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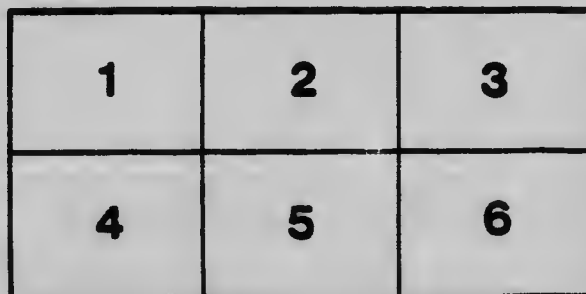
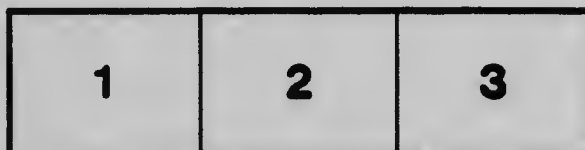
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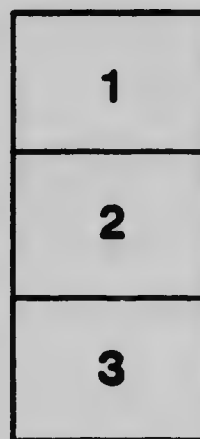
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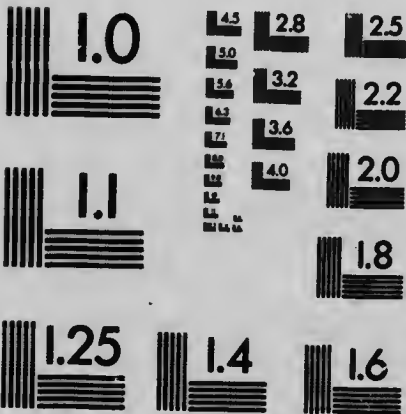
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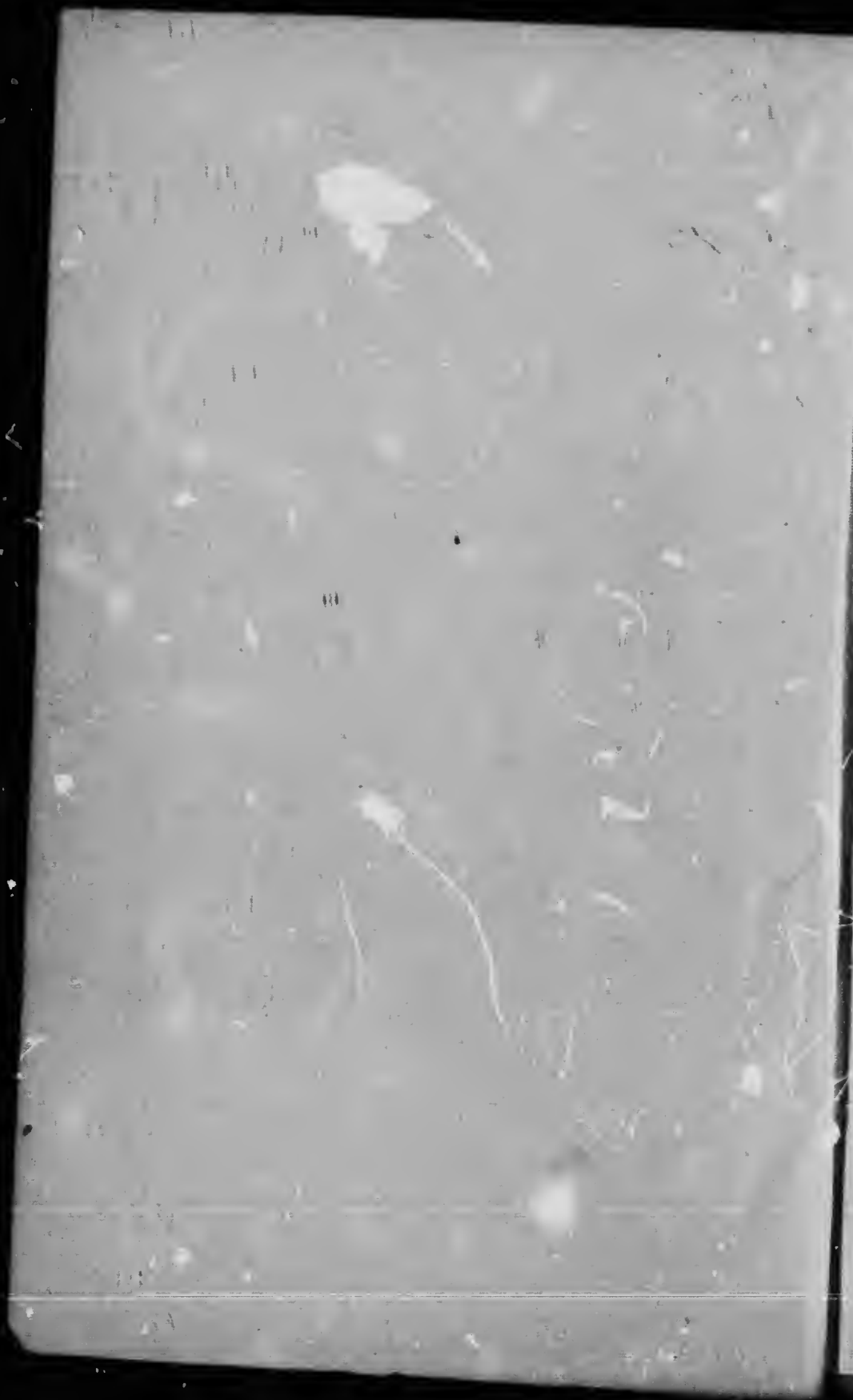


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BECAUSE OF JANE

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DOWN OUR STREET

THE BROWNS

A BACHELOR'S COMEDY

LOVE IN A LITTLE TOWN

THE PILGRIMAGE OF A FOOL

A GOLDEN STRAW

BECAUSE OF JANE

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE

AUTHOR OF "DOWN OUR STREET"

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BECAUSE OF JANE

CHAPTER I

FLIGHT after flight of starlings gathered on the bare branches of the sycamore tree until it seemed, from a little distance, to be covered with leaves. The sound the birds made—hundreds of them twittering together—was very sharp, sweet and of an indescribable freshness: the sort of sound that leaves would make if they were suddenly to find voices.

“Auntie!” said little Jane, ceasing to look at the starlings.

“Well?” said Beatrice.

“Auntie,” repeated Jane, staring with wide brown eyes, “what did gardener mean when he said to Nurse that you were getting a bit long in the tooth?”

“Oh!” said Beatrice. Then, after a pause: “It was just a foolish remark.”

Jane folded her thin brown hands.

“Another of the things I mustn’t ask about until I grow up,” she remarked without rancour, resigning her ardent little spirit to the indefinite period of waiting.

“No, no,” said Beatrice quickly. “You can know now. It only means that I am thirty.”

"Old?" said Jane.

"Yes: old," said Beatrice

She looked again at the sycamore tree, and something in her look stirred the delicate unconscious pity of little Jane.

"Hullo! What's that?" said Beatrice, starting at a hairy touch on her cheek.

"It's only old Ted. He wants to give you a kiss," said Jane.

"Well——" Beatrice roused herself and took the uncouth and shabby Teddy Bear on her knee. "I don't care much for old Ted's kisses. I would rather he bowed respectfully—like that."

Jane's laugh rang out, as fresh and sweet as the chirrup of the starlings in the sycamore.

"Auntie! I do believe you are going to turn out funny, too!"

Beatrice glanced at the sparkling little face and wondered idly who else in Marshfield had found out what a very feeble joke will produce that sudden trill of child's laughter—only it must be the right kind of joke.

"So I'm funny, too," she said, smiling at Jane. "Who is the other one?"

"Mr. Croft," said Jane at once. "Oh, he is a funny man!"

And Beatrice, of course, pictured a little fat man without much hair and a fancy waistcoat, immediately dismissing the commonplace vision from her mind.

"Come," she said, rising and holding out her

hand to Jane, "you were sent to fetch me. You must take me in, now."

"I wish we hadn't to go in," said Jane, pulling back. "I love gardens and out-of-doors, don't you? I wish there *was* no indoors."

"Rubbish!" said Beatrice, but Jane knew quite well that her aunt understood. For there is no need to shout at children; the ears of their spirits are not yet dulled.

"Oh, here you are at last," said Jane's mother, opening the drawing-room door. "Martin wants you."

She was a tall, fair woman with a pleasant voice, a precise articulation and blue eyes—a contrast to the Fawcett brother and sister, who were short and dark.

"Yes? What is it, Martin?" said Beatrice, going in.

"Mummy," interposed Jane, "Auntie Beatrice has been telling me about when she was little. She used to plan that she would keep Daddy's house when she was little like me. Shall I keep Bobby's house when I grow up? Or do you think he will get married too?"

Beatrice frowned, for it is painful to see even a broken dream roughly handled. And this dream of keeping house for Martin had solaced her all through a motherless childhood spent with kind but stern grandparents, and through a girlhood of aimless wandering with her widowed grandmother from one foreign hotel to another. And Mrs.

Fawcett frowned too, for the reminder was most inopportune.

"Don't chatter so much, Jane," she said, sharply. "Go to Nurse. Or—no—Nurse is out. Well, fetch me a clean handkerchief."

Jane knew perfectly well that she was being sent out of the room because she was not wanted, though she gave no sign of it, and trotted obediently through the doorway, where her father closed the door on the tail of Emmaline Fawcett's plaintive :

"Now, Beatrice, about this question of living with us."

And upon the beginning of Beatrice's rather distressed :

"Oh! Emmaline——"

It was already twilight even in the drawing-room, while outside, in the hall and on the staircase, the dusk had already fallen.

Jane went up the dim stairs, where a neglectful housemaid had forgotten to switch on the light, into a place which was only a largish bedroom in the full daytime, but which now loomed immense, mysterious, with things lurking in the corners that had no shape as yet, but would take dreadful form if she were really to look at them.

All that the poor grown-ups go thousands of miles to find in an Egyptian temple when the Eastern night comes suddenly, and something, half-beast, half-man, waits in the dust of ages, Jane saw by simply going upstairs to fetch a pocket-handkerchief.

The drawer stuck, and she could not get it out. She dragged and pushed with all her little strength, feeling desperately that the something was getting nearer—it would be on her in a minute.

She had no sort of idea what it could be, but the vagueness made the horror more terrible. Still, she never thought of going down without the pocket-handkerchief.

A last violent pull—the drawer flew open—she snatched a handkerchief and ran, at the very moment when terror became almost insupportable.

It is to feel the thrill of this moment when Jane snatched the handkerchief and ran that men and women go through immense dangers in the untrodden places of the world. Sometimes, when a red-eyed beast of prey bolts out of a jungle that is all weird shapes, like a forest in a nightmare, and they kill the beast just one second before it can kill them, they do get something of that moment back again—but not all.

And as Jane came downstairs she still scurried along in a sort of exquisite fear, for from each door just after she had passed emerged a vague shadow that crept after her, dogging her footsteps, until, white-faced and shiny-eyed, she burst into the now lighted drawing-room.

The three grown-ups, secure in the shining brightness, were facing each other near the fire-place, and Jane knew quite well that something unpleasant was taking place, though at that moment they were quite silent. The edges of her child's soul curled

at contact with the atmosphere of strife like a sensitive plant; for children still keep for a little while the mysterious traces of some life where words are only one medium of communication.

She stared, wide-eyed, at the group by the fire; then Emmaline said, in her precise, controlled way:

"You have been a long time, dear. What were you doing?"

"The drawer stuck, Mummy," said Jane.

And that was all she did say about it, then or ever, for there is nothing in life so strange and so deeply rooted as the secrecy of a child.

"Well, Beatrice," said Emmaline, continuing a former conversation, "now you know exactly how we are situated. Unless you live with us we must leave this house."

They were all too engrossed to notice Jane, who crept quietly to a footstool and sat down with little brown hands folding and unfolding, her eyes fixed intently on the group near the fire. She knew that if she moved she would be sent away, so she waited, quivering with curiosity and interest, but quite silent.

Martin stood in the centre with his head bent and his hands deep in his pockets.

"I am not going to persuade Bee to live with us if she doesn't want to," he said doggedly. "She seems to have set her heart on living in London and finding some work to do, and I shall not try to prevent her. Grandmother left her the money, and I am sure she earned all she got. It was no

joke trailing about the Continent with a semi-invalid for all those years. She must do as she likes now, Emmaline."

"It is all very well talking in that independent way," said Emmaline; "but if your grandmother had known that you were doing so badly in your business she might have arranged differently."

"Nonsense," said Martin roughly. "You know I had my share from my grandfather. If I fail to make a good living, my wife and children must suffer. But there is no need that Beatrice should do so as well. I wonder at your making such small-minded and ungenerous——"

"Martin!" gasped Emmaline. "You have never spoken to me like this before. Never!"

The thud with which the idol had fallen to the ground had rendered her so impervious to every other consideration that she only waited to gain breath, and then continued tearfully:

"To be threatened with leaving all my friends, and a house which exactly suits me, for a miserable street in Flodmouth—and then to be spoken to like that because I try to find some solution of our difficulties! Oh, Martin! I little thought you would ever speak to me like that!" And she shed a tear discreetly into the clean pocket-handkerchief which Jane had fetched her.

