you and the baby to-day. I will come and spend an evening with Ted later on. Just let me sit down beside you for an hour or so, and if you can give me a cup of tea I should like that. I am so very pleased to come.'

'But it is very disappointing. Ted said he thought

you would stay when you came, and my spare bedroom is so very pretty. We have only had it furnished a few weeks. It is white and blue. Won't you stay?'

'Not to-day.'

'Then I'll tell Cynthia to get tea. Yes, isn't it a ridiculous name, but she's a good little girl, and so fond of baby. I can quite trust her to take her out and even to bath her sometimes. You see, Ted begins to want me to go out with him of an evening now, and of course I must consider him first.'

She spoke quite naturally, yet with a pride and dignity which filled Christine with increasing amazement. The advent of wifehood and motherhood had made a new creature of the little household drudge, and she was so pretty that she was a delight to the eyes. Christine began to think that Ted had done very well for himself.

Eddie did not seem in the least afraid of her new relative, but hovered about her with affectionate solicitude, anxious to show her every attention and to convince her of the warmth of her welcome.

'You look so happy,' said Christine as they sat down together at the table after tea had been brought in. 'It does one good to see you.'

'Oh, I am happy! Sometimes I can't sleep for thinking about it all. It is so wonderful that I should have so much—a husband like Ted and a darling baby. And they are all so sweet to me at Sydenham. I do love Granny—don't you?'

'Granny!' repeated Christine wonderingly.

'I mean Ted's mother. She's so kind to me that I have never really missed having my own mother. We are dining there to-night. I forgot that when I asked you to stay. If only you would come with us how glad they would all be—wouldn't they? They're all so fond of you.' Here the blue eyes suddenly filled with tears. 'I shall never never forget all you have done for us, and that

day when Mr. Hedderwick and Granny came in a cab to Brixton to fetch me back to Sydenham I shall never forget—it was like a story-book, only a thousand times better !’

Christine could not keep back the answering tear which sprang to her own eyes at the moment.

‘It is a very pretty story,’ she said as she dashed it away. ‘You are very happy, you say? There isn’t even a single crumpled rose-leaf in your lot?’

‘Not one. I have everything in the world I want, and far, far more than I deserve. I lie awake at nights sometimes, thinking how I can make home brighter and better for Ted. And oh, I must tell you something,’ she added gleefully. ‘Mr. Hedderwick gave me ten pounds on my birthday to buy what I liked with, and I spent it nearly all on cooking-lessons. I have had two lots, and all this month I have been going to a *chef*, and Ted keeps on wondering how I can get him such lovely dinners. On Christmas Day Granny and Mr. Hedderwick are coming to late dinner with us, and I’m going to give them such a surprise. Won’t it be nice when I tell them I have cooked every little bit of it myself? And Ted knows that when he gets to be the head of the business and we are in a big house, I shall know exactly what to do to make him proud of me and of his home. Won’t that be delightful?’

Christine said she was sure it would. The prattle of the proud little housewife fascinated her. Her own life, her aims, and her uncertain future, seemed suddenly grey by contrast.

While they were chatting over their tea the baby woke up and Christine took her in her arms. The soft touch of the child’s hands, its lovely smile and air of joyous contentment filled her with astonishment.

‘I thought all babies were cross and cried a lot,’ she said.

'They don't when they are well and well cared for,' said the little mother with an air of great experience. 'When a baby is cross you may be sure there's something quite wrong. Isn't she a darling, and don't you wish you had one like her? Oh, I do hope you will have soon—it makes such a difference.'

Then Edie remembered and blushed furiously, and took the baby from Christine's arms to hide her confusion.

'Do forgive me. It was horrid of me. I quite forgot. But it's going to come all right—isn't it? Ted and I speak about it sometimes, and now I have seen you I know it's going to be all right. You're so beautiful, but you want to be happy—don't you? I'm sure you are going to be some day soon.'

Christine made no reply, but she made the little woman understand that she had said nothing to offend her, and that the visit had been a great success. She promised to come again soon, and after she had left the house she turned back to wave a last greeting towards the window where Edie stood with the child in her arms, nodding and smiling good-bye.

Christine returned to the empty boarding-house with an ache at her heart.

Next morning she spent at the shops, buying some little Christmas gifts for her aunts, and packing up the necessary things, she left London by the two o'clock train. It was little more than a year since she had made the same journey, which then partook of the nature of a voyage of discovery. How much had happened in that time, how much older she felt, how life had changed!

Her eyes, looking out upon the wintry landscape, had a somewhat weary, listless expression in them, and the two hours spent in the train seemed interminable. When she was nearing Medwyn, she gathered her things together, wondering with a half smile whether Aunt Grace would be at the station, or whether to Sophia Timbs had been

relegated the duty of meeting her. She did not much mind—perhaps, even, they would not be glad to see her at all; in which case she would cut short her visit. The train was quite full of eager folks hurrying towards their various destinations, anticipating the holiday festival and the reunion with relations and friends. Christine had got a little tired of the very name of Christmas, which seemed to dominate everything and to be entirely made for happy folks.

She did not hurry from the train. She had no large boxes as on her former visit, but merely a small dress-case which she could lift herself. She stepped out of the compartment with it in her hand and, setting it down on the platform, took a swift glance round in search of some one from the house at South Plain. It was a moment or two before she was satisfied that no one had come. Then a trifle chilled, as the arriving guest is apt to be on missing such a token of welcome, she prepared to step out in search of a fly. At that moment a figure came forward out of the throng, and she gave a start which nearly caused her to drop her valise. A man advanced, a hat was raised, and a voice, vibrating with the liveliest satisfaction, addressed her.

'Mrs. Grier, is it possible? What a happy coincidence that you should come to Medwyn to-day! I arrived myself only last night.'

'I have some relatives here, Sir John,' said Christine a trifle confusedly. 'I was looking round, expecting that some one had come to meet me, but there does not seem to be any one.'

Her face paled after the flush, and she compressed her lips a little, knowing that now there could be no escape.

'I have been sent to meet a relative—a cousin, who is a stranger to me. I am afraid I must leave you just for a moment, and keep a sharper look-out for her. As we have never met before it is rather awkward.'

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Christine gave a little embarrassed laugh.
 'Don't go away!' she said abruptly. 'I am the
 cousin! How is it that you don't know? Did my aunts
 not even tell you my name?'

Amory stood still, staring at her with a certain blankness.
 'You are my cousin! Were you Christine Breck before
 you became Mrs. Grier? It was Christine Breck I was
 sent to meet. They did not even tell me your married
 name.'

'Yes,' replied Christine, 'I am Christine Breck.'

'Why did you not tell me before? Think how pleased
 my mother would have been. That explains everything
 —how she was drawn to you from the beginning. There
 is something after all in the call of the blood.'

'Do you think so?' asked Christine listlessly.

'Yes. But you have not yet told me why you did
 not proclaim your relationship. You must have known
 —if you knew anything at all about the Amorys—that
 we were the same family.'

'Oh yes. Of course I knew from the beginning.'

'Then why—'

'I did not think I was a desirable relation, or one that
 you would be very anxious to claim after you knew the
 circumstances.'

Amory looked surprised and a little embarrassed.

'Perhaps we had better be getting back home,' he said
 a little less cordially. 'Is this all the luggage you
 have?'

'Yes.'

'The carriage is outside.'