"Would it have to be a very small house, Martin?" said Beatrice.

"No—yes—not so very small, only no garden to keep up."

"But why not take a little house in Marshfield?" said Beatrice.

Mrs. Fawcett lifted her face and said solemnly: "The only one available is in a row—next door to the Blakes."

"Are the Blakes so very objectionable?" said Beatrice.

"No, no. Decent people enough. He is a clerk somewhere—I often see him at the station," said Martin. "I think that might do——"

"No!" said Emmaline, drying her eyes. "Never! If I cannot have a decent house in the country I will bury myself in Floddrouth." Then she turned to Beatrice. "I think I proved once and for all that I was not a mercenary person when I married your brother. It does not do to allude to these things, but I might, of course, have married a rich man; and I chose Martin."

"Yes, I know: Arthur Walker," murmured Beatrice with compunction, though she was aware that this suitor now dead had been in life possessed of a clubfoot and an unenviable reputation.

"I was not thinking of myself," continued Emmaline. "I was thinking of Martin and the children."

"We know that," said poor Martin incoherently. "I ought not to have married. I ought to have waited."

"I could not ask mother to do anything," said Emmaline.

"But you know there is no need for that, dear,"

said Martin, cut to the heart. "We can still afford a couple of good servants and a nurse for the children. I told you so before. It is only that we cannot afford to keep up this house and garden."

"Our first home—the home you brought me to when we were married—Oh! Martin!"

He said nothing, but looked across at the bent head of his first and only love, whom he still worshipped with an ardour that made everything else in life seem only of secondary importance. Then he turned to Beatrice:

"Bee—I suppose you couldn't be happy with us?" he said shamefacedly, tentatively.

Beatrice stared out at him from under her dark brows with just the same anxious, round-eyed gaze as little Jane in her dim corner.

"It isn't that, Martin; only I have done what somebody else wanted for so long—I longed to have a place of my own."

Emmaline lifted her head.

"You could be quite independent here. I should never interfere," she said.

"No, no, I know. It isn't that," repeated Beatrice. "I——" she drew a long breath as the years of a long servitude rose before her. "I want to be free."

"I can understand that," said Martin quickly. "There is no more to be said. I quite understand your point of view. Quite." And he put his hand on his wife's shoulder. "We must leave it at that."

Emmaline lifted her delicately-flushed face and wiped her eyes; she was, according to her lights, an excellent mother and a devoted wife, and she now remarked with a good deal of dignity :

"I have no wish to persuade Beatrice against her will. Of course we shall manage. And we can never be quite unhappy while we have each other."

Beatrice had a bewildered sense of being put gently, quietly and finally, in the wrong position; people very often did find themselves in that position after a disagreement with Mrs. Martin Fawcett, and Beatrice could only say helplessly :

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But if you only *knew* how I wanted to be free."

"There, there!" said Martin. "Let's say no more about it, old girl. Of course we quite understand."

But the real kindness of his tone went to her heart; for that fatal weakness of character, which made him ready to sacrifice almost anything to create a happy atmosphere about him, belonged to Beatrice as well: brother and sister, strong in other ways, were at the mercy of all those whom they loved.

"After all—perhaps I should be happier here—I could go away for a change," Beatrice blurted out desperately.

Emmaline's expression brightened.

"That is just what Marion said," she remarked. "There is no need for you to be here always, of course."

"Your sister Marion!" said Beatrice. Then, more slowly: "Oh, it was Marion who suggested the plan!"

"Yes," said Martin eagerly; "wonderful head Marion has! Extraordinary in a young girl!"

Beatrice stood frowning. She was not jealous of Martin's absorption in his wife, but this blind admiration for his wife's sister which she had already noticed seemed to rouse a tempest of anger and jealousy within her. She was not going to be managed by Marion Russell.

"No!" she said. "Much as I should love to be with you, Martin—I can't do it."

"I wouldn't have you here, Beatrice, if I were not certain you wanted to be here," said Martin. "We will regard the matter as settled." He paused and took out his pipe. "Think I'll go and have a smoke."

"Martin—you don't——?"

Beatrice caught his arm as he passed.

"I don't—anything—old girl," he said pleasantly, patting her arm.

"Jane! Up still!" he added as he passed his little daughter sitting mouse-like in her corner.

"Jane, I never noticed you," said her mother.

"It is very wrong to hide and listen."

"I didn't!" flared little Jane.

"Hush! Hush! Don't add to your fault by telling stories about it now. Say good-night."

Jane went slowly half-way to the door, then she burst out in one of her sudden storms of weeping.

The end of the universe seemed to be walled up with a dense blackness through which the light could never shine again—the grown-ups thought she had been listening—and that she had told a story—and she had no power to convince them otherwise.

“Naughty girl—after being allowed to sit up so long,” scolded Emmaline gently enough. “Go upstairs at once.”

So, clutching Teddy and sobbing a doleful sob on every step, she made her way to the nursery.

The dinner that followed was not a pleasant meal, for Martin made himself unnaturally agreeable and facetious in his desire to prove to his sister that everything was all right between them in spite of her refusal to share his home. And Emmaline was obviously and conspicuously tactful, discoursing to her guest of continental travel.

After dinner Beatrice could bear it no longer, and escaped upstairs to fetch a book. Then, as she passed Jane's little bedroom, which opened out of the nursery, she heard the sound of voices and opened the door upon a scene of conflict: Nurse, pink with annoyance and delayed supper—Jane, wide-eyed and sitting bolt upright in bed.

“Oh, what's this, Jane?” said Beatrice.

“She has been a very naughty little girl indeed,” said Nurse. “She threw her boot at me when she was getting undressed.”

Jane looked at Beatrice with a quivering lip.

“Auntie, it was only a *gentle* boot,” she said.

"You can go down to your supper, Nurse," said Beatrice hastily. "I will talk to Jane."

The door closed.

"It was very naughty of you to throw your boot at Nurse," said Beatrice.

Jane flung herself back on the pillow with a dramatic swirl of her two brown plaits, and sobbed out :

"Oh, Auntie ! Auntie ! I didn't start naughty. I only started misrubble. *Why* doesn't nobody know where naughty ends and misrubble begins ?"

Beatrice waived the insoluble question and took the feverish little hand in hers.

"Why were you miserable, dear ?"

"Because we're going to leave lovely Marshfield and live in a nasty old house in a nasty old street," sobbed Jane.

Beatrice felt the leaden oppression at her heart grow even heavier than during that dreary dinner, but she managed to say judicially :

"Still—that doesn't account for the boot."

"I threw it at her because she was glad—glad ! When I was so misrubble !"

Beatrice put her arm round the quivering little figure and said very gently :

"What made her glad, Janey ?"

"I told her we were going to live in Flodmouth. She says there's more life in a town. I don't want life. I want my own little garden."

Beatrice looked down at the thin brown arm on the coverlet, and a great fear assailed her—the

fear lest Jane should never live to grow up in a large city. She was healthy enough in Marshfield, with freedom and fresh air, but she took cold easily—she was so very excitable. Beatrice shivered a little.

“Auntie,” Jane laughed suddenly, “somebody is walking over my grave.”

“What do you mean?” said Beatrice, with a start.

“That’s what Nurse says if I shiver when it’s warm,” said Jane.

“But *I* was the one to shiver, you goose,” said Beatrice cheerfully.

Then she sat for a moment, quite quiet, and heard the ashes of the nursery fire beyond fall into the grate. Bobby was asleep, but he gave a joyous, gurgling whoop, as of a happy chieftain pursuing sugar-sticks on legs through groves of toffee trees. The blind flapped at the open window. Beatrice remembered these little sounds and the gleam of the light across the dressing-table for the rest of her life.

“Look here, Jane,” she said at last; “if I told you it was all a mistake, and that you were going to stay on in this house, what should you do?”

Jane became very still, only her big eyes were fixed on Beatrice with the wistfulness of those who wait powerless upon Fate. It is quite certain that God Himself saw that look upon our faces before He sent down His only Son.

“What should you do?” repeated Beatrice.

“I don’t know,” said Jane, still staring. Then

she suddenly flung herself upon Beatrice's neck and cried out between sobbing and laughing: "Oh! Auntie! It's true! It's true! We're staying in our own, own home!"

"Yes, dear," said Beatrice.

And as they looked at each other, the two faces all alight with tears and laughter were wonderfully alike.

Somebody once said of Beatrice that, when she was moved, it was impossible to forget she possessed an immortal soul, and the same might have been said of little Jane. The spirit shone flame-like to-night through her fragile body.

But the happy hunter in the next room heard her ecstatic shout and woke up, howling, most naturally, to find himself in a plain night nursery after the splendours of the chase.

"Really, Beatrice," said Emmaline, appearing at the door, "you should not keep the children awake at this hour. Jane looks quite feverish."

"She didn't keep me awake. I kept myself awake," explained Jane eagerly. "Oh, Mummy, I *am* so glad we are going to stay in our own house."

Emmaline looked at Beatrice.

"You are—you mean——?"

Beatrice nodded.

"Yes, if you'll be good enough—if you will still have me."

Emmaline put her arm through Beatrice's and said with real feeling:

"I can't tell you how pleased I feel, dear. And

I am quite sure it will prove to be the best arrangement for you in the end."

Jane leaned back on her pillows.

"So now we're all pleased," she said, with a contented sigh. "All but Nannie. I wish," she peered out again rather anxiously, "that Nannie could be pleased too."

"Oh, there's always somebody not satisfied," said Emmaline, tucking her daughter in.

"*Has* it to be like that?" said Jane.

"Of course it has," said Emmaline lightly.

CHAPTER II

THE wind got up about ten o'clock and rushed round Marshfield, tearing the leaves from the trees; but it fell again with the dawn, and as Beatrice and Jane walked along the village street in the morning it was really like walking in an autumn garden. The windows of every house and shop twinkled out across little flower-beds, and the very railway station bloomed almost up to the railway carriage doors, offering a bouquet of perfume to every traveller there, from the time of the last mignonette to the first of the violets.

As Beatrice was going to remain in Marshfield she began to make the best of it—but that was just what she had been doing for so many years that now, at thirty, she wanted something which did not require to be adapted to her mind by that mental exercise. However, her own weakness had now chained her to her brother's household as she had been chained by duty to that of her grandparents'; for she knew that after her share of the household expenses was paid there would not be much left for wandering elsewhere.

"You aren't listening, Auntie," said Jane.

"No. Well, what?" said Auntie.

"Should we go to the Island?"

"Oh, anywhere you like," said Beatrice dully.

So they went across the wide bridge that led to a flat, treeless stretch of country which had once been part of the great river Flod but was now reclaimed land; and, as the tide was high, they watched the ships beyond the embankment gliding along above the level of the fields in the sunny autumn haze like vessels in a dream.

There were few hedges, and Beatrice and Jane, sitting on a fence, were visible far off across the stubble of the mustard seed. An old labourer tramped by with a rough "Good-morning" that held somehow the promise of seedtime and harvest and the real things that matter. If not here—after much toil—then somewhere else: "Good-morning!"

"Hi! Mr. Croft! Mr. Croft!" shouted Jane suddenly, jumping off the fence and running like mad down the level road.

Beatrice thought to herself with a sort of annoyed indifference: "Oh, that tiresome little fat man, of course!" And, as she was disinclined for little fat men that morning, she remained where she was, staring intently across the mustard stubble.

But the intruder himself seemed equally disinclined, and after a good long pause Beatrice's curiosity impelled her to look round.

She gave a little start of astonishment when she did so, for nobody in this world could be more unlike the man she had imagined than Stephen Croft

as he stood smiling down at little Jane. He was a spare man, fairly tall, but so much too broadly built for his height that it made him appear short and rather uncouth. And Jane was gazing up at him with the same sort of tingling expectation which some grown-ups feel when the curtain rises before an amusing play—only more so—with an edge and sparkle in her expectation which belongs only to life's earliest morning.

She did not speak, but her whole body was one ecstatic: "I know you're going to be gloriously funny! Do begin!"

Croft was at no time an amusing person to any one but Jane, and this morning he was disinclined to play up, even to her. But such is the power of faith that he found it quite impossible to disappoint that joyous certainty of fun about to start, and as his own mood was one of dull and restless dissatisfaction he fell, in his emergency, upon the very bedrock of comicalities, and grabbed Jane's red velvet bonnet.

"Let us change hats," he said. "I've wanted a velvet one ever since last pantomime. You can have mine. Now, don't I look lovely?"

He tied the bonnet under his chin while Jane squealed with joy, and really the red velvet and fluffy feather did look sufficiently ridiculous over blunt, harsh features and hair growing thin upon the forehead.

"You'll break the strings! You'll break the strings!" shouted Jane, jumping up and down.

"Oh, if only my Nannie could see you tying my new strings in a knot!"

"Well, come along, we'll show her. I fear no Nurse in shining armour! Just keep my cap on with your other hand. Now!" and he began prancing along the road towards Beatrice, more like some uncouth animal than a shipowner of position. "Now, Nannie, don't we look—— Oh, it is a new nurse, I see. Good-morning."

Jane laughed again, and the clear sound echoed over the flat fields with an untouched joyousness that went to the heart like the song of a lark in a blue sky near the sea.

"It's not a nurse! It's not a nurse! It's a auntie!" she cried, dancing along beside him.

Croft hastily dragged at his head-covering, but it refused to move, so he bowed with some dignity.

"Miss Fawcett, I believe?" he said.

Beatrice bowed with equal ceremony.

"Mr. Croft, of course. I have heard——" Then her voice began to tremble uncontrollably, and her laughter joined with that of Jane. "I—I beg your pardon," she gasped at last. "Unpardonably rude of me—but you really do look——" Then her voice began to shake again.

"Oh! Oh!" shrilled the enraptured Jane. "I told you he would do something funny."

Croft pulled hard at the bonnet strings, then looked doubtfully at Beatrice.

"I can't undo the beastly thing. I suppose I ought not to cut it. Can you untie it?"

"I'll try," said Beatrice.

So he bent near to her in the searching sunlight, and as she unfastened the difficult knot she could not help noticing the many lines in his weather-beaten face: lines, not of age, for he was only a year or two over thirty, but engraven by a restless temperament which never let him know the meaning of peace.

His features looked hard, now that he was no longer smiling, and his absolute indifference to Beatrice's opinion only just stopped short of being offensive. He did, indeed, regard her as a dull little person no longer in her first youth, and he almost allowed this to appear.

"Children will have jokes where you *do* something!" he said, handing over the bonnet. "They are like old-fashioned theatre-goers. The young at heart will always like to see a fat man sit down suddenly on the floor. Verbal witticisms are no use to them."

Beatrice felt herself roused to a vague antagonism.

"Well—I don't care—it *is* funnier to see something funny happen than to hear words juggled with, unless it's so wonderfully done that you hold your breath."

"Oh—you think so?" said Croft, not bothering to discuss the question. "Well, Jane, I must go home to bed."

"Bed! In the morning! When you are not ill!" Jane paused, slipped her hand in his, and asked in a low voice: "Have you been naughty?"

Croft smiled at her and closed his hand kindly over the little fingers. It was wonderful what a difference that smile made to his rather disagreeable face with its blunt features.

"Not more naughty than usual, Jane," he said. "But I went out in the boat last night after I got home."

"In all that gale!" exclaimed Beatrice.

"Oh, I like a good wind. Something to fight against," he said carelessly. "Well, good-bye, Jane."

They said farewell, and Jane trotted rather soberly by her aunt's side.

"He never mentioned the doll's bedstead," she said.

"I expect he has been busy while he was away. It is the sort of thing a man might easily forget," said Beatrice.

"He promised," said Jane.

"Well, but he——" Beatrice broke off, for Croft was calling to them over the fence, making a trumpet of his hands.

"Bedstead!" he bellowed. "Got it all right. Blue curtains." Then he ran on out of hearing.

"Isn't he a funny man!" said Jane, with a little sigh of complete satisfaction.

And after that they wandered along the road towards the village, where the autumn sunshine was drying the dew off the last roses and the straggling mignonette, so that a perfume as of an old-fashioned posy rose towards the greyish-blue

sky across which a few rooks were calling. The stationmaster stood tying up chrysanthemums as they passed by, and it was wonderful what Marshfield had done for him; for he arrived one spring day, a bustling machine, irritable and surly about parcels unaccompanied by passengers, but now he was a warmly human person with a feeling for lost groceries, and a sympathy with the indispositions of pass-holders.

"Fine day, Miss Jane," he called out, pushing back his gold-laced cap.

"Good-morning. How do you do?" said Jane politely. Then she added to Beatrice: "I like gentlemen in fancy dresses with braid: soldiers and sailors and things, don't you, Auntie?"

"Oh, we all do," laughed Beatrice.

Then they passed the Wesleyan Chapel, where the name of the preacher for the next Sunday appeared between Michaelmas daisies, as if garlanded by nature, and it seemed a pity he should be called Mr. Montgomery-Boggs. But all the same the spirit of John Wesley, natural, ardent and austere, seemed to rest with the sunshine upon the ugly building grown round with flowers.

At last they reached the corner leading away from the village street to their own house, and here they saw a middle-aged lady coming out of her gate, driving three clean, pink pigs before her.

Jane betrayed no sort of surprise, but Beatrice had always lived in large places where no one has ever a chance to grow anything save round and

even because of the constant rubbing of passers-by upon any little shoots of individuality, and she really could not help her astonished eyes, though her lips only gave the morning greeting.

"I am a great lover of animals," explained Miss Thornleigh, "and the life of confinement which pigs lead has often made me unhappy. Why should they, out of all created things, be denied air and exercise, especially"—she glanced at them, unconsciously dropping her voice—"especially when we are all so fond of bacon!"

"Shall you eat Mary or Billie first?" said Jane, looking up at her, intensely interested.

Miss Thornleigh turned away with a light shudder.

"Oh, neither. I couldn't eat my own pigs; I never feel quite sure that they do not possess souls—they have so much character when you get to know them. So I *always* send mine to a sausage maker in Flodmouth."

Jane looked serious.

"Yes, then nobody can say this is Billie's leg," she responded. "I know."

For Miss Thornleigh had, in some ways, never quite grown up, and she and Jane understood each other.

Then Mr. Wood, the curate, came briskly out of the little house and through the gate, and the pigs seemed interested in his trousers.

"See how playful they are when they are properly treated," said Miss Thornleigh affectionately. "Dear things!"

And she moved one way, while Wood went the other with Beatrice and Jane.

"Well!" said Beatrice, when they got round the turn. She dared not say anything before, because it was necessary to speak so very clearly and distinctly to Wood on account of his deafness.

"Queer— isn't it?" he said, with a grin, looking very big and strong and unlike the typical curate in the clear morning light. "But I like the old girl," he added; then the grin died away and his pleasant, honest face grew serious. "You should see her devotion to her old aunt, who is half-blind and quite penniless. And she says with such pride every time you go: 'Isn't Aunt wonderful for eighty? The doctors think she may live to be a hundred.' I do call that fine."

"I hate kissing her," said Jane. "I don't know how you can like it." She turned to Beatrice. "Mr. Wood kisses old Mrs. Thornleigh every time he goes."

Wood turned red to the roots of his light hair, then he looked straight at Beatrice and said bluntly:

"It makes me look a fool: but when I go in she thinks for the minute I'm her son come back. She cries if I don't kiss her; and she is so old."

Beatrice put out her hand and touched his arm.

"Hush! Hush!" she said. "Don't apologise for the nicest thing you ever did." Then she added quickly: "I wonder how Miss Thornleigh ever got like that—taking pigs for walks and treating the cat like a human being!"

"I know," said little Jane again, raising her clear pipe so that Wood could hear.

"Well, Jane?" he said, the pleasant grin reappearing.

"It's because she has no little girls and boys of her own—Nannie said so," Jane remarked calmly; then she gave a startled side glance at Beatrice.

"Oh, Auntie!"

"Um?" said Beatrice absently, eyeing the dewy spiders' webs with the sun upon them.

"Auntie," desperately, "do get married!"

Both Beatrice and Wood now gave her their attention.

"Why?" said Wood, as someone had to say something.

"Because," said Jane very distinctly, with anxious eyes on Beatrice, "you can't have children without getting married, and I *don't* want Auntie to turn like Miss Thornleigh."

"Wonderful the effect of sun——"

"Glorious weather for the time of year——"

The two remarks emerged simultaneously from the lips of Jane's companions, but she was following the trail with all that impulsive ardour which ought to bring her success in later life.

"Here," she said, seizing a portion of Wood's coat tail. "Here, I want to tell you something." And she dragged him round to the other side of a thorn bush, where she said in a loud, sibilant whisper, close to his ear:

"I wish you would marry my Auntie Beatrice!"

"I can't hear," muttered Wood, with the pathetic shamefacedness of young people who are deaf.

"Jane!" shouted the outraged Beatrice, hurrying forward.

"I wish you would marry my Auntie Beatrice," yelled Jane, then turned to face any punishment that might follow. "I'd rather be sent to bed now," she declared desperately, "than have you get like Miss Thornleigh!"

Wood raised a crimson face and looked sadly at Beatrice.

"Send the child on. I want to talk to you."

"Oh, no, no!" said Beatrice, crimson too, and catching at Jane's little brown paw.

Wood put his hand on the child's shoulder.

"I say, Jane, be a good chap and go and look for beech nuts under the trees."

Jane looked up at him, nodded, and tried to pull her hand away.

"I know," she responded. "That's what Nannie's young man always says. Now, you tickle Auntie and she'll let go my hand; that's the way."

"Jane!" gasped Beatrice.

Then she loosed Jane's hand and allowed her to depart, because on the whole it seemed the safest course to pursue.

"I have often thought that people do not sufficiently appreciate the late autumn in this level country, and I am sure——" began Beatrice with

nervous volubility. But Wood put his hand on her arm and said in a steady tone :

"I don't know how to thank Jane enough. She has given me courage to tell you now what I have been wanting to tell you for some days. I love you. I loved you the first time I saw you. I shall love you until I die."

It was all so very quiet that Beatrice at first did not realise what was happening. Could it be true ?

Then she looked at his face and knew that it was all quite true ; which is an immense thing for any woman to be able to believe of any man. He loved her so much that he had reached those depths of the soul where everything is still.

"Oh, I'm sorry ; I'm sorry," she said in the clear voice which reached him so easily that it seemed to fall with a touch of healing on his straining ears.

And then Beatrice remembered how she had said those very words to her brother only a few hours ago. She had made him unhappy, and then, after all, she had put things right again. But in this case it was impossible to put them right. She could not marry a man whom she did not love.

Wood's healthy colour faded, and he turned grey under the tan as he looked into her eyes.

"I am three years older than you. We have only known each other for a few weeks. I could never marry a man unless I loved him," said Beatrice incoherently.

"I wouldn't take a woman who didn't love me," said Wood, straightening his shoulders. "That is not marriage."

"I'm so sorry," said Beatrice again, holding out her hand.

He took it in his and held it for a moment.

"Good-bye, dear," he said. Then he began to tramp away down the road so fast that Jane was panting when she reached him.

"What are you going away for?" she shrilled.

"You haven't done it yet."

"Done what?" said Wood mechanically.

Jane gave him an impatient push.

"Why, kissed her, of course," she said. "That always comes at the end."

Wood looked down at the eager, sparkling face.

"The end has come without that, Jane," he said.

"Wouldn't she give you a kiss after all?" said Jane.

Then something in her friend's face went to her little tender heart, and she cried out:

"Kiss me! Kiss me! Me and Mrs. Thornleigh love your kisses!"

CHAPTER III

THE Fawcetts' house was called the End House for a reason, which is more than could be said of most of the residences in Marshfield, and it stood just where the village joined the open country. Two tall, windswept fir trees guarded the further side, and Jane liked to see the red sun behind them when she went to bed. They reminded her then, though she didn't know why, of the *Pilgrim's Progress* which her father read to her on Sundays. Something wild and strange about the two trees, black upon a flaming sky, struck an answering chord in her queer little child's soul. Even when she grew up she pictured all weird and strange happenings with a background of black fir trees against the sunset.

"Wool-gathering again!" said Nannie, with pardonable impatience.

"I was only thinking, Nannie," said little Jane, hastily beginning to pull off her stockings.

"Then you shouldn't think," said Nannie. "People who think come to a bad end." And she flounced off to soothe the happy hunter in the next room, who was yelling for biscuits before he set forth on his nightly chase. She loved him dearly, because already at two and three-quarters

he was so entirely masculine. But she naturally got out of patience with a little girl who was always asking questions.

When she was gone Jane jumped up and went to the window, leaning her nose end on the glass. She liked doing that for two reasons: first, because it was not allowed, and secondly, because a pleasant little cloud came on the glass, where she could draw patterns with her forefinger.

She made one something like an eye and looked through it; then she gave a sudden cry that brought the Nurse running back into the room.

"Now, what?" said Nannie.

"I asked him! It was a secret! I *knew* he would!" said Jane, clasping her little brown hands and staring out with all her might. "Oh, he's nearly at the top now, and the wind's blowing the tree—Oh, Nannie!"

Nurse ran to the window and peered over Jane's head.

"What does the——" She broke off, goggling too on the outside wonder. "Well, of all the wild gentlemen! Climbing up that in a wind to fetch your kite! He'll be killed if he goes any higher!" She flung open the window and shrieked out: "Stop! Stop! Sir! It isn't safe!"

Then Martin ran out of the house, followed by his wife and Beatrice and Marion Russell.

"Come down, you fool!" he yelled with the exasperation of fear. "Half the branches on that side are rotten!"

Jane said nothing, only her life was in her eyes as she stood pressing her little hands together.

Croft's square figure crept with extraordinary agility towards the tall spike of the summit, but the tree trunk bent towards the west with his weight as he climbed higher and higher. A dead branch snapped and fell. No one dared speak now for fear of startling him and causing him to lose his foothold. At last he reached the kite, and clung like a huge bird while the tree swayed against the dying sunset.

"Got it!" he called.

"Come down! Come down!" shouted the little group below.

He glanced down at them, their blurred, uncertain faces against the dusky grass; then he climbed swiftly and surely to the ground.

"You've no right to do such things, frightening us all so," scolded Mrs. Martin, white about the lips.