'The carriage!' repeated Christine with a little smile.
 'It was a fly last time and Sophia Timbs standing at the
 booking-office.'

'Your aunts—our aunts, I should say—are very pleased
 at the prospect of seeing you—Aunt Grace especially. I
 suppose you know that she loves you very much?'

Christine did not reply, but walked with him in silence to the outside of the booking-office, where the carriage was in waiting. Amory carefully handed her in, but did not offer to get in beside her.

'I shall walk back, I think. It is a very short distance.'

'No, please get in,' said Christine a little imperiously. 'I have something I must say to you.'

Amory hid his surprise, which scarcely veiled his satisfaction, and obeyed her without a word. The moment the door was closed and the horses started forward she turned to him her face, somewhat white and desperate.

'I would not have come had I known you were here. You told me you were going into Somerset.'

'I took my mother there, but something drew me back to Medwyn, and the aunts were very anxious that one of us should spend Christmas with them. I return on Monday of course.'

'But it complicates everything. Now I must tell you things I would greatly have preferred not to have spoken about to you. My aunts know very little about my marriage.'

'Too little. They think you treated them badly over it,' he replied gravely. 'What was wrong that they could not be told about it?'

'Nothing then. It was hurried—that was all, and I did not think that anybody was sufficiently interested in me to care,' replied Christine truthfully enough. 'But it has all gone wrong since. I left my husband some little time ago, only I did not wish my aunts to know. It would horrify them—you know it would—and I should have a terrible time. I thought I might just get through this brief visit till Monday without letting them know anything about it.'

'It will place you in a very false position,' Amory reminded her.

'Not necessarily, and I needn't be untruthful. It is

possible to parry questions, but I can't of course unless you help me.'

'I don't see how I am to help you.'

'You can best do it by saying nothing. Can't you do that for two days for a woman who is in straits? It commits you to nothing.'

Amory did not immediately reply.

'If you can't I must stop the carriage now and go back to the station,' she said quietly, but with a kind of desperate note in her voice. 'I am not really able to stand the ordeal I see in front of me if I have to explain things to my aunts. They can't be explained—it would simply kill me.'

'Why did you think of coming to Medwyn at all if they have that effect on you?'

'I was a fool, but all this Christmas talk got on my nerves, and I wanted to have a home to go to like other people, I suppose. I ought to have gone to my Uncle Hedderwick's where they really wanted me.'

'I am glad you came here,' was Amory's reply, and at that moment the horses took the curve at South Plain and dashed up to the door.

'You haven't promised,' said Christine feverishly.

'You poor child!' he said with a strange deep note of tenderness in his voice. 'Can't you see—don't you know that I am your friend?'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLEAR CALL

MEDWYN VALE is watered by one deep, wide river into which flow many tributary streams. At the bottom of the delectable gardens of South Plain there is a shallow stream which in summer gives a special charm to their green lawns and cool recesses. A path, shaded by fine trees, makes a pleasant walk much frequented on summer evenings, but practically deserted in winter, except when the stream freezes over and provides amusement for the skaters, who then fly over miles of uninterrupted country.

In mild winter weather, however, there is often a chill mist lying about the banks so that it is avoided by persons who have a care for their health.

The following afternoon—the day before Christmas—Amory and Christine left the garden of the old Amory House, crossed the stream by a foot-bridge a little lower down, and turned their faces to the open country. It was about an hour before sunset, and already the sky was showing signs of the exquisite colouring so often observed at the close of a fine winter day. The frost imparted such clearness to the atmosphere that the landscape for miles was set before them like a sharp cameo. It had a certain beauty of its own, though there was nothing grand or awe-inspiring in the level breadths with the faint outline of distant undulations which could hardly be called hills. A suggestion of peace, however, of plenty and of prosperity, seemed to brood over what

was a very typical English scene. Amory remarked upon its beauty as they passed from the shadow of the tall old trees whose thick tracery of branches even in winter made considerable shade.

'The sky is lovely,' said Christine, 'but I cannot see much beauty in these flat fields. When you have spent years of your life as I have done in the heart of the Highlands, you'll never be satisfied with this.'

Amory stepped aside for a moment in order that she might avoid a broken bit of the path. She smiled upon him, accepting this little attention, and once more he was struck by the exceeding sweetness of her face. It was in many respects a striking face, and it interested him more than that of any woman he had yet seen. During the few hours they had been under one roof he had taken much sharp counsel with himself, perfectly aware of the emotions that were beginning to do battle in his heart. The evening and the morning had passed without catastrophe. The aunts had been cordial and not too curious; Christine had been able without much difficulty to parry the questions she could not answer satisfactorily. The break with her married life had been so recent that she was able without effort to furnish them with details concerning its routine, which was all they asked.

Christine was unaware, however, how much she really owed to Amory, and might have been surprised had she overheard a few words that passed between him and Aunt Grace after she went upstairs to bed.

He was delightful in a household of women—simple, sincere, deferential, yet always strong. One never lost the sense that his was a mind of force and greatness, yet not disdainful of those simple things which help to make up the sun of life. Christine was charmed and found herself leaning upon him, anxious to win and keep his good opinion, and determined to justify herself in his eyes. She had welcomed his suggestion that they should

take a long walk in the country, though she knew perfectly well it was impossible they should return without some words of import having been spoken.

Amory, accustomed to deal with difficult matters and a born diplomat, could not suffer a situation like Christine's to continue without some effort on his part to better it. The kinship between them, he considered, fully justified his desire as well as his right to interfere. He wondered, as he looked at the clear strong outline of her face, just how far he might go without fear of giving offence.

They talked of ordinary matters during the early part of their walk, Christine asking many questions concerning his life in the East. She even seemed to have a certain feverish shrinking from silence which might be broken by questions she could not answer. Amory, however, exhibited no signs of a desire to pry into her affairs, but discoursed interestingly concerning his varied experiences, giving Christine much insight not only into his work, but into his own outlook upon life. The ideal was so high, the outlook was so clear and definite that a growing wonder filled her soul.

'I have never met any one quite like you and your mother. I have not had very much experience of men in public life, of course, but is it not unusual for the servants of the State to be so avowedly religious?' she said, hesitating a little over the last words.

'I hope it is not so rare as you think,' he answered gravely. 'There is no doubt that religion is an immense help to a man in his conduct and attitude towards public affairs. It gives him the right sense of proportion and solves for him a thousand problems. For myself, life in China would be impossible without it.'

'What happens to the person who, like me, has no such guiding force?' she murmured, then immediately added, 'Do you make it a guide for conduct? If it would

not tire or bore you, will you tell me how this strange belief in the unknown and the unknowable influences your life, for I can see that it does—that you do nothing waywardly, but always pause to consider what, I suppose, must be cause and effect ? ’

‘ Not always. I came to Medwyn the other day against my better judgment and somewhat to my mother’s disappointment. I acted merely on impulse. ’

‘ You had to come and see me. I needed you, ’ was Christine’s unexpected reply. ‘ I too was drawn to Medwyn—I felt that something awaited me here. I think I am a fatalist, and my blind acceptance of the events of life has been fostered during my companionship with Mrs. Prentice. ’

‘ She is an extraordinary woman, ’ said Amory musingly. ‘ I have heard of her from Lady Carteret, and our aunts have told me part of her history. I cannot conceive of any common meeting-ground between you and her. ’

‘ Oh, but she was most kind to me, though I have never understood her deep-rooted interest in public life for women, which does not appeal to me in the least. Apart from that she was most interesting, and her knowledge of the human heart was a little disconcerting at times. She seemed to know what one thought before one knew oneself. ’

‘ She is going abroad, I think you said ? ’

‘ Yes, on the fifteenth of January—for the study of the occult in the East. I think she is dead, so far as interest in the Women’s Cause in England is concerned. I cannot help wondering what will be her ultimate end. I have even wondered whether she might ultimately find rest in the bosom of the Romish Church. ’

Amory stole a side-glance at her, wondering whether the same fold might appeal to her.