Fool's trick! And in your evening clothes too. Look at your shirt!" said Martin.

Croft stared from one to another in astonishment.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I'd no idea that you would be alarmed. I'm so used to climbing about on the boat. I promised Jane I would get her kite."

In the excitement Nurse had run downstairs, and Jane flew stockingless behind her. But no one noticed her approach.

"Well, you'd better come in now," said Martin,

recovering himself. "I appreciate your kindness to Jane, Croft, but if you do want to commit suicide at any time perhaps you wouldn't mind doing it in your own garden."

"Pity you don't go in for the high trapeze—if you like that sort of thing," said Beatrice, whose heart was also with difficulty resuming its normal beat.

Croft glanced at her with a slight smile—so she thought he was doing it to show off, did she? But it was a matter of complete indifference to him what she thought, and he turned lightly to Marion.

"You haven't scolded me yet?" he said.

She put out her hand.

"How could you!"

Her hand was quite cool and steady, but her tone could convey so much that Croft probably did not notice this; anyway he took the slim fingers in his and said very gently:

"Forgive me. I wouldn't have frightened you for the world. No man ought to startle a singing bird."

"That is all you think of—my voice," she said in a low tone, walking on with him.

"Shall we go in?" said Emmaline in her precise accents. "We were naturally alarmed, Mr. Croft, all of us." Then she turned and saw the stockingless Jane. "Jane," she said in the quiet way her daughter feared most, "come with me."

But the little thin figure in petticoat and bare

legs, with hair bunched up ready for washing, had something about it of the fierce intangible fire of the martyr.

"It was *me!*" she said. "All me! I made him! He isn't to be scolded! He went up in his best clothes and dirtied them because I asked him to. Take"—she flung out a little brown paw, for she was ever such a dramatic Jane—"take my new bedstead with the blue curtains and let him off."

Her voice trembled on the blue; she could not help it; but she conquered the natural weakness and finished on a note of defiance.

Croft looked at her with a qucer expression which betrayed nothing.

"You like that bedstead better than anything you possess just now, eh, Jane?" he said lightly.

"Y—Yes!" said Jane, drawing a long breath.

"Well, you won't have to part with it this time," he said. "They are not going to scold me any more. I've said I am sorry."

Then he picked her up and ran across the lawn, trumpeting like no elephant that ever lived, while Jane's delighted laughter startled the birds that were just going to sleep.

"Good old Jane," said her father.

"Ridiculously spoilt," murmured Marion.

"I am sure I do my best, but she is a regular Fawcett," remarked Emmaline to her sister, with a sigh, as they entered the house. "It seems strange that I, of all women, should have married

into a family where it seems hereditary not to behave like other people."

"What a fool that man makes of himself," said Beatrice to her brother as they followed more slowly.

Martin was preoccupied because he could see his wife was annoyed, and when that was the case he always remained a little distraught until she became pleased again. But still he did rouse himself to say regretfully :

"Oh, I'm sorry you don't like Croft. He is a great friend of mine."

"But it was such a mountebank's trick to climb up that tree," said Beatrice. "I suppose it is half-dead. He might easily have been killed."

"Only wonder he wasn't," said Martin, "but he never expected us to see him. He simply doesn't consider his personal safety at all. He doesn't care."

"Well, there is something unpleasant about that—inhuman," said Beatrice. "He ought to value his own life. Every man ought."

"Ah, well—Croft, of course, has some reason—" began Martin; then the gong boomed out across the quiet garden and he did not finish his sentence. "Come on, Beatrice," he added, "there's dinner. Emmaline doesn't like us to be late."

The dinner was well served, because Emmaline added to her other virtues that of being an excellent housekeeper, and Marion was pleasantly conscious of giving lustre to the occasion. It was always

just a little of a favour when she dined with her sister, because she was so greatly in request elsewhere. A girl who is young, good-looking, possessed of a charming voice, and high principles which she has the happy knack of wearing outside, is not likely to be left in a corner anywhere. In Marshfield she was as inevitable at every entertainment of any importance as the hired waiter from Flodmouth.

For it is a very great gift, which a few good women possess, of seeming as good as, or even just a little better than they are—almost every other woman would be glad to possess it. No wonder that Beatrice, who was quite without this gift, felt a little envious of something intangible but real as she sat eating and drinking with no incense before her at all—nothing but plain mutton.

Croft talked rather excitedly in spurts, and then drifted into moody silences; but towards the end of dinner it did appear at last to occur to him that he was scarcely showing enough attention to the sister of his host, who was also his most intimate friend. So he turned to her with a remark about the weather.

“My sister-in-law has travelled a great deal. She and you ought to compare notes about the Italian Lakes,” said Emmaline, with a real desire to bring Beatrice forward a little.

“Rained last time I was there. Have you stayed at Como?” said Croft. But it was perfectly plain that he would remain quite uninterested if

she replied that she had stayed in the crater of Vesuvius.

"I have been to all the usual places," said Beatrice. "This is very good mutton."

"Beatrice has stayed a great deal in Germany," Marion hastened to say for the sake of the family credit. "It is a lack of politeness there, I am told, if people omit to remark on their food."

Beatrice looked across at Marion's anxious face and her ill humour evaporated.

"Travelling does make one a little unconventional, of course," she said meekly. "I shall soon improve of that here."

Then they all went into the hall together, where the log fire threw shifting gleams of red and gold upon the white dresses of the three women as they stood in a little group before it. Only a few of the lights were turned on, so that the broad stairs and the gallery across the farther end were all in a warm twilight. There was a sense of unobtrusive security and luxury about it all, as if those to whom the house belonged were certain of well-trained servants here and their equivalent in any existence which might come after. It seemed sacrilegious to think of Emmaline chopping onions in any possible reincarnation.

Martin allowed his wife and sister-in-law to hover round Croft in the neighbourhood of the piano, which stood clear on the parquet floor away from all other furniture, and he sat down close to Beatrice on a sofa nearer the fire.

"I say, old girl," he said, "I haven't forgotten that it is you who make this sort of thing possible."

"Oh, that's all right, Marty," she answered, going back to her childish name for him. "We always did say we were going to live together, you know."

"Well," he glanced happily round and came back to her. "Well, it's just as we planned, Bee, but for Emmaline and the kids, isn't it?"

Not for worlds would she have disappointed that expectant smile.

"Just, old boy," she said gaily. "Log fire and all. You know we always planned to have a log fire after we went to see Warwick Castle."

"Had a better day at the office to-day," he said, stretching out his legs to the fire. "And now you have settled to stay we shall be quite all right. 'Pon my word, Beatrice," he said, turning round to look at her, "I don't know what I've done to get a wife like that. Isn't she a wonderful manager? And such nice relations, you know. makes such a difference."

"Do you like Mrs. Russell?" said Beatrice.

"Oh yes. A bit snobbish, perhaps—keen on the main chance—but she's such a good woman."

For it was from Mrs. Russell that her daughters had inherited their enviable gift.

"I'm so glad you are happy, Martin," said Beatrice softly. "As happy as we planned to be—when we were little. Few people can say that."

Martin sat up straight, his brown eyes shining just like Jane's.

"Bee, old girl! Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I am, you silly! Perfectly happy," said Beatrice, laughing.

Martin leaned back again, basking in firelight and full content.

"Well, it is nice for you having Emmaline to go about with; the Russells are so popular," he remarked. "Ah, there's Marion beginning to sing. If she had rather a bigger voice, they say she might do wonders."

Marion was seated at the piano in her white gown with the firelight upon her; far off, high on the wall, a cluster of crystal lilies poured a subdued radiance upon her fair head and upon Croft's weatherbeaten, restless face. The whole group stood out most delicately upon the grey panelling of the hall.

Then Marion began to sing, and every note fell clear and distinct, like water falling in a still garden on a summer noon. She sang, as was usual with her, an old song whose unusual phrasing added to the effect of finished simplicity; and to hear her was like walking in an enclosed garden where yew hedges, cut in formal, pretty shapes, stood quiet against a blue sky.

There was no ardour or passion in her singing; it was detached, exquisite; and the restlessness gradually vanished from Croft's face as he listened to her.

Beatrice leaned back and watched him, herself inexpressibly soothed by the sound of the clear notes falling. She thought idly of Saul and David as she noticed the heavy frown grow less marked between Croft's thick eyebrows, while his fiercely alert glance became reposeful and almost mild.

After a while he got up and leaned over the piano.

"Don't tire yourself for me," he said in a low voice.

"I don't get tired—singing to you," said Marion.

But he put his hand lightly on hers as she began a new accompaniment, and stopped her.

"No, no. I must take care of your voice if you won't do it yourself. Come to the fire."

"You are an old grandmother," she said, rising from her seat.

"I don't feel like a grandmother when you sing to me," he answered, smiling down at her.

Then they joined the circle round the fire and Croft talked about the holiday from which he was just returned, and about certain housekeeping difficulties common to all bachelors; and Emmaline advised, and Martin laughed, and they all drew very near together. For Croft had the power, denied to many who want to be intimate, of being able when he wished to let people within the circle of his own life.

Beatrice said very little, but she felt interested, in spite of herself, in a man so virile and so intensely human. He was not interested in her, and she

found him irritating, but all the same she could understand a woman being in love with him. Only she would not have supposed that he would be Marion's choice. She could best imagine Marion engaged to a smart young man with political aspirations and the newest collar; but of course you never knew.

As she thought this, she began once more to follow the thread of the conversation.

"Saw Wood as I came along," Croft was saying. "He grows more deaf, poor chap! I shouted after him and he never heard me."

"Good chap—Wood," said Martin.

Then the ladies rose and the two men went into the billiard-room for a whisky-and-soda.

"Won't you play, Marion?" said Martin. "She plays a rattling good game, Bee. I must teach you."

"That's the worst of living abroad. You can't play games. You're nowhere if you can't play games," said Emmaline, as they went along to the billiard-room. "Marion and I have always been awfully keen on everything that came up."

"I am stupid at such things," said Beatrice, with genuine regret. "I only wish I were like you and Marion. But I must be content to look on."

"You get very little in this life, dear Beatrice, by looking on," said Emmaline, with gentle precision. "I think it is a woman's duty to cultivate a taste for everything that makes home attractive, don't you?"

Martin's eye beamed affectionately as it rested on her charming figure—what a good woman she was, to be sure.

But Beatrice, deep in her unregenerate heart, felt that Emmaline would almost have been dearer to her if she had been bad—so perverse is human nature.

She was, however, properly ashamed of this feeling when Emmaline came into her room that night with a glass of warm milk and an india-rubber hot-water bottle.

“I saw you looked pale and chilled this evening,” she said with real kindness. “We must try to get you strong now you are with us. But the will does a great deal, dear. Try to feel bright and you will be bright.”

Beatrice sat up in bed and obediently drank the milk; but she did wonder, considering all things, how she and her sister-in-law had managed to get into their respective positions.

She did not realise that there are, from this point of view, but two classes of people in the world—the born getters and the born givers. You see it every day, and they always find their proper place. No wonder that Emmaline and Beatrice, being both rather above the average, should have fitted into their places very quickly.

But she lay down and went happily to sleep at once after drinking the milk, for she always had the indefinite feeling, which she shared with little Jane, that to-morrow was going to be splendid.

Some people keep it until they die. And to lose it—that is age.

The next morning did not quite answer Beatrice's expectations, but that made no difference, and she went down the village street in a storm of rain and wind, elated by the sting of the cool drops and the riot of dead leaves about her. Nobody knew this, as she plodded along, her eyes shining under an old hat and her little figure covered by a macintosh; but she was shouting in her heart with the gay wind and the dancing leaves when she gave Stephen Croft a somewhat distant, "Good-morning."

He glanced after her carelessly, thinking she would soon develop into the typical little old maid, and he felt rather sorry for Martin and his wife that they were obliged to make a home for her. It must be a great nuisance. But, of course, Mrs. Martin would do it. She was such a good woman.

Beatrice had done her commissions at the little draper's shop, and the scream of the wind across Bank Island called to the spirit of her with an irresistible "Come and Play! Come and Play!" So she crossed the bridge and turned off towards the river Flood, because Croft's house stood in the centre of the flat expanse in a little wind-beaten coppice, and the main road led that way. In the distance she saw Wood tramping along to a clump of three grey cottages, plainly visible far off; but he was going away from her and would soon be round a corner.

She watched him walk out of sight, fine and erect, in the teeth of the gale, and wished from her heart that life might go well with him; then a motor-car swished past her, and she bent to rub some mud from her cloak. As she looked up there was the sound of a motor-horn followed by a great cry. It rang along with the whistling of the gale and startled some sea-gulls so that they cried in unison: a strange dirge-like wailing.

Beatrice began to run; and it was not so much her eyes as her whole being that sought for the sight of a tall figure in a macintosh. Only those know how who have once run so—in an agony of fear, searching an empty sky.

Then, when she was almost there, Wood rose from the ground and stood talking to the man who had been driving the car.

"It's all right," Wood was saying with white lips. "I'm deaf. The wind made such a row that I didn't hear the horn somehow. But I'm only shaken up a bit." He put his hand suddenly to his head. "I think—I'm falling!"

The man caught and held him while Beatrice spread a rug on the ground, and they laid him gently upon it.

"Don't let him move an inch," said the man, white with fear and anxiety. "I'm afraid it is some internal injury. I went right over him. Can you stay here while I go for the doctor?"

"Yes."

"Where's the doctor?"

"Straight ahead. First turn to the left."

In a moment he was gone, and Beatrice knelt alone by the side of the silent man, the wind and rain buffeting them, the sea-gulls still screaming above.

She took his hand and bent over him, feeling his pulse; it was still beating. Then he opened his eyes:

"I'm—dying," he said.

"No, no," urged Beatrice, holding his cold hand between hers. "You are so strong. It was a nasty knock, but you will soon be all right. The doctor is coming."

"I know," he said gasping. "I am—in no great—pain—but I know."

"Try to live. Oh, don't give in! Try to live," entreated Beatrice. "We"—her voice shook—"we all want you so."

"I don't want to die," he said most simply. "But I'm ready."

Then he spoke no more, but groaned a little once or twice and at last he gasped out:

"I'm—I'm going. And nobody—really—cares."

"I do! I do!" said Beatrice.

He closed his eyes. He had not heard: he was going away in a great silence.

"Stay! Stay!" shouted Beatrice, and her clear voice rang far out over the flat fields. "I love you! I love you!"

There came a moment's pause, even the storm seemed to hold its breath, and as it burst with

redoubled fury Beatrice heard the sound of Croft's voice.

"I ran all I know—met the motor—how is he?"

Beatrice got up and faced the intruder.

"Dead," she said.

He waited for a moment, then knelt down and felt Wood's heart. They were now close to the elemental things, and Croft no longer saw in Beatrice a little old-maidish girl in a macintosh, but a woman in the grasp of love and death.

"Where shall we take him?" he said. "May he lie in my house instead of in his lodgings?"

"It's—it's not for me—I don't know," stammered Beatrice.

"He has no near relations, and there is no time to ask any of them. It is for you to decide." He paused and added with difficulty. "I—I heard you say you loved him. That would give you the right."

Beatrice stood a moment with her head bent. No. Something within her would not let her disown him now. She could not say that she had never loved him.

"You heard correctly. Please take him to your house and I will bring some flowers."

He looked pityingly at her set face.

"We are all sorry," he hesitated. "But you mustn't take it like that, you know. He's—he's——" But Croft found it impossible to continue for a moment, and at last he added hoarsely: "He's all

right, if ever a man was. It is something to have loved a man like that."

"Yes," said Beatrice.

Then she sat by her dead in silence until the car came up.

It was only just before they moved off that she said in a low voice:

"May I ask you to keep your own counsel about—about what you heard? There was nothing definite. I should not like to have it talked about."

"I should have thought you would be proud!" he began fiercely. Then he added in a more even tone: "Of course you know best. I will respect your wish in the matter."

Three days later the funeral took place, and it seemed a pity that Wood could not know how many cared; but perhaps he did.

Jane chanced on that morning to be out for a walk with Nannie and baby brother. Now Nannie loved life and found the solitariness of a rural existence almost unbearable, so it is not surprising that she paused to look through the churchyard gate at the pleasant spectacle of forty people gathered together. Having once looked she seemed to be involuntarily drawn through the gate towards a secluded place among the grassy graves, where she could watch the funeral from far away without being noticed.

She stood against the tall yew hedge with baby brother in her arms, and he wore a pale-blue cape

that made a strong patch of light upon the green. A clump of double sunflowers was shining like gold in the bright sunshine near the church corner. The little group of mourners gathered blackly round something Jane could not see. Jane looked carelessly about her.

Then suddenly there was a sound of earth falling on wood and a woman burst out crying.

Jane started, and clutched at Nannie's gown, but five minutes later she was picking daisies with baby brother in the lane and had forgotten all about it.

Or seemed to have forgotten, though it was stored, really, in that strange secret place where childish memories are kept, to spring forth afterwards like magic flowers, still sharply bright with the colours of life's morning.

Though Jane was only six then, the presence of death would always bring back to her a sunlit churchyard, with a child's blue cape against the green and the sound of a handful of earth falling.

That night when Nannie believed the subject to be safely disposed of, Jane remarked to Beatrice:

"Nannie says Mr. Wood has gone to heaven."

"Yes," said Beatrice, with a catch of the breath.

"Ah!" said Jane, trying to put her finger through her stockinged foot.

She was thinking what it was like there in heaven. For grown-ups forget what heaven is

like, but you nearly always remember when you are little. Jane knew quite well, though it was one of those things she had to keep silently locked within her child's soul.

She saw it always as an immense vague place full of sunshine, with a little hill at the farther end, where God sat on a golden arm-chair. The sides of the little hill were covered with a lambent glory, something between pale-yellow flame and sunlight; and there were streets of gold leading away far into the distance, but they always seemed to Jane empty shining pavements with nothing between them and a blue sky above.

After she had been to Flodmouth pantomime the Christmas before she added the immense, glittering gate made of jewelled light which formed the climax of the transformation scene; but though she had seen it, this never seemed as real to her as all the rest.

"I've enough holes to mend without you making more," said Nannie, seizing the stocking at last.

"Auntie," said Jane, "must you die to go to heaven?"

"Yes, dear," said Beatrice.

Jane pulled off her last garment but one and surveyed Beatrice with solemn eyes.

"Then you *have* to die if you want to go to heaven. I do wish God could have thought of a nicer way."

"Hush, Jane," said Nannie, very much shocked. "Brush your teeth and don't talk nonsense."

Jane moved obediently towards the washstand, but she had not yet done.

"Shall you go to heaven, Nannie?"

"Expect so," said Nannie, shaking the stocking with easy confidence.

"Why do you expect so?" pursued Jane.

"Oh, if you believe in heaven you go to heaven. What a child you are! Now for your hair."

But Nannie could not know what a subtle creed she had evolved, and Jane only said softly, pausing, toothbrush in hand:

"I loved Mr. Wood! Didn't you, Auntie?"

Beatrice nodded, but she could not speak, for the strain of the past three days had unnerved her, and her heart was very tender that night for the poor boy whose body lay at rest in the churchyard beyond the hedge.

Nurse glanced at her sharply and hustled Jane into the next room, where she said in a severe undertone: "Jane, you must never say that to your Auntie again. No lady ever loves a single gentleman unless she is engaged to him. Now, get into bed."

But all Marshfield was aware before the following Sunday that poor Miss Fawcett was suffering from what must have been a "disappointment" if Mr. Wood had lived; for he would never have had her, three years older than him, and a pale face with big eyes just like little Jane.

Still Nannie, like nearly everybody else, had kindness hidden within her; and she knew from

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painful experience with the butcher's young man what it was to suffer from a disappointment. So she brought Beatrice cups of tea at odd times, and comforted her with the reflection, in various paraphrases, that singleness is bliss.

CHAPTER IV

THERE is only one criminal in Marshfield, and he is an apricot coloured horse who inhabits the piece of common ground which extends behind the long street of the little town. He has been convicted at least half a dozen times and bailed out, or whatever the legal term may be, by Miss Elizabeth Thornleigh. The old hawker to whom the criminal belongs always goes in tears to the back door of the Thornleights' house, and rescue follows; though the people whose front gardens have been ruined think her benevolence misplaced.

She was stepping now across the waste ground towards Mrs. Russell's afternoon-party, with Beatrice by her side, and three lumps of sugar in her hand.

"Cop! Cop!" she called in her loud croaking voice.

The apricot-coloured horse flung out his ungainly hoofs and ambled as he did in the moonlight sometimes down the pavement of the long street when all the world was asleep, waking loud echoes. Then would come a pause, and a queer, crunching sound, which made those nearest to it jump blasphemously from their warm beds and rush out, regardless of propriety, to send him away.

This again shows what one evil member of the community may do, for before he lived on the common no Marshfield person's bare legs had ever been seen upon the public road.

"Dear thing!" said Miss Thornleigh, as he nozzled the sugar with his ugly old fiddle head. "He can't help having a craving for garden produce—it is like drink in some human beings—he ought to be pitied, not condemned."

"He ought to be fastened up," said Beatrice.

"Oh, so he is! Look at the piece of broken rope dangling after him," said Miss Thornleigh. "Somehow"—she ruminatingly pursued her way—"somehow he always reminds me of Stephen Croft."

"What!" exclaimed Beatrice. "Mr. Croft is not particularly good-looking—but still——"

"It is not that," said Miss Thornleigh hastily.

"Oh, not at all. If you could see the present of game he sent us only this morning, Stephen Croft, I mean, not the horse, of course. But"—she lowered her voice—"I am always reminded in seeing it of his poor wife. She drove a horse just that colour in a high dog-cart during the short time she lived in Marshfield."

Beatrice waited a full minute. Then she only said:

"I did not think there was another animal that colour in the world."

"Of course you knew he had been married," pursued Miss Thornleigh conversationally. "It

all happened ten years ago, and she died in a few months, poor thing, and all is forgotten, but it changed Stephen from a gay sort of boy into the man you see now." Her eyes rested meditatively on Beatrice. "I never quite understood why. She was very nice but not quite a lady—though perhaps one ought not to say so of a person who is above all such considerations now. She sang in a musical comedy—some song about sea-bathing—though why *that* should attract a gentleman——" Miss Thornleigh paused and added in a low tone: "They were married at a registrar's office. That always seems to me a little like buying machine-made underclothing. Doesn't it to you?"

"Yes—no—I don't know," said Beatrice.

"And so," said Miss Thornleigh, pursuing her train of thought, "it didn't last. It was never likely to last."

"I cannot think that Mrs. Stephen Croft died because she was married at the registrar's," objected Beatrice in common justice.

"Well, perhaps not," conceded Miss Thornleigh. "But it was a bad start. A bad start. And look how thin Stephen is, with all his good health."

"Yes, but he might have remained thin if he had been married in church with orange blossom and six bridesmaids," said Beatrice.

Mrs. Thornleigh shook her head.

"No," she said. "If he had always done things like other people do he would have grown comfortably covered; his—his mind would have

learned to sit down, if you understand me, my dear."

Then they rang the Russells' bell and were ushered into the presence of Martin's mother-in-law, who waited in state with her unmarried daughter, ready to receive guests. She was very young-looking for her years, with carefully-dressed hair parted upon an unlined forehead, and she greeted Beatrice cordially, asking after the rest of the family.

"Emmaline is coming, but Martin wants a game of golf after his hard week," said Beatrice.

"Poor boy! He works hard indeed," said Mrs. Russell, in just the same graciously-precise tone as her married daughter. "And little Jane?"

"Nurse is bringing her round for a few minutes about tea-time," said Beatrice.

"I don't know why my Mother wants the child at a grown-up party," said Marion.

"I believe in training a child socially from the very first, don't you, Miss Thornleigh? It gives her an ease and aplomb that can never afterwards be obtained," said Mrs. Russell, rolling her hands and glancing involuntarily at the portrait of a bishop on the opposite wall, who had become a bishop because his mother had followed the precepts just enunciated.

Indeed, many of the Russell family had obtained a good deal from the world, principally owing to their great gift, of which mention has already been made, added to a very real social talent.

The Bishop himself was the apex and shining exemplar of what could be done in the Russell line. Even his many friends admitted that he was neither an intellectual man nor particularly energetic—but he was so good : and he never made a social mistake.

Mrs. Russell admired him as any one who is really clever in their own department will admire a past master ; and if her heart could have been visible there would have been found upon it, after the fashion of Queen Mary, not a town, but a neat little pair of gaiters.

If Emmaline had been in a position to wear gaiters she would probably have earned them too ; and when she entered with Martin, clad in pale grey, with white about her throat and a fresh colour on her fair face, she did convey a very charming impression of matronly sweetness.

“ I thought you were going to play golf,” said Beatrice to her brother.

“ Well, Emmaline was very good about it, but I could see she was disappointed,” he said. “ We so seldom have a chance to go about together. And after all, I don’t know that I approve of husbands and wives spending their weekly holiday apart.”

Beatrice laughed, but there was great tenderness in her eyes as she looked at her brother’s tired face.

“ Dear old Martin ! ” she said. “ Only don’t turn into nothing but an echo.”

He laughed back, seizing her point, but there was seriousness in his eyes too.

"So long as I echo nothing worse than Emma-line!" he said, then he turned the subject hastily. "Bless me! Am I going to be the only man? Oh, joy, here's Croft coming up the path, by all that's wonderful!"

For men do not attend afternoon teas in Marshfield, because of the simple reason that most of them are at business every day but Saturday, and then they play golf; so Martin and Croft made the little party quite a grand affair, and when they handed cakes or sandwiches each lady made a little flattering remark to them; not flattering in words perhaps, but flattering in intention.

This does not mean that Marshfield ladies thought particularly highly of the men; on the contrary, they discussed all serious questions with each other, and proffered these sugary conversational scraps to the opposite sex as being all that the masculine palate would desire.

Croft brought in with him a big box of sweets with a bunch of scented artificial carnations on the top, and he gave them to Marion in a way that all the ladies thought most pointed.

"From Paris?" said Mrs. Russell, lending her countenance with a gracious smile. How charming of you to remember us, Mr. Croft. How sweet!" and she sniffed delicately at the carnations.

"Do have one, Beatrice!" said Marion, opening the box.