‘ You take some interest in the Romish Church yourself, perhaps, that you speak like that ? ’

'Oh, none. I have very little interest in churches, which seem to me a relic of barbarism—of symbolism, if you do not like the other word. They have really very little relation to actual life.'

'But public worship, ordained and sanctioned by our divine Master, remains the only form of religious expression that we have,' said Amory quickly.

'Oh no,' rejoined Christine. 'There is the life which is inspired and dominated by religion as yours is, and which is more eloquent than the formalism of church services. I can't conceive of you acting meanly or treacherously or selfishly. I am therefore compelled to respect—even to acknowledge—what I don't understand.'

Amory did not reply for a moment, and Christine looked at him to see whether her words had made any impression. Then she continued—

'I have met a great many so-called religious people who are quite without the light of which your mother spoke to me, and which I see that you also cherish. Take our aunts, for instance. Aunt Lettice affects piety, and she is an ardent supporter of all the ordinances of All Hallows', but she is at heart a selfish, worldly woman, and is even a little cruel. Aunt Grace is better, but she would be just as much of a dear without going to church. She is as pleasant on week-days as on Sundays.'

Amory smiled a little. He wished her to talk—to express all the views she cherished in order that he might arrive at a clearer conception of her character and outlook upon life. He had set out upon this walk with a definite purpose—to talk to her about her own private life, to ask about her husband, and if possible, try to discover where the difficulty of their relationship lay. It was a course most unusual for a man of his temperament, being rather shy by nature and disinclined to express himself with freedom in the presence of strangers. He could not feel, however, as if this cousin who had so

strangely crossed his path belonged to that category, as he had felt familiar and happy with her from the first moment of meeting. He had accidentally discovered how completely isolated she was at the present crisis in her affairs, and realising to the full the dangers of such a position for a young and attractive woman, he had determined to use all the powers he possessed to bring about some reconciliation between her and her husband. But first he must get a more clear and definite idea of the lions in the path. It was a rather strained and unusual situation, but he had had some considerable experience in dealing with difficult situations, and he did not shrink from it.

'Do you mind if I talk about myself?' she asked presently when he made no comment on her words.

'It is what I wish to hear more than anything else,' he answered so swiftly and with such a look of quick appreciation that she was left in no doubt of his interest in her. The feeling that he was deeply interested in her comforted her, and though he might disapprove of her actions in certain circumstances, his sympathy and understanding would never fail.

'I warn you, I am horribly selfish,' she said with her sweet smile which had once been the joy of Otto Breck's life, but which, of late, had been so rare and fleeting.

'I am prepared for that,' he answered, smiling too. 'It is so common and dear a failing that we ought all to have sympathy with one another because of it.'

'Ah, I thought you would reprove me for that, and show me wherein I had failed in my Christian duty,' she said banteringly.

'Who am I to judge?' he made answer. 'But I am a man and you are a woman. It is just possible that between us we may arrive at some solution of the particular problem which vexes your soul. Life is at once so complicated and so simple that we cannot afford to

disdain any help which will bring us nearer any realisation of its meaning.'

'I have always been proud,' answered Christine. 'And I have lived very much to myself. That is partly due to temperament and partly to training. Now I will tell you about myself, beginning at the beginning, and I warn you it will be a tedious story.'

'I shall not find it so. I am honoured and touched by your confidence.'

'It will be the first I have given, and the only reason I offer it to you must be because we come of the same people. My mother died when I was born, my father brought me up—' She talked on then, giving a full, though brief, sketch of her childhood and of the perfect relation that had existed between her father and herself.

It was a moving and beautiful story, and as Amory listened to her vibrating voice and witnessed the moving tenderness of her face, he realised what depths and possibilities were enshrined in her nature for good, what womanly capacity for happiness on the right lines. She told the story consecutively and, when she came to the incident of her father's death, she stood still in the path, opened the bodice of her dress, and took out a letter wrapped in a soft handkerchief.

'This is the message he left to me—the last letter, I think, except one which he penned the night before he died. I was selfishly sleeping, not knowing how his heart was riven because of me. It is in keeping with the whole—'

'You wish me to read this?' asked Amory in a low voice.

'Yes, it will help you to understand what came after.'

She turned away from him while he read it, and walked a little restlessly to and fro on the path. A low wind had risen and was ruffling the bosom of the quiet stream and giving a chill to the air, which they must have felt

had they not been deeply engrossed. The sun had gone down, and the grey shadows of the night, creeping across the landscape, narrowed and dwindled it till the perspective was wholly obliterated.

Amory quickly read the closely written sheets which Otto Breck had penned in the night-watches; and when he had come to the last page he turned back and read certain passages again. Then he folded the letter, and Christine stretched out her hand.

'Don't say a word about it yet. Let me go on.'

She related all that had passed at the Glen of the Ford on the day of the funeral, and she drew a portrait of her Uncle Hedderwick and—incidentally—of Alan Grier without so much as mentioning his name. She passed over lightly the record of her London experiences and her visit to Medwyn, then hastened on to tell of her visit to Locharde and her hurried marriage to Grier. From that moment forward her voice seemed to harden, and though she tried to be just while describing her life at the Manse, Amory could read between the lines and made no mistake in his estimate of the actual state of the household and the elements of which it was composed. When she came to explain the reasons which had led her to decide on the drastic step of turning her back on it all, she was not so clear.

Time adjusts so much in our human experience that occasionally, after some lapse of time, we are at a loss how to account rationally for certain actions that previously seemed perfectly reasonable, if not unavoidable. Christine became suddenly ashamed of her fight with fate and felt that she had not behaved with dignity and that it was more difficult to present a clear case than she had imagined. She felt irritated by this discovery, unaware that the whole change was in herself. Her little excursion into life—as she had expressed it—had not altogether failed of its purpose after all, and she was now beginning

in spite of herself to behold the true proportion of things. Her voice grew a little weary, and she lost the quick descriptive speech and the picturesqueness of touch which had held Amory spellbound at the beginning of the recital.

'I think you need not go any further,' he said with a great gentleness. 'It is becoming quite painful for you, and it is unnecessary. I think I understand. I should be very obtuse if I did not after what you have told me. Let us leave what is past and go on now to what is to come.'

'I don't see what is to come,' said Christine listlessly. 'I feel as if everything was over.'

'At five-and-twenty?' said Amory with a smile. 'Well, if you prefer it, we shall talk of the present.'

'But are you not going to pass any remark on what I have told you, or let me know your opinion of my conduct? I felt certain from the beginning that, though you might understand what I have done, you would not approve of it.'

'I am only concerned with it so far as it affects your happiness and welfare. You have not at least found happiness in the way you have taken. That, I think, needs no telling. It was written on your face that night I first saw you in London—it is written on it now.'