Beatrice took one in her hand, and glanced at Croft.

"Sweets to the nightingale, of course," she said, with a smile. "No wonder you remembered."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "She is going to sing later, isn't she?"

"I believe so," said Beatrice, moving away.

Marion approached the little bride, for whom the party had been given, with the chocolates in her hand.

"My husband was so very sorry he could not come," said the bride, flushing like a rose. "He had to play in a foursome."

"Oh, of course, dear," said Marion kindly; and every one felt that when she married Croft such things would not happen.

But just for the moment Croft was not thinking of the lady to whom Marshfield had given him. He stood, instead, glancing at Beatrice with a queer, whimsical look of aroused curiosity as she talked to Miss Thornleigh.

Then Jane came in, rather abashed, but joyful all the same: and she caught sight at once of the little bride at whose wedding she had been a bridesmaid only six weeks before.

"Well, Jane?" said the little lady.

Jane looked at her very hard with brown hands clasped tightly together, as her habit was when she felt tremendously eager.

"Have you ordered a baby yet?" she said.

There was a dead silence in the room for one second, and then Emmaline said very hastily :

“What awful weather for the time of year. Jane, you can go back to Nurse now.”

“Why, Mummy, I’ve only this moment come,” said Jane, the corners of her lips beginning to quiver, for she was a most sociable little soul and dearly loved a “party.”

“Never mind. You must go, dear,” said Emmaline with decision.

Then the little bride caught up Jane on her knee, and said appealingly :

“Do let her stay.”

“She asks such awful questions,” said Emmaline in a low tone.

“Never mind,” said the little bride, cuddling Jane to her. “I always wanted to know things. I remember what it feels like.”

“Oh, well, if you’ll take the risk,” said Emmaline, going off to the other guests.

Jane snuggled her head down upon the soft, lacy shoulder, and whispered lovingly :

“When you *do* order a baby it will have a nice Mammy to come to.”

“You darling !” whispered the little bride back.

Then Jane had to go, and Marion began to sing one song after the other, while all the ladies, who had found talk flagging a little before owing to the unusual presence of gentlemen, thought of a thousand interesting things to say all at once. They got in what they could between the songs, but

that was very little, and before long they went away.

Beatrice went with them, leaving Croft by the piano, and Martin and Emmaline engaged in talk about family affairs with Mrs. Russell.

But though Marion was just about to sing again, and Croft was under the spell that her music exercised upon him, he still looked after Beatrice as she left the room with the same expression of aroused interest.

"By Jove!" he said. "Miss Fawcett is like Jane. Just like Jane!"

"Have you only just found that out?" said Marion carelessly.

"Oh, I believe I must have begun to notice it before. Something puzzled me——" He broke off.

"I did not think anything at all about her when she first came."

"No? Well, she is not striking. Good-hearted, though, poor little thing!"

Marion touched the piano lightly and began the next song.

But Jane at home was less easily turned from the subject in hand, and as she sat on the floor cleaning her dolls' house she thought about the little bride first and marriage afterwards. She wore a knotted handkerchief on her head to look like a real charwoman, and rubbed industriously as she pondered.

She had known what a wedding was, of course, when she was only three; but the little bride had

always been a friend of hers, and seemed so unlike a Mammy that it was rather puzzling to think of her as one.

For that was little Jane's idea of marriage—a state in which ladies and gentlemen who were not related lived together and turned automatically into Mammies and Daddies, and were at liberty to order babies from heaven if they liked.

"Auntie," she said earnestly, when Beatrice came into the room, "would you like to get married?"

"No," said Beatrice.

"Not if Mr. Croft were to ask you?"

"No, indeed," said Beatrice.

"Well, I'm going to marry Mr. Croft when I grow up," said Jane placidly. "We shall have chops and pancakes for dinner every day, and ten lumps of sugar in our tea. It will be fun."

"Won't you come and live with your old Auntie instead?" said Beatrice. "I shall be really old then, you know."

Jane looked grave.

"I'd love to, Auntie," she said, "but it seems properer to have a husband and family of your own, doesn't it?"

Beatrice smiled down at the odd little figure with the knotted handkerchief and bunched up frock.

"Well, I suppose it does, Jane," she said.

CHAPTER V

NOVEMBER came in with a great storm, and all round the east coast were little vessels making for harbour. Martin arrived home chilled and weary from Flodmouth, glad to sit near the great fire in the hall and to hear the roar of the gale from a place of warmth and shelter.

It was weekday service in the little chapel, and a handful of people gathered there, listening half-fearful to the wind, and singing the hymn that grows most real in places like Marshfield :

“Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the Sea!”

They could see troughs of green water as they sang, for they knew all about it.

Even the Flod was no longer a calm stretch of opalescent water, but a place of churning mud-coloured waves and dangerous currents.

“Oh! the poor things at sea to-night!” said Emmaline, very kindly and gently, as she drew closer the heavy curtains.

Beatrice sat looking wide-eyed and serious, for she was not used to storms like this, and she said with a catch of the breath :

“You would wonder any one ever went to sea.”

“Oh, you have forgotten, Bee,” said Martin,

with a laugh, knocking out his pipe. "I wanted to go to sea once. Almost every boy in Flodmouth wants to go to sea sometime or other if he has got any spirit of adventure in him."

"Well, I'm glad you have outgrown it, dear," said Emmaline.

"Oh, I'm a steady old business man who only wants a fire and a dinner at the end of the day," said Martin. "But Croft has never altered—he is as reckless as he was when we shared a boat together as lads—more so. I saw him in the train to-night, and he is going out in this. I couldn't dissuade him. I tried my best, but he got angry in the end. It was no use."

"He must be mad!" said Emmaline.

"Well, I must say myself I sometimes think old Croft has a tile loose," said Martin. "Good chap, though, old Croft. Not another like him."

Beatrice said nothing, but as they gathered close round the fire she thought of his strange face set against the storm. Did he want to die? Was it possible that he would be glad to die?

Then she remembered him walking into the Russells' room with the chocolates and dismissed the idea as incredible.

But as Croft fought with the wind, beating up towards the mouth of the Flod, he had no wish to die. On the contrary, he felt a wild exhilaration in the mere fact of living. His face, if there had been any one to see, was restless no longer. He clung to the tiller, as the water rushed by close to

the boat's edge, with a splendid sense of bringing into play every power of mind and body. There was no unused energy to make him fret and chafe—it was all wanted.

He had come out to get away from troublesome thoughts, and for the time being the question which had been facing him for some weeks might remain unanswered. But deep in his inmost heart he knew it would come back.

Once, as a lad of twenty-three, he had sworn that no woman should ever be anything to him again, and now after ten years he was beginning to think that Marion Russell might bring into his life that peace for which he was always craving.

She soothed his restlessness as no one else in the world could do; and he did not quite realise that she would not be always singing songs which made a man feel as if he were walking in a quiet garden at noontide.

Still, a doubt somewhere lingered, troubling him, driving him from one room to the other of his rambling house during the whole of the previous night; and so he had come out here to leave it all behind him.

One time the boat gined too suddenly and he was nearly capsized; for a moment he was quite close to death and never saw it, being of those who never see the dread visitor until he holds them close. Then the boat righted itself and he went gaily back towards Marshfield and the dawn.

But though the Fawcetts crouched round their

roaring fire and listened to the wind, they did not know what it looked like, any more than Croft himself, who was in the midst of it. Only Jane knew, as she lay wideawake in her bed upstairs and heard it racing round the house. Few grown-ups know, because they have forgotten, but they nearly all knew once, as Jane did, how the long grey things, wingless, half-transparent, race each other screaming round the corners of a house.

To-night, as it was so stormy, they often met, and fought and screamed and laughed together, until Jane wanted to get up and dance about the room for glee; such glorious fun seemed to be going on somewhere.

But Nurse was asleep beyond the open door, and to awaken baby brother would mean a return from happy hunting grounds, which would cause him to protest at the top of his healthy lungs until Jane had to hide her outraged ears under the bedclothes. So she just lay quiet and listened.

And as the dawn rose over the little quiet place, and over the windswept spaces of Bank Island beyond, Croft ran his boat up to the little jetty he had made, and went back to his house in the strange light between night and morning.

The fight with the storm had left him calm and gay, and he whistled as he jumped over the last fence beyond his swaying coppice; then he went to bed and slept for a few hours until it was time to rise and go to business in Flodmouth.

He attended the office regularly four or five days

a week when he was in Marshfield, and as he motored in this morning his active brain was full of business in the great waters. It was a business which suited him, and he it, and though he made big mistakes he made far bigger successes.

Wars and rumours of wars—pestilence and famine—all the great things which affect the shipping trade swept pageant-like before him as he sat at his desk that morning, and he found a joy in grappling with each situation as it arose.

Then he went out for some lunch without a thought of Marion Russell, and encountered her walking along the street with another man. This admirer was eligible, though not so eligible as the shipowner, and he was only one of many. It became quite plain to Croft, all at once, that if he wanted to marry Marion he must propose to her without delay. She was not one of those who wait by themselves in a corner until a man makes up his mind.

So he sat down in the writing-room at the club and wrote a note inviting the Russells and the Fawcetts—including Jane—to lunch at his house on the following Saturday.

He thought Jane would reduce the formality of the proceedings without taking away from their significance.

After he had finished his meal he went back to the office, posting the letter on the way, but when it had vanished through he stood frowning and staring at the slit of the letter box.

"Want it back?" jested a friend in passing. Croft turned.

"Oh! I d' know—perhaps so," he said shortly, and walked on.

"Queer-tempered chap," remarked the friend to another. "Keeps the clerks in his office on the move, I can tell you. But they all think the world of him—do anything to please him—don't know how it is."

"I do," said the other. "He's so dashed human. Takes it to heart if their kids die or they start drinking. Give you my word he sent one man the finest dessert apples every Saturday for a whole winter because he had been told that raw apples stopped the craving. Wife made them into pies, of course, and the chap went on drinking. But that's the sort of thing."

"Well, he must have more time on his hands than you or me," said the friend, turning into his office.

The invitation was received in Marshfield that evening before Jane went to bed, and when she was told of it she danced for joy about the nursery floor, with Bobby dancing after her in his pale-blue dressing-gown. Jane turned and hugged him rapturously, for though she did hate to hear him bellow she would have followed him to the world's end when he came out from his bath shouting, "Daney! Want my Daney!" with his dressing-gown tassels flying and his damp gold hair ashine like a son of the morning.

Jane's other relatives were also discreetly pleased,

and Mrs. Russell, if it had not been for those little gaiters, might even have done a sprightly step or two across the drawing-room carpet; for she was so very genuinely pleased. But instead of dancing she said to Marion in a tone of solemn elation:

"Think of the good you will be able to do. Your voice is not large, but it carries well. You will have no difficulty in speaking when you preside at meetings, and open bazaars and so on. I do not consider that Stephen Croft has ever yet realised his position in the county. His wife will be a power—a power for good."

Marion laughed.

"Don't hurry too much, Mother. He has not asked me yet."

"He will," said Mrs. Russell with conviction.

"I have no reason for thinking so. He has never said anything," answered Marion placidly.

But they all felt quite sure that this party was, as Croft meant it to be, a definite step in the direction of an engagement.

The storm wore itself out by the Friday, and when Beatrice went round the garden she gathered a few pink monthly roses which still bloomed so late in the year in a sheltered place under a hedge. Their clear colour was lovely against her grey skirt as she sat for a moment in the sunshine, and a robin piped cheerily somewhere near at hand.

After a minute or two she rose with the flowers in her hand, and walked down the village street to the churchyard.

It seemed to her suddenly that Harold Wood was out of all this, even though he was somewhere much better. To go away so young from the dear old earth, and the common sights and sounds, though it were to join the company of the blest--

She felt her tears rise as she placed the flowers on his grave.

Then, as she came away, she met Croft, who had been making arrangements with the Parish Clerk about the gravestone.

He looked from the little patch of clear pink on the distant grave to her face, and said bluntly, without any greeting :

" You don't think that does him any good. do you ? "

" No," said Beatrice.

" Then why do you do it ? "

" He would be pleased if he did know. He thought nobody cared."

Croft looked down at her intently.

" So you come here to make even your memory of him satisfied. And yet you cared nothing for him. You lied to him when he was dying."

" How dare you ! " cried Beatrice, her face aflame, her eyes sparkling fiercely behind her tears.

" How dare you say such a thing ! I loved him ! "

But instead of any answering anger there was an expression of moved kindness on his face as he watched her. Just such a look as he would have

worn if little Jane, grown older, had been there instead of Beatrice.

"Forgive me," he said. "I ought to have understood before! I should have understood if I had thought enough."

"I have no wish that you should understand me. Please do not trouble to think," said Beatrice, walking quickly down the path.

But he put his broad figure between her and the gate.

"Look here," he said, "you're a just woman, I believe. You know that no man can do more than apologise. I'm truly sorry. I first began to wonder about you when I heard you crying out across those fields: 'I love you!' It was a last desperate call to a dying soul. It would have made any one think. Then, afterwards, I was sure you had never loved him. You see I was so fond of him. That made me keen."

"What did it matter to you when he was dead? Let me go!" said Beatrice, shaking the gate, her whole being on fire with a resentment which seemed greater than even the circumstances warranted.