'Oh, surely not,' said Christine, putting up her hand with an involuntary gesture as if to chide a face so betraying. 'I have had very good spirits, I think, and of course I have been intensely interested in most of my experiences.'

'Granted—an intelligent woman is always interested in the novel and hitherto untrodden paths, but could you contemplate a lifetime of such occupation as you have had lately?'

'No,' replied Christine calmly. 'I have had enough, if you are talking of the public life which Mrs. Prentice

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liked and to which she introduced me. I have no call to it, and very little sympathy with its aims. I don't apologise for my lack of public spirit, or comradeship with those who are actuated by the sincerest motives, and who believe in all they are striving after. I simply say it does not interest me—why, I can't explain.'

'You have music in your soul, I could almost take my affidavit,' said Amory quickly.

'I love music, but not enough to constitute a career—I mean I have no outstanding gift for music, but I can write. I know I can. I have done some writing since I have been with Mrs. Prentice, and everything I have written has been accepted. I have even been asked to attempt something more ambitious, and to send it to the same publisher. So, you see, my future is not altogether without hope.'

'Have you any plan for the immediate future, then?'

'I had none when I came here, but this morning I was very early awake, and an idea came to me. I thought I might go to a little village on the Brittany coast which I visited with my father one year. There is an old convent there, and the sisters board a few ladies. It is very restful and delightful, and certainly there would be few distractions if I wished to write.'

'That sounds well,' said Amory quietly.

At the moment they came to another foot-bridge over the little river, and there both involuntarily stood still. The light was becoming a little grey, but there was sufficient for them to see one another's faces clearly.

'What about the home you have deserted?' asked Amory deliberately, 'and what about all the broken vows and neglected responsibilities? What place have they in the scheme of things you have just sketched out?'

Christine started violently. These were the last words she had expected to hear, Amory having been so consistently gentle and sympathetic throughout.

'Oh, I thought you understood that I could not have any more to do with them,' she said confusedly.

'Not at all. I understood that a certain irksomeness of detail and narrowness of outlook fretted your spirit, and I can perfectly comprehend the step you took in a blind desire to obtain a better perspective of them. But in all that you have told me there is not a single happening which justified, even afar off, your conduct toward your husband and your husband's mother. May I ask whether you have ever given a thought to their suffering?'

'They will not suffer,' she said coldly. 'At least not much, except in their pride.'

'That I don't believe. But even if it were true, what right have you to hurt even their pride? It was a very serious thing for a man in your husband's position to have his wife leave him like that. This often is a bitter and censorious world. Probably while going so near to wrecking your own life, you have done him an irreparable injury, and that totally without just cause.'

'Oh, you don't understand!' she cried desperately. 'I suffered so much—every day was like an eternity.'

'You magnified small things because your temperament goaded you to it; but tell me, have you ever in all your life tried to realise what is the actual destiny of a human soul, what the purpose for which it is sent into this world?'

'We have no choice!' she cried rebelliously. 'And things should not be so hard for us.'

'We are each one of us units of the whole creation, part of the Great Plan, and our Maker demands and expects the fulfilment of certain conditions at our hands. Just contemplate for a moment what a world it would be if all men and women, seeking for selfish ease, should act as you did, in every crisis life presents. The result would be chaos and misery unfathomable.'

'But I had so little chance of happiness,' she pleaded

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wistfully. 'And a woman wants happiness first of all—surely she is entitled to it.'

'You had the chance of it,' he answered quietly. 'What you have missed in your life is the guiding principle, Christine. How I wish I could inspire you with it, get you to understand the joy of service, of surrender, the satisfaction of giving up!'

Christine looked at him with awe and wonder.

'I suppose it is your religion,' she said falteringly. 'You talk just like your mother when she told me about the little children she had lost. I suppose you too have had to do without things in that strange, even horrible country. But you have compensations—where are mine?'

'The same way is open, Christine. The mercy and the tenderness of God are for all. You need something to rest your soul upon. You will find it only in the service of the Lord. Cease fighting. Ask Him to order your life for you. Wait and He will guide you.'

Christine shook her head.

'You are speaking in an unknown tongue. I don't believe anything. I don't say I refuse to believe—only it seems impossible to me.'

'It is because you are fighting against it—because you can't surrender. Tell me, when your father lived, had you not implicit faith in him? Your father said "Go!" and you obeyed without asking any questions.'

'Yes, it was like that.'

'It is the same trust and love that God requires, Christine. It may be that your father was taken from you that you, through your very need, might find the only rock within whose shadow the God-created spirit can rest.'

She was silent as she walked on by his side, the wind ruffling her hair, and she seemed to shiver with a sudden sense of cold. After a moment she turned to him, with

an expression of great wistfulness, such as a child might have shown on being commanded to follow a difficult and unwelcome path.

'What does your religion bid me do with myself and my life?'

He was silent a moment, more moved than he could have expressed. But when he spoke there was neither hesitation nor doubt in the tones of his voice.

'It bids you go back.'

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE WIND FROM THE NORTH

THEY walked back to South Plain almost in silence.

As they re-crossed the little foot-bridge close to the garden of the Amory House, Christine turned to Amory with a somewhat piteous smile.

'If there is a God, how is it He did not permit us to meet before it was too late?'

'It is not too late,' returned Amory frankly. 'It is as you said—you had to seek for your experience in the wilderness.'

'The wilderness,' she repeated slowly. 'Yes, it is that; but the wilderness is not only behind me—it is in front.'

Without speaking a word he stood aside for her to pass across the bridge. Something told him that they had come to the end of speech.

The house was lit up when they entered the familiar door, it being now about an hour past tea-time. Christine, unwilling to meet her aunts just at once, was about to go upstairs when the drawing-room door opened and the voice of her Aunt Grace summoned her.

'How late you are, dear; there is some one here waiting for you. Come.'

A sudden terror shook her, and for the moment she felt she must flee. But immediately another figure filled the doorway behind Aunt Grace, and a joyous voice called her by name.

'Effie!' The word fell in a great cry from Christine's lips, and the next moment she was clinging to her, and they had forgotten their surroundings.

Amory a little awkwardly sought to enter the drawing-room, and when Aunt Grace saw the two girls go together upstairs, she followed him in without a word and closed the drawing-room door.

'Why did you keep Christine out so long, John? She must be famished for her tea.'

'We did not think about tea, I am afraid, but perhaps you could send some up to her. Who is the lady?'

'Her husband's sister, come to spend a brief Christmas holiday in London with Christine. There seems to have been some misunderstanding about the visit. I am afraid Christine is still a very casual person.'

Amory pondered the thing, certain that there were wheels within wheels. But there could be no doubt that to Christine the new-comer was more than welcome.

'Where did you go, John?' asked Aunt Letty. 'I am sure it was not a very fine afternoon for a walk.'

'We were talking, Aunt Lettice, and, I am afraid, did not much notice either the weather or the direction.'

'But surely you must know which direction you took!'

'Oh yes. We crossed the river and walked west—at least we were all the time facing the sunset, which was fine.'

'Did you walk as far as the little church at Threefold Cross?'

'I don't think so. At least I don't remember seeing any church.'

'And what did you talk about? I am so glad to think you can make Christine talk. She has been so very silent since she came. Either her husband must be a great talker or a very silent man to have changed her so.'