"It's no use," he said, holding the gate fast, and speaking quickly. "I'm going to have this out with you. I took you for the usual woman past her first youth who was glad to marry a fine-looking chap younger than herself, even though she did not care much about him. He—he seemed to me too good for that. *Now*, do you understand?"

He let go the gate and stood upright.

"Yes," said Beatrice at last. Then the something in her which made her do things for which she could never afterwards account, caused her to add eagerly: "I do! I do! I'm so glad you felt like that! I'm so glad you cared enough for him to be angry."

He looked down at her—such a little, quiet woman, and yet beneath it all a thing of tears and flame.

"You did more for Wood than any one living could do," he said. "You lied to him when he was dying that he might die satisfied."

Beatrice opened her lips to speak and the words would not come, but at last she burst forth, weeping:

"He never heard! I couldn't make him hear!"

"Hush! Hush!" said Croft. "It's over now. He's all right now. But—but don't let us quarrel over him." He held out his hand and said simply: "Won't you be friends?"

Beatrice hesitated, and then put her hand in his.

"I don't make friends quickly," she said.

"You won't have to *make* friends with me," he said, holding her cold hand in a warm grasp. "Jane has done that already. You are so like her, you know."

"I can't jump into a friendship," said Beatrice.

"I'm sorry, but I can't."

Croft's queer, lined face looked pleasant enough as he smiled down at her, and his eyes were very bright.

"I'll do the jumping," he said, "and I'll pull you in after me. We shall have great times together—you and I and Jane."

"Shall we?" said Beatrice; then she continued in a different tone: "Did you see Marion as you passed this afternoon? She asked me to say, if I saw you, that she hopes you remembered to get your piano tuned."

"Oh yes. Had it done yesterday," said Croft, resuming his ordinary manner. "I am so glad you are all able to come."

Then he went back to the Parish Clerk, and Beatrice returned home, where she found her niece anxiously considering two worms upon the garden path.

"Things *is* queer," sighed little Jane.

"Are," corrected Nannie.

"What is the matter now?" said Emmaline. Then she turned to Beatrice and said pleasantly: "And what have you been doing? I had a Mothers' Union Meeting this afternoon, or I should have taken you with me."

"I went to the churchyard with some flowers," said Beatrice, whom Emmaline's tactfulness, most unreasonably, seemed to make stiff and blunt.

"So glad you were able to take a few blossoms to the poor boy's grave," murmured Emmaline gently. "Do always gather anything you feel inclined, won't you? We want you to regard the garden as your own."

A dim suspicion that she ought to have asked

permission before gathering the roses somehow entered Beatrice's mind for the first time, and she decided to leave the flowers in her brother's garden alone for the future.

"Well, what is queer, Jane?" she asked.

"Mammy says," responded Jane, "that blackbirds are happiest when they are eating worms, but then the worms are misrubble, of course. Why can't blackbirds and worms be the happiest together?"

"What ridiculous questions you do ask to be sure," said Nurse. "Come in to your tea. You make my head go round. Question, question, question, from morning to night."

Then she went on with Bobby, who was rather tired and cross, so Beatrice took Jane's hand in hers as they walked towards the house.

"Look here, Jane," she remarked, "there are lots of questions nobody can answer. The only thing is to leave them alone. You'll know all about everything some day."

"When I'm really grown up?" said little Jane, with her eager face towards the western light.

Beatrice paused a moment and thought of the still graveyard under that November sunshine.

"When you are really grown up, dear," she answered.

Jane paused a moment, thinking deeply, then she remarked:

"I shall do my hair like Nannie's when I grow up. Why don't you stick your hair out with three

combs, Auntie ? And you can save the bits that come out to make a tail, you know."

So Beatrice gave up metaphysics and raced Jane to the side door.

The next day was still fine, but there was no sunshine, and the wide stretches of flat land looked very black and bare, as Croft's guests drove over the bridge, leaving sheltered and flowery Marshfield behind them. Martin was coming direct from the station, but Mrs. Russell and Marion were in the big Marshfield cab with Beatrice and Emmaline and little Jane.

Emmaline sat very important and smiling in a lavender gown, and the two Russell ladies were sufficiently gay to regard some straws on the blue cloth cushions and a broken window-strap as a sort of joke—which really shows how very gay they were.

Beatrice and Jane pretended they were two very grand ladies going to Court, and when Jane's curls caught her cheek she cried out, most convincingly : "Keep your feathers out of my eye, *please*, Lady Marshfield ! I must have both eyes to see the Queen with, or I shall tread on her toes and be taken to prison in a State coach."

"Really, Beatrice !" said Emmaline. "One would think you liked it too."

"She does ! She does !" said little Jane in eager defence. "That's why she makes such fun. She's—she's in it."

But of course little Jane could not say what she

really meant, no child can, and this is why children so often remain uninterested by the well-meant attempts of kind grown-ups.

It is a fact, however, that Beatrice felt very cheerful that morning. The cloud which her decision to remain in Marshfield and Wood's tragic death had thrown over her was clearing away; so that she again felt the old, unreasonable conviction that to-morrow must be splendid.

Perhaps it was the talk with Croft in the churchyard which finally dispersed the clouds, for when a real friendship rises over life's horizon it is like sunshine, making everything just that much brighter than before.

As they turned into the somewhat neglected garden Emmaline remarked with a little smile at her sister: "This place sadly needs a woman's hand." Then she turned to Beatrice and said in a low voice: "You know, of course, that Stephen Croft is a widower. But please do not make any reference to his marriage, will you, dear?"

"I had thought of asking him at lunch if his wife used to eat potatoes," said Beatrice, with twinkling eyes. "Just for something to talk about, you know."

"Beatrice! What——" began Emmaline, then she smiled indulgently. "Oh, I see—you were joking!"

Beatrice laughed and nodded, glancing across at the contented, smiling face; and she sincerely envied her sister-in-law, for it is impossible to be

quite satisfied with yourself if you have a sense of humour.

Then the cab stopped before the great square house with its bleak walls and grey-painted Georgian window-frames, and Croft came out to welcome his guests.

He also was in a very happy mood that morning, and ushered Mrs. Russell into the ugly drawing-room with a gay deference which, as everybody felt, was exactly the right thing from a man who was nearly a son-in-law and yet not quite.

Mrs. Russell sat down on a sofa and decided that all the furniture in that room must be sold, even Marion could do nothing with it.

In a few minutes Martin arrived and the whole party went in to luncheon, which was excellent and well served, but with discoloured damask and plates chipped at the edges. The place did, indeed, cry aloud for a mistress, and Marion ate her chicken rather pensively, wondering if she should have Crown Derby or Coalport.

But the meal was a very gay one, because Croft and Martin were both in excellent spirits, laughing and chaffing one another, and everybody talked together with a steady accompaniment of rippling conversation from Mrs. Martin, who felt it her duty at social functions to pour out a pleasant little stream of talk that never seemed to stop for a moment. No wonder anxious hostesses who were not quite sure whether a wait in the service might not occur, or a sudden silence fall, were

desirous above all things to obtain the company of Mrs. Martin Fawcett. The only wonder was how she managed to get sufficient to eat; but she had a particularly refined way of taking her food, which was so perfect as to be almost imperceptible.

The table was a round one, and Croft had placed Mrs. Russell on his right, but left the other guests to sort themselves, so Beatrice found herself opposite to him. He looked across at her with a quiet friendliness which was quite different to the quick, admiring glances which he bestowed upon Marion, and he scarcely said anything to her. But several times when she made some laughing remark their eyes met, and she was conscious of that steady, interested regard.

"Hi, Jane!" said Martin. "Now it is your turn. Pudding coming."

Then the blow fell.

"Why," said Emmaline, with sweetly grateful surprise, "you have even remembered to order a rice pudding for Jane."

"But Mammy," began Jane.

"Eat your beautiful rice pudding at once, dear. It is so nice and milky," said Emmaline in a pleasant tone.

But Jane knew, and she lifted her spoon to her trembling lips in silence.

"Why, what's up, Jane?" said Croft, catching sight of the crimson cheeks and dolorous mouth.

"It's a funny thing to be invited to a party and then have rice pudding," said little Jane.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Russell. "Naughty girl!"

"But, Grannie, it *is* a funny thing to be invited to a——"

"Be quiet, Jane," said Emmaline.

"Oh, do let the poor little kid have a piece of this sweet," said Croft. "What an ass I was! Only I noticed she always had rice pudding at home. I say, Jane, leave it."

"No," said Emmaline, still smiling, "I must beg of you not to interfere, Mr. Croft. I know you mean it kindly, but discipline must be maintained. Jane, if you speak again you must go into the drawing-room."

But Jane bent her face over her plate and muttered obstinately between every mouthful:

"It's a funny thing to be invited to a party and then have rice pudding."

"Go into the drawing-room, Jane," said Emmaline quite gently.

So Jane went, muttering still but obedient, for there was that in her mother's voice which she dared not disobey.

Beatrice felt with the culprit; still she too knew that discipline must be maintained; so it was not until coffee had been served that she managed to slip away in search of Jane.

But there was no disconsolate little figure to be found, though Beatrice called and hunted everywhere, and she was reluctant to go back with the

news to the dining-room, because that would cause a disturbance of the party and also get Jane into worse trouble than ever.

She came to the conclusion that the child had gone upstairs to the bedroom where the maid had removed her out-of-door garments, and after glancing round doubtfully for a moment she made her way up the wide stairs. The steps were oak and uncarpeted, and even her light footstep seemed to echo through the house. Grim portraits, very badly painted, lined the walls up to the first floor, and there was a mahogany gate at the end of the corridor which had sometime been used to keep in a horde of happy children. The whole place seemed very desolate. She could picture Croft pacing about it restlessly at night, hearing echoes which seemed to come from sounds long dead.

"Jane!" she called softly, "Jane!"

No answer.

"Jane!" she called more loudly. "It is only Auntie. Where are you?"

A door opened a foot or so and a little tear-stained face peeped woefully out.

"I'm here, Auntie," said Jane, then she vanished, and from the interior of the room came the muffled cry:

"Oh dear! Oh dear! Whatever shall I do?"

Beatrice followed the sound and found her niece flung face downwards upon a dirty sofa of pale-green brocade piled with pink cushions. The wall-paper was patterned with pink roses and green

ribbons, and the carpet had once repeated the same design on a white ground. It was evidently an upstairs sitting-room, not often used.

"Hush, hush, dear!" said Beatrice, putting a hand on the heaving shoulders. "It is not so bad as all that. Mother will forgive you. What are you doing here?"

"I looked for my things," said Jane, sitting up and glaring fiercely at her aunt. "I wanted to run away. I hate everybody! And it *is* a funny thing to be invited to a party and then have rice pudding."

"But, Jane, Mr. Croft meant to be so kind," said Beatrice rather feebly. "Gentlemen are different. They don't always understand, dear."

"Why—*why* didn't God give gentlemen as much sense as ladies?" sobbed little Jane. But before Beatrice could attempt to answer that question she heard the sound of running footsteps and Croft burst into the room.

"What are you doing here?" he said roughly. "I didn't ask you here to come peering and prying about my house like——"

"Mr. Croft!" said Beatrice, regaining her breath.

"I f—found it first," said Jane. "This *is* a horrid party. I want to go home."

Croft looked at the child and tried to restrain himself, but his voice shook with anger as he said, quietly enough:

"Perhaps you would take her, Miss Fawcett. I will order the car at once."

"Thank you. We will walk. Come with me, Jane. Please say I have taken Jane home."

He never turned round as they went out, and for a minute or two he stood staring into the empty fireplace. Then he rejoined his guests.

But he left them again a few minutes later, even though Marion was now at the piano, and watched from a staircase window the two little figures battling against the stiff breeze which nearly always blew across his land. As he watched them the restless anger in his face gradually gave place to a great tenderness. So little flesh—so much indomitable spirit—two tiny things of fire and tears and laughter braving that bleak expanse as they would brave anything.

He came down again and listened to Marion singing until it grew quite dusk. Then, as they were all going, he turned to Martin and said:

"Do you think your wife would have me to dinner to-night?"

"'Course she would, Stephen," said Martin. Then he added innocently: "Marion can't come, though, I'm afraid. She is dining out somewhere."

"I'll manage to do without her for once, then," said Croft.

"Here, Emmaline," called Martin, as his wife came cloaked and veiled down the stairs, "Stephen is coming back with us to dinner."

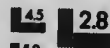
"So glad," said Mrs. Martin. "We shall make no difference for you. Just a chop!"

But already she was planning an elaborate



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savoury and saying to herself that they would have a little entrée as well; for she knew better than to give a plain chop to a prospective rich brother-in-law. She was immensely wise, was Mrs. Martin. But she was sorry that she could not teach Beatrice to be a little more discreet, and she said to her husband on the way home :

“ Of course I could make no remark at the time; but it was most unseemly of Beatrice to leave early in that way, taking Jane with her.”

“ Bee meant it all right,” said Martin sharply; “ I think it was very good of her to take the child home.”

Emmaline lifted her handkerchief to her eyes.

“ I do hope we are not going to have disagreements about Beatrice,” she said. “ There has never been the slightest cloud between us before, and it is not every woman who would care to take a sister-in-law to live with her.”