'Oh Lettice, Christine never was a talker,' said Miss Grace. 'That is a charming girl who has come—she is

so frank and outspoken. We quite took to her. She left her bag at the Golden Fleece Hotel. We have sent Tirnbs up for it. A most extraordinary muddle it seems to have been. But Miss Grier merely laughs over it. Some sisters-in-law would not take it so pleasantly.'

Amory concluded that the new arrival must be a person of tact and discernment, and a load lifted from his mind. He had done his part. It might remain with the new-comer to guide the story to its fit conclusion.

'What do you think of your cousin, John?' asked Miss Lettice's sweet, somewhat querulous voice. 'She seems to us greatly changed since last year. No one, seeing her then, could have imagined matrimony could have such an effect on her; she is so subdued.'

'Tell me more explicitly in what way she is changed, Aunt Lettice,' said Amory interestedly, as he helped himself to a cup of tea. He could not keep his thoughts from wandering to the room overhead. Was a poignant scene being enacted there, he wondered?

But had he been permitted to look into the pleasant room which Sophia Timbs loved to make homely and inviting for Miss Alice's daughter, he would not have seen anything to suggest tragedy. Effie stood by the table, smoothing her reindeer gloves in her hand, her bright face very serious, but perfectly calm.

'Don't glower at me, Christine,' she said with a little smile. 'I have just come to find out for myself what is the matter. You gave me the right in the cab that day before the wedding, and I'll never give up that right.'

Christine looked as if smitten with sudden cold. She shivered a little and sat down, conscious of an increasing weakness of body and lethargy of mind. No longer a free agent, she felt helpless and incompetent to give any account of herself. Effie's question was very straight and clear, but the answer must be less so. In a word, Christine did not know what to say.

'I hardly thought you would need to ask that question, Effie. I have heard you criticise the life at Strathardle before now.'

'Yes, and I may criticise it again, dear. But that does not help us here. What *was* the matter?'

'I was not needed or wanted,' said Christine dully. 'They must have been glad when I went away.'

Effie put down her gloves and began to unbutton her coat.

'We got our holidays at Lanark on Monday because there had been a case of suspected scarlet fever. I went up to Strathardle on the Tuesday——'

'Not expecting to find me there, I suppose,' interrupted Christine.

'Oh no. I knew that you had gone, for the moment my mother had Alan's telegram she went back to the Manse.'

'I told you it would please her,' said Christine with a sort of quiet triumph.

'As to that, I don't know. She hardly ate or slept when she came to me, and when I saw her this week she looked to me like a woman not long for this world. She'll never get over it, Christine. It was far worse for her than a death at the Manse.'

'Why? I thought she would just slip into the old ways and that everything would go on just as before.'

'We are apt to think that, but nothing can be the same after the deluge. It alters the face of the whole world. And, unfortunately, my mother, you see, had got to be very fond of you. That was where it hurt.'

Christine's mouth shut with a little snap.

'I never did anything to make her fond of me. I didn't want her to feel like that,' she said hardily.

'Perhaps not, but that's the fact; and because of it she's hard on Alan—blaming him entirely.'

'I hope he's quite well,' Christine forced herself to say.

'His hair is greyer than my mother's, and he looks like an old man, but we never spoke your name, Christine. When

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I saw how it was with them I just rose up and came away. You have destroyed life for these two folk that never harmed you, and you went there of your own free will.'

'I never wished to go,' she said defiantly.

'Still you went as a free agent. Don't tell me anybody coerced you into it. You are not that kind of woman.'

'But I hated it all! If I had remained I should have done something dreadful.'

'I get up at Lanark some days, feeling fit to murder the whole school,' replied Effie calmly. 'But I don't do it. These are the days when I get on best with those about me, because I fight myself. Don't think nobody has a battle except you, Christine. Do you think any sane woman, feeling herself capable of higher things, would choose such a life as mine? When I walked in London yesterday and felt the throb and beat of its myriad life I knew what I wanted, but I didn't telegraph to the Clerk of the School Board, resigning my situation. We're not bairns, Christine, with the bairns' right to throw away the broken toy. When it happens to be broken we have got to mend it—that's all, and hold up the brave face, even, if necessary, trying to convince ourselves that it is not broken at all.'

'Marriage is different,' said Christine. 'You never seem to get away from it.'

'I understand that, but it has compensations.'

Christine was silent a moment with her head on her hands.

'Did Alan say anything about me, Effie?'

'Not a word, but my mother knows that I am here—at least that I have gone to London for the purpose of seeing you. I have a letter for you from her in the bag. Shall I give it to you now?'

'No, no! I don't think I want to see it.'

'You will have to. The writing of a letter is an event in my mother's life. I have had only two from her in my life. Yes, come in.'

This invitation was in answer to a knock at the door which, as Effie perceived, Christine had not heard.

Sophia Timbs appeared, bringing in a dainty tea-tray and with a glance of affection set it down before Christine on the table.

'Miss Amory's orders, ma'am, and I made the toast myself.'

It was Effie who thanked her, and who, when the door was closed again, poured out a cup and touched Christine's arm.

'Here, dear, drink this, and eat a bit of the toast that hard-faced woman made for love of you. See what power you have over other people's lives! I, a harmless, unnecessary unit, envy you, though I think, dear, that if God gave to me the capacity to win so much love, I should better know how to appreciate it.'

Christine sat up with a little start and began to drink her tea in feverish haste.

'What do they say about me in Strathardle? Have they put me outside the plea yet?'

'There has been talk, of course, and plenty of it, but my mother has lied bravely for you, Christine, and talks to everybody as if it were some sickness or other pressing cause that keeps you so long among your own people.'

'Your mother has lied for me!' repeated Christine vaguely. 'Why should she?'

'It is her idea of being loyal, I suppose,' replied Effie calmly.

'But why should anybody lie about the cause of my absence? I don't mind though everybody knows.'

'You have nothing to lose, perhaps,' observed Effie drily. 'My mother has centuries of pride and decent feeling behind her. What you have done means disgrace to the Griers. There isn't any use mincing the matter. She told me that Dr. Elder had been up trying to rouse Alan, and that probably after the New Year he will leave

Strathardle and take up some post in Edinburgh in connection with the headquarters of the Church. It might even be a travelling secretaryship or a mission of inquiry abroad. I believe that Dr. Elder will create such a post for him. My mother said as much.'

Christine emptied her cup and filled out another. Her tongue seemed parched in her throat.

'Are there trains back to London to-night yet?' inquired Effie. 'These dear old ladies asked me to stop over to-morrow, and they expatiated at great length on the horrors of Christmas Day in a hotel. I had hoped to find you at your hotel, of course, but they couldn't tell me when you would be back.'

'Effie, I'll go back with you to-night to Whitefield's. I should like to show you London.'

'I'd rather stop here over Sunday,' replied Effie, 'if the old ladies meant it—and I think they did. What a splendid-looking man your cousin is. I have been hearing of his achievements. How proud they are of him and all belonging to him. Is he a good man?'

'Good? Oh yes, he's horribly good, Effie. Don't let us talk about him. I tell you, he's impossible. Shall we go down and see what they say in the drawing-room? I don't look forward with any pleasure to spending to-morrow here, I can tell you. I would much rather go to London to-night.'

'Well, but it doesn't do to make conveniences of people and throw them over at a moment's notice,' said Effie. 'Heavens! if we all behaved in such an irresponsible way what a world this would be! I am not very conventional myself, but I acknowledge the use of the conventions. They're a sort of daur ower us. Do they dress for dinner here? I have nothing in my bag but a white blouse.'

'It will do,' answered Christine. 'Everybody wears high frocks, of course.'

A little later, when a message from the drawing-room took them down, Christine was surprised to find it all so easy and pleasant. The atmosphere which she had found impossible Effie seemed to revel in. She set herself down by Miss Lettice's couch and proceeded to talk cheerily to her, telling her little stories to make her laugh, and deferring to her in a hundred little ways which delighted the invalid, and created a sunny atmosphere about her. Remembering that Effie had not been much of a success at Lochardle, Christine was more and more amazed. Perhaps she too had learned in the hard school of life.

It did not quite please her, however, to observe how well Effie and John Amory seemed to understand one another, and her brows went down when on the Sunday afternoon they went off for a walk together without so much as suggesting that she might like to accompany them.

'What a perfectly charming girl your sister-in-law is!' exclaimed Aunt Grace as from the French window she watched them crossing the lawn towards the river path. 'If your husband is at all like her, you must be a happy woman.'

'They are not at all alike, Aunt Grace——'

'Had you a letter this morning? It seems hard for you to be parted at Christmas time,' pursued Aunt Grace, vaguely conscious that there was something not altogether satisfactory about Christine.

'I didn't have any letter.'

'Well, I suppose you will be getting home soon. Miss Grier says she must go up to London to-morrow, that it is her first visit and she must make the most of it. But you won't go too?'

'I must, Aunt Grace. Effie came to see me without sending me any notice or I should not have left her to arrive as she did. It was very sensible of her to come on down here, and I am certainly very much obliged to you for being so kind to her.'

'It is easy to be kind to such a delightful creature.'

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She is so fresh and cheerful it quite does us good. I have never seen your Aunt Lettice take so quickly to any one. John feels just the same. By the bye, do you like John?' 'Is he not a little bit priggish?' asked Christine somewhat maliciously.

'We don't think so, and his manner to old women like us is charming. I must say his mother has brought him up well. We are in great luck to have such an interesting household for Christmas.'

Christine made no reply.

'Why didn't you go to early communion this morning, Christine? It was lovely, and your sister enjoyed every moment of it. We were all there and missed you very much. I was in hopes that you would take more interest in the services now that you are a clergyman's wife. They are a great comfort and a help as well.'

Christine made no response. Her thoughts were with the pair on the river path, where it wound down to the church of the Threefold Cross. Doubtless they talked of her. Her heart swelled rebelliously at the thought.

If they had, Effie made no allusion to the fact, nor did Amory. Both avoided any, even the most distant, allusion to the under-currents of feeling which occupied their thoughts.

When Christine came downstairs rather earlier than usual next morning she was surprised to learn that Sir John Amory had already left Medwyn by a train at half-past seven.

'He had an important connection to catch in London, ma'am,' said Sophia Timbs. 'He said good-bye to Miss Lettice and Miss Grace last night.'

Gone—and he had not so much as thought it worth while to speak another word to her, or to leave her a message!

Christine's mouth took an unusually bitter curve.

At breakfast they all discussed the trains that reached London later in the day, and finally were permitted to

fix upon one which left Medwyn about four o'clock. Christine, feverishly restless as usual, was eager to be gone. A new turn had been given to her life and she did not know what she should do next. She knew that Effie hoped—if indeed she was not determined—that they should travel back to Scotland together. Effie, however, had not actually suggested this, but had simply remarked that her ticket would expire on Friday, and that she would have to travel back to Edinburgh on that day. She had also delivered over Mrs. Grier's letter to Christine, but was unaware whether she had read it. As a matter of fact she had not, for she was afraid.

That night after they had returned to London, however, and Effie had gone to her own room at Whitefield's Hotel, Christine, seated before her bedroom fire in her dressing-gown and slippers, prepared herself for the ordeal.

The envelope was addressed in Effie's handwriting, the sheet within was covered with cramped, somewhat uneven characters not so much the work of uneducated fingers as of those stiff at an unusual task.

Christine was surprised and touched by the words at the top where the letter began abruptly.

DEAR LASSIE,—As Effie is in hopes of seeing you, though I don't myself feel so certain about it, I take this opportunity of writing a few lines to you myself. It will not be easy for me to say what I want to say, because I have little skill with the pen, and because it is a very difficult matter I have to write about.

I am not seeking to inquire as to why you went away, Christine; that must be between yourself and your Maker who created you a responsible being. What I want to say is that if I did anything to vex or humble you while you were here, I am sorry for it: I never meant ill, lassie, though I confess that I had a sore heart over your first coming to the Manse. In the years that are coming, Christine, may be after you have sons of your own, which God grant you may have, you will understand what I suffered. But you would never

make the mistake I did and sinned in the doing, making an idol of my son and shutting his sister out, and living for him as if the world held none other.

I have been punished for that likewise, for it is written 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.'

But after you came, and your sweet ways wound themselves about my heart, I found that there were other joys in the world besides that of motherhood of one son, and the place grew bonnier and brighter because you were there. And just when the sun was shining at its brightest and I had got to love you like my own, you rose up and went away, and the darkness shut down upon my life and my son's.

I say nothing about my pain, for that, maybe, I have deserved, but my son did nothing to deserve that you should tear his heart to pieces with your bonnie fingers; and my whole prayer to you is for him. For sure unless you come back to him, his whole life is over, and he will do no more good in this world—shame that I should have to write such a word about my own son—nor will he be ready for the next. I am an old woman, whose days will be few. I have not had much happiness in my life, chiefly because I have feared to be happy, thinking I had not the right to it. But I say here, that when you come back, I will go down on my knees to serve you, to try and wipe out the hard thoughts I once had of you, not only for my son's sake, but because you are as dear to me as he is. That I should live to say this to another woman's child, I could never have believed. But we never get to the end of the mysteries of life.

I am an old woman, my dear, and you are a young one. I long for you, I need you, and this empty, empty house is crying for you as the plovers are crying over the desolate spaces of the Ardle Moor. So come to her that is fain to mother you, and that here signs herself with truth and affection your loving mother,

MARIAN GRIER.

Christine bowed her head till her lips rested on the paper where a tear had blotted it, and when she slept it lay upon her breast.

Nevertheless Effie on the appointed day travelled to the north alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MAN TO MAN

THE desk between the two windows of the study in Strathardle Manse was littered with papers and reference books, while the pile of evenly written and carefully corrected manuscript steadily grew. Alan Grier had learned one of the great lessons of life—that the balm of Gilead is often hidden in the heart of some task which at first sight appears irksome and distasteful. To him had been revealed the secret evangel of work.

He was less ruddy, a little more careworn than before, yet his face wore a peaceful look as he laid a weight upon the well-covered sheets and began to clear the litter from the table. The book, promised for the spring, was now within measurable distance of completion. On the whole, he was satisfied with his performance of the task, and he casually wondered as he rose from it after five hours' close attention, where he should find another to fill its place.

He had a sick child to see at Hamish Duguid's cottage near the head of the loch, and must make haste unless he would be caught by the swiftly gathering dark. His boots, placed by a careful mother to warm on the fender, invited him to get ready for his walk. Before putting them on, he stepped to the window to scan the sky. Its aspect was threatening, and some stray flakes of snow were driving before the north wind. It already lay several inches deep on the road, and winter had the Glen of the Ford in its icy grip.

At the moment a trap drove up to the gate, and a stranger nimbly sprang from it, spoke a word to the driver, and opening the gate approached the house. He wore a fur-trimmed overcoat, and his soft hat was well drawn over his brows, so that very little of his face could be seen. Grier hastily put on his boots and had just risen from his chair when Annie Donald, without preamble, announced 'A gentleman for ye, sir.'

The stranger entered with the ease of a man never at a loss in any circumstances—an ease acquired through much dealing with difficult problems among all sorts and conditions of men. He smiled slightly as he bowed, and laid his hat on the table, placing in it the gloves which he drew off.

'My name is Amory. Is it at all familiar to you, Mr. Grier?' he asked, and the tones of his voice, ringing true, relieved Grier of a strange embarrassment.

'Yes, I have heard it. I know it to be the family name of my wife's mother.'

'Right. I have come from your wife, though not of her knowledge or with her consent. First of all, am I welcome?'

'Certainly; and before we go further, what about your conveyance? I suppose you have driven from the Junction, since there is no train due at our local station at this time.'

'Yes, and I find I cannot get back to Aberdeen to-night. If you are so kind as to offer me your hospitality I shall be glad to accept it.'

'Most certainly. Let me tell them to give the man some tea before he goes back, and to bring in your bag.'

'Thank you—that will be very kind. It is what I hoped for.'

While Grier left the room for a moment to inform his mother that an unexpected guest had arrived, Amory looked round with a conscious quickening of interest upon

the surroundings which his kinswoman had found intolerable. They were simple but refined, and the house breathed of a homely comfort. Also, as he had been quick to note, there was nothing weak or repellent about the man. His fine looks, indeed, had come upon Amory as a great surprise. He was warming his hands over the cheerful blaze of the study fire, when Grier, with a slightly heightened colour, returned to the room.

'My mother and the servant will see to the man, and afterwards to your comfort. You will be glad of a cup of tea. I was thinking of one myself before I should go out. The Manse is simple, but to what it contains you are welcome.'

'I knew that when I entered, or I should not have asked for your hospitality. I should simply have made my call and gone away.'

'You are not stopping at any of the great houses in the neighbourhood, then?'

'No. I left London yesterday afternoon at 2.20, slept the night at Edinburgh, and here I am. I come from a tropical country, so I was afraid to risk the night journey, though I must say your travelling is very comfortable.'

'Yes, it is. There have been great changes in that respect in the last few years. Let me help you off with your coat.'

As Grier stepped to his visitor's side to give the proffered aid, they were brought into contrast and comparison. In the matter of inches Grier certainly had the advantage, his figure being altogether on a larger scale. His face, too, had a more rugged strength, but it lacked the mobile curves which made Amory's such an arresting one.

Grier drew an arm-chair close to the fire, and Amory took it, but he did not himself offer to sit down. Outwardly perfectly calm, both were conscious of the undoubted strain of the moment.

'I spent the week-end at Medwyn in Bucks, and left your wife there, Mr. Grier.'

Grier made no remark. Amory, watching him keenly, observed the sensitiveness of his face and the signs of a pride that had been hurt. But he did not discover any of the repellent traits for which he had been prepared. Christine's behaviour more and more perplexed him.

'I am somewhat at a loss to explain or justify my intrusion upon you at this time,' he continued in his pleasant voice which had been known to smooth the angles off many a sharp corner in his experience. 'Your wife is my cousin, and though I only met her for the first time in the course of the last week, I feel in a measure responsible—at least, I could not pass on without trying whether something could not be done—'

'She is well, I hope?' said Grier in the same constrained voice.

'She is quite well, and so also is your sister who is at Medwyn with her—a charming woman. I was glad to see that so perfect an understanding seemed to exist between your wife and her.'

'Effie at Medwyn!' cried Grier in amazement. 'How did she get there?'

'She arrived in London with the intention of visiting Christine, and hearing that she had gone to Medwyn, simply followed her. She made such an impression on the old ladies there that they insisted on keeping her over Christmas, and as I say, I left them both there.'

'Yes,' was all that Grier said.

'I have had a long talk with Christine. I did not force her confidence, but, observing her unhappy and puzzling over the obviously unusual circumstances of her lot, I ventured to ask her a few questions, presuming perhaps a little on our newly established relationship. She did not resent it. But I must say I did not make much headway. The most I can say is that I awakened

some new thoughts in her mind, and that she has begun to realise what she has done.'

'Is she unhappy?' asked Grier a trifle wistfully.

'About herself. But it is a step in the right direction. I don't like what she has done, Grier—to be quite frank with you—but she is a woman above the common, and perhaps cannot be judged by the ordinary standards. Then she has not had much chance of getting a proper perspective of life. We must remember how she was brought up, when we are tempted to be hard on her.'

'I never have been hard on her, God knows,' said Grier with a sudden passion. 'I have cared, and do care for her too much for that. I have done nothing to induce her to return, because I was simply stunned and felt that my intervention might be worse than useless. If Christine ever comes back she must come of her own accord.'

'Precisely, and that she will do some day, but we must do something to hasten the happy issue. Perhaps without knowing it, you took the very best course possible in the circumstances. She fully expected you would rush after her, and believe me, she has resented your silence. A woman only resents what a man does when she is interested in him.'

'I have had news of her all along, of course, from Mrs. Prentice who, unknown to Christine, has been my friend. I have had a letter from her only to-day. She is in this very county at present, visiting a relative, but I shall not be able to see her as she is laid aside with illness.'

'Her connection with Mrs. Prentice is at an end. She is simply drifting now. On Saturday, when we had a long walk and talk together, she talked of going across to Brittany to a convent to do some literary work. My advice to you is to let her go there.'

'But that takes her farther away.'

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'Would you advise me to write to her?'

'Yes.'

'What sort of a letter?'

The words were forced from Grier's unwilling lips, and Amory's eyes expressed his sympathy as he listened. He observed how love had softened a naturally hard man, and destroyed the citadel of his pride.

'You should write what your heart dictates.'

Grier turned from him for a moment and gazed intently into the fire.

Amory saw that he was forgotten. When Grier spoke again there was a different note in his voice.

'How am I to thank you for this brotherly and Christian act?' was all he said.

'By not thanking me at all,' replied Amory genially. 'We are servants of the same Lord and Master, and surely the least we can do is to hold out the hand of comradeship as opportunity offers—even to create that opportunity on occasion.'

'As you have done,' put in Grier quickly.

'Well, frankly I felt that I could not understand my cousin's strange case until I had seen you. Now I confess I understand it less than ever. Hers is a very complex nature, however, and even when she comes home your happiness will never be of the restful order—you will have the price to pay.'

'I am ready to pay it,' replied Grier without a moment's hesitation.

'But do not be too humble with her. A woman like Christine respects strength in a man, and she would despise weakness.'

Grier merely smiled, and Amory fully understood that smile, which implied that he sought to legislate in a region wholly unfamiliar.

Both men laughed spontaneously, and Amory drew out his cigarette case.

'Do you smoke, and may I?'

'I do, but I am afraid mine is stronger meat,' observed Grier as he reached for his old black pipe.

Then they sat down together and smoked the pipe of peace, and talked no more of Christine.

Before they had got to the end of their talk Annie Donald's knock summoned them to tea.

Mrs. Grier stood at the door of the dining-room, eagerly expecting the guest, hungering for news of Christine.

'Mother, this is Sir John Amory, a cousin of Christine's, and he has come to tell us about her,' said Grier, desirous of relieving his mother's anxiety.

Of late they had come much nearer together in heart, anxiety about Christine making a common bond between them. But he was unprepared for the sudden quiver that crossed his mother's lined face as she stepped forward quickly and laid her hand on Amory's arm.

'Oh sir, tell me about my lassie! When is she coming back? When did you see—her?'

'On Sunday, and I think she is coming soon,' said Amory, more moved by the eager love expressed in the old woman's face than he had been by Grier's manly bearing. And in his heart his anger grew against the woman who had despised the pure gold of these true hearts and had heaped such pain upon them.

The questions Grier had not asked were put without hesitation by his mother. How did Christine look? Was she tired, was she sad? Where had she been living? When would she come back?

Amory tried to reassure and comfort her, at the same time taking a fresh vow within his heart. He would go straight back to Christine, and if any power of his could persuade her, she should never cross the sea to the Brittany convent. The book, if it ever was written,

should be written here in the Manse of Strathardle. And its basis would be the new life that she should begin after her experience in the wilderness.

It was Saturday, however, before Amory reached London and, though he called at Whitefield's Hotel it was only to learn that Mrs. Grier had quitted it the day before. The hotel people did not know where she had gone, and she had taken away all her belongings, leaving no address. She had not left at the same time as the other lady, but after her departure. Amory was bitterly disappointed, but realising that in the meantime nothing more could be done, he returned to Clievdon to his mother to acquaint her fully with the extraordinary story in which he had taken a small part.

The Manse of Strathardle was a very empty place for its inmates when Amory had left it. There is a kinship of the soul which takes no account of time or circumstance or distance, and which forges the bonds of a friendship that is eternal. Amory had completely won the confidence of Alan Grier, and their talk had been brothers' talk. Mrs. Grier, watching them together, had thanked God for His intervention in the darkest hour of their lives.

'Mother,' said the minister, when he had returned from seeing Amory off at the Junction, 'we will stop here at least another year. I will write to Dr. Elder and refuse the foreign appointment. Then I will finish the book. It would not do for Christine to come back and find a closed door.'

'I would never leave the Glen till she came, Alan, even if I had to go to live in the White Cottage itself,' replied Mrs. Grier, and in spite of himself a mist dimmed for a moment the clear grey of the minister's eyes.

'You like Amory, mother? He's one of the princes whom God sends to the world from time to time just to keep the balance true.'

'I could have loved and mothered him, Alan, in spite of his title and his grand doings. And when I heard him speak about those cruel heathen who killed his father he minded me on Stephen. His heart is a bairn's heart, but it serves the Lord wi' a man's strength.'

Thus they spoke of him who had gone out of his way to do a Christlike deed, at what cost to himself they did not know.

It is certain that had Amory and Christine met earlier her story never would have been written.

Mrs. Grier went about her tasks blithely for the next day or two, getting the Manse ready for the return of its mistress, her eyes often wandering to the white road that followed the dark windings of the Loch to the Ford.

Night and day she dreamed of the home-coming of Christine, and at last one day the dream came true.

The minister was absent at the usual monthly Presbytery meeting at Kinellan, the day of which Christine had not forgotten. She had chosen the time of her arrival well, reaching the Inn of the Ford about two of the afternoon, where she dismissed the man and left her things, saying that she would send down for them later on.

Her demeanour and speech were so natural that the man from the Junction and Mrs. Maclaren of the Inn as well were satisfied that all the stories which had been rife concerning the affairs of the Manse were lies. Young Mrs. Grier behaved exactly like a person who had been absent on family affairs, and who was returning at the earliest convenient moment.

After she had inquired for the welfare of the Inn folks and again impressed upon them the fact that she would send down for her things, she stepped through the sparse wood to the kirkyard and made her way to the grave under the rowans. And when she reached it and saw it so freshly cared for, and a little glass filled with some newly-blown snowdrops under the stone, her breath came

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in a quick gasp that was wholly shame. She knew whose hand had placed them there, she herself having often filled that glass on the study mantelpiece at the Manse.

She came—unobserved, as she thought—to the Manse gate, the bitter wind of the north blowing against her face, and the snow touching her hair in a sort of rude welcome. But when she got there the door was open and the tall, spare figure of her husband's mother stood—as she had often stood before—ready to welcome her. It was not enough, however, to stand at the door. An eager heart gives speed to loving feet, and Mrs. Grier ran out and caught her in the lee of the big thorn-tree and held her very close.

'My bairn, my bairn, my bonnie doo! Yes, yes—but dinna greet, an' if ye maun greet, this is the place—on your mother's hert.'

'It is for you I have come home,' murmured Christine, and would have knelt at her feet. 'It was your letter that brought me—mother.'

Grier came home in the grey gloaming, and though no man told him that his wife had returned, he knew it in his heart even before his mother met him at the door.

'She's away ower the moor, Alan,' said the old voice tremblingly. 'You will not be hard upon her, lad, for her heart is broken and her face has a weary look. God Himself has judged and led her. We shall keep her only by our love. Dinna stint her of it as I have stinted you. I will to my knees for you and her. It's our only safeguard and refuge at a time like this.'

Amory had spoken truly when he surmised that Grier's happiness in his married life could never be of the restful order. It must suffice here to say that Christine after her return from her flight into the wilderness strove to do her best. At times it was a sorry best, yet she never

forgot the tender mercy shown to her by the people whose hearts she had wrung.

In her family life sorrow followed hard upon sorrow. It is across stormy seas that some souls are driven to port. She probed at once the joy and deep pain of motherhood, and understood to the uttermost the story which Amory's mother had told her that night in Great Cumberland Place. But she never reached such perfect self-surrender as that saintly woman—she will fight more or less to the end. Some success she has achieved in the literary life, but, as she possesses none of the popular gifts her writing must always be for the few. Her chief aim—sometimes obscured by the foam and the wind-drift—is to be a helpmeet to her husband in the higher sphere to which his gifts have called and entitled him.

They two have achieved a certain happiness together, but there are many who declare that they do not understand the wife of Professor Grier. The one person who understands—because she loves to the uttermost—is a very old woman whom the children call granny, and who is no longer able to leave the big sunny room that has been set apart for her in her son's house. There Christine finds sanctuary, and the prayer of her passionate heart is that that room may be long occupied.

Of the other persons who in their own time and way influenced the one who came after, we need perhaps, mention only two. Effie is to be found a leader of society in that mysterious city of the East which is the cradle of a great race and in which her husband, Sir John Amory, pursues his honourable and distinguished career, fully trusted by his own Government and also by the Power to whom he is accredited. No problems disturb her happy heart; she is frankly devoted to the man who has given her not only a great position but a singularly happy life. Childless herself, she dedicates her time and

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means to the alleviation of the sufferings of child-life in the country of her adoption. With her brother's wife she maintains a continuous and affectionate correspondence, but Amory and Christine have never again met.

Mrs. Prentice is still hidden in the dim mysterious regions where she sought the final solution of life's problems.

Whether she will ever emerge again, bearing with her the torch of the fuller light, it is not in my power to predict.

Her name is forgotten save by one or two who for a brief space came under the spell of her versatile personality.

The quest for happiness and peace—how alluring it is, yet how often missed, while

'A man's best things are nearest him,
 Lie close about his feet.'