“ Of course not,” said Martin with compunction. “ If I had only done better in business there would have been no need for it. We could just have had her for long visits.” He took her hand. “ But you don't regret marrying me, do you, Emmaline ?”

“ You know I don't,” said Emmaline, smiling, as he felt, like an angel upon him.

And indeed she did truly love her husband, though she had such a marvellous instinctive gift for placing herself in the right position.

CHAPTER VI

CROFT motored into Flodmouth after he had taken his guests home, his powerful car streaming like the wind along the flat, empty roads, and he still managed to arrive at the Fawcetts' house half an hour before dinner.

He knew the habits of the house well, and he found, as he expected to find, that Beatrice was sitting alone by the hall fire. Only he had not counted on little Jane, though he had a parcel in his hand which he was going to send up to the nursery.

"Hullo, Jane! You up?" he said.

But instead of flying towards him as usual, she looked out doubtfully from under her shock of dark hair and remained by her aunt's side: for a child's confidence is easily destroyed and difficult to restore. A scene like that which had taken place in the sitting-room with the pink paper makes an indelible mark on the mind of a child like little Jane, though she soon seemed to forget it, and for a long time there would be a queer uncomfortableness connected with all her thoughts about the big house in Bank Island. Everybody knows how who has been little and has gone through an unpleasant experience at a strange house.

Beatrice rose at once.

"Come, Jane. It is just bedtime," she said, taking no notice of Croft's presence.

"Wait a moment, Jane," said Croft. "I have something to show you," and he cut the string of the box.

Jane looked doubtfully from him to Beatrice, then curiosity triumphed: she drew near the table.

"What is it?" she said.

"Well," said Croft, "after you and Auntie had left, I was so vexed with that old rice pudding that I stamped three times and said: 'Kerfoozlem! Kerfoozlem! Kerfoozlem!' So it took me for the fairy dustman and turned into this." As he spoke he drew a sponge cake like a tower triumphantly from the box. "I brought it here at once, of course, because I knew it was meant for you," he added.

Jane stared at him for a moment, half-doubtful, half-believing, then she clapped her hands and danced up and down.

"Oh, you *are* funny! You *are* funny!" she said. "Nearly as funny as the garden boy who used to make faces at me with orange-peel teeth."

"Such praise is praise indeed," said Croft gravely.

"I don't know what you mean," said Jane. "But I'll get Auntie Beatrice to make some orange-peel teeth for you, and then you'll see. She says she can."

"I don't suppose she will," said Croft. "She is very angry with me."

Jane glanced anxiously at Beatrice's annoyed face.

"It was a pity," she said, folding and unfolding her hands, "that you didn't stamp and change something into a present for her too."

"Jane!" said Nurse at the door.

"Good-night," said Jane hastily. "I just slipped away without mentioning it."

"I am coming too," said Beatrice, following the child towards the door.

"No!" said Croft. "I have something to say to you."

"There can be nothing——" began Beatrice.

"You must stay," said Croft. "I want to explain my behaviour this afternoon."

"Oh, there is no need."

"There is a great need," said Croft, "or I should not do it. But I know no other way of keeping you for my friend."

He stared a moment into the fire and then added jerkily:

"The fact is, I am always ashamed when I go into that room and"—he drew a long breath—"it's—it's intolerable to feel ashamed. It makes me furious. I can't control myself. Then the surprise of finding you there——"

"Oh, please don't say any more," murmured Beatrice. "It's all right."

"No. I'll go on now I have begun. I know it's the only way. Look here, I—I got into just such

a rage with my wife in that room. We quarrelled and parted there. Then I flung off and left her at a time when no decent man should leave his wife. And she died."

Beatrice said nothing, all that had happened in her life seemed suddenly lit and meaningless in the face of a reality like this.

"Now, you understand," said Croft.

"You were so young. You were only a boy," said Beatrice in a low tone.

"I was old enough to marry a woman, so I was old enough to behave like a man to her. I behaved like a hound." He spoke quietly enough, but the sound in his voice was, to Beatrice, like the sight of the sweat of agony—something brought out by a long torture almost too great to be borne.

"Don't tell me any more. Oh, why did you tell me?" she said.

He put his hand to his head.

"I don't know. I wanted to explain. I didn't want to lose you," he said. Then he looked at her with a sort of desperation in his lined face. "I believe I had to talk it over with somebody. It was driving me mad, thinking of that for ten years day and night and never saying anything."

"You didn't realise——" began Beatrice.

"I did wrong," he said heavily. "You must agree with that."

"Yes," said Beatrice, "you did wrong."

But after she had said that her lip began to tremble and she held out her hand.

"You've been so awfully sorry," she added.

He took her hand and held it for some moments, then he dropped it and tried to speak in his ordinary tone.

"You are not so like little Jane as you look," he said. "I dared not bring you a sponge cake. When you marry——" He broke off, looking at her as if a new thought had struck him.

"I am not likely to do that," said Beatrice quietly.

"Well, so I considered when I first met you," he said, evidently engrossed in his own idea.

"Indeed," said Beatrice, naturally nettled; for it is one of those things which no sensible woman minds saying, but all nice women expect a denial from a friend.

"When you marry," he continued, looking down at her with the queer, whimsical smile which he kept for her and Jane, "your husband will be a down-trodden creature. Fancy a wife who couldn't be appeased by a new hat! Horrible!"

Beatrice did her best to respond, but she found it difficult because her mind was in a turmoil and her heart stirred by his strange confidence. Still she knew he was, in a way, warding her off: fearful lest she should touch the exposed wound; therefore she talked about Miss Thornleigh's pigs and the weather until Martin and Emmaline came down.

After dinner the two men played billiards according to their usual custom, while Beatrice and

Emmaline embroidered by the billiard-room fire until it was bedtime.

During the next few days Croft was constantly in and out of the house, though not more so than often happened during one of his restless fits; but he paid no more attention to Beatrice than he had done in the past, and she sometimes almost wondered if he could have talked to her about the deepest secret of his life. It seemed incredible.

But she found her own thoughts dwelling on him constantly, to the exclusion of every other interest. When Jane suddenly ran forward shouting: "Here he is!" she felt her heart hammer against her sides in a way that at once suggested to her somebody's patent indigestion cure. Her grandmother had long suffered from palpitation of the heart produced by indigestion, and Beatrice began to fear it was hereditary.

At last one Saturday about a fortnight later Martin came in from the office with the news that Croft had gone out in his canoe-yawl on the river.

"Silly ass to go on sailing so late in the year," grumbled Martin. "It is a very open season, but the days are short and the weather uncertain. He may do it once too often. I told him so this morning."

Beatrice went on with her lunch and said nothing, only immediately afterwards she retired upstairs and took a strong dose of bicarbonate and ginger. She was at once so incredibly younger and older than her years, was Beatrice.

But when Martin came home greatly agitated on Monday night, and said there was a rumour in Flodmouth that Croft's boat had been blown out to sea, she felt a terrible seizure of the heart which indigestion could not account for. She knew it to be love and fear.

"Perhaps he is sleeping on the boat," she said at last. "Or he might have landed somewhere."

"We have telegraphed to every point up and down the river," said Martin drily. "A steamer passed him near the mouth of the Flod and offered to take him and the boat on board, but he would go on. He could not be living on a little craft like that out in the open sea."

In the strange blank days that followed, Emma-line and Beatrice went quietly about the house, as if some one dead were near at hand. And Marion came and cried, and put powder on her nose, and went out for a little walk with the next most eligible of her admirers; but without ceasing to feel a real regret for the missing man.

Mrs. Russell cried too, because she was human and had kindly human feelings in spite of the little gaiters, but she was a good woman and soon began to console herself with the thought that Mr. Wainwright, the next most eligible admirer, was more like other people than Stephen Croft. It would have been a constant slight irritation to her, in spite of the many advantages, to have possessed a son-in-law who was not quite like other people.

But Jane was kept in ignorance of the whole

affair, though she felt there was something wrong somewhere, and struggled to express this feeling when she remarked vaguely :

"Auntie, it seems somehow like a wet Sunday when you've got a cold in your head : and yet I haven't and it isn't."

"No, dear," said Beatrice, kissing the little wistful face with a sad heart. "Let us play at something. What shall it be?"

"I don't feel up to anything but old Ted," said Jane, lugging forward the faithful animal. "He is never in really kicking-about jolly spirits at any time, you know. He's just comfortable."

So they played for an hour, and then Beatrice went for her daily walk across the bridge towards the river. She hated going there, and yet she could not keep away.

It was a fine morning, with a little breeze, and the yellow leaves swirled along under the bare hedges. The tide was full, and the ships moved pageant-like across the grey November sky. And underneath that opal-gleaming water Croft must lie somewhere asleep.

Beatrice walked along weeping now, because at home she had to be the most cheerful of any. Even Nannie had known him longer than she, and had the right to put her handkerchief to her eyes when she talked about the drowned man in the servants' hall.

Then, suddenly, without the least warning, he came round the corner and was before her.

she stared at him, her face still wet with tears, and shrieked aloud:

"You're alive! You're alive!"

Then she sank in a little heap by the roadside.

But it was only a momentary faintness, and when Croft reached her she tried to struggle to her feet. He helped her up and then stood still holding her.

"Why, Beatrice," he said, "what is it?"

"We thought you were dead," she gasped breathlessly.

"Dead!" he said. "Who believes that?"

"Everybody," sobbed Beatrice.

"But why?" he asked, evidently puzzled.

"Because you went away like that, and the boat never came back," said Beatrice, beginning to feel angry with the resentment which follows intense anxiety. "Where have you been?"

"Sailing on the Dutch canals," he said humbly.

"I never dreamed—I wanted to think—there is a place for thinking like a Dutch canal in autumn."

Beatrice pulled herself away from his supporting arm.

"But the boat?" she said.

"I was just sailing quietly down the river towards Flodmouth when I encountered a Dutch steamer," he answered. "I was thinking then. And it suddenly struck me I would get myself and the boat taken on board. The captain knew me. I hailed him. It was so simple. I say—I am so sorry. Did Martin believe I was drowned?"

"Yes," said Beatrice, "we all did."

"Not Jane?" he said quickly. "I hope they didn't tell her."

"No," said Beatrice, walking on. "We must go and tell the others at once."

He came up swiftly behind her and put his hand on her arm.

"Stop!" he said. "There's something has to come even before that. Look at me, Beatrice."

She looked at him bravely, her eyes glinting through her tears.

"Well?" she said.

"I went away to make sure that I loved you," he said plainly and directly. "I love you. Will you have me?"

"Yes," she answered just as simply, for she had already reached those passionate heights where everything is simple.

He kissed her wet eyes first.

"My love," he whispered, "thank God I met you crying on the road."

"Stephen," she said, "I thought I should die, and yet I had no right to be sorry. Oh, those nights! It seemed as if I had only just lost you—and yet as if you had been dead for a long time."

Then he kissed her lips.

"I believe I should hear you crying," he said, "if I had been buried for a hundred years. Oh, my dear, my dear!"

They clung together, two little figures in the midst of that wide expanse with the arching sky

above, and felt that they belonged to the Immortals whom Fate could never touch.

After a while he let her go.

"Now kiss me," he said, "kiss me of your own accord."

She put her lips to his, still a little shyly, but with a touch that made him feel as if he were undergoing a baptism of sweetness and fire.

"I didn't know I could love like this," he said breathlessly. "You must come to me soon, Beatrice. Do you want to come to me?"

"Yes," said Beatrice.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She looked him straight in the face, her little figure erect, her eyes wonderfully shining.

"Yes!" she said.

And as they wandered home down the bleak road they went back, for a little while, to that golden age in which lovers were not ashamed to talk beautiful nonsense.

But when they came to a point from which the Russells' house could be seen, things became real again.

"I had forgotten about Marion," said Croft rather blankly. "Oh, well, she never cared two-pence about me! I made all the running."

Beatrice stood thinking. She was not quite sure about that; but she was quite certain that Croft must not be there when Marion was told of his engagement. The instinct of their common womanhood stirred within her, outraged at the

thought of any man looking upon a woman's unwanted love. She must cover it up from him and hide it close.

"Look here," she said. "Don't you think you ought to go home and telephone to your office, and to Martin? Your house is so near."

"All right. You come too," he said.

"I think not," said Beatrice.

"Surely you have none of that prudish nonsense! Can't come into my house for five minutes because you are engaged to me," he said hotly.

Beatrice laughed.

"I was almost beginning to fear you had turned sweet and angelic," she said. "It is so nice to see you scowl again, Stephen. But the fact is that the Russells are at our house and I could run and give them the news while you telephoned. It is a shame to let such old friends go on thinking you are drowned a moment longer than they need."

"Oh, so the Russells are there? Um, well, perhaps it would be a good plan if you went on, Beatrice," he said. "I'll come on in half an hour."

So they parted, and Beatrice went down the road with a little smile on her lips that betrayed the embryo wife. She knew very little about men, but she had just learned that a man may be brave enough to risk his life a hundred times and yet fly like a coward before an unpleasant situation.

As she approached the End House the ladies within were engaged in earnest consultation about winter clothing. Emmaline's past gowns and

hats were spread about the spacious bedroom, and Marion was taking her sister's wardrobe in hand. She had quite a genius for the management of everything, and even refractory silks and laces "went together" at last under her guiding hand.

A little table was spread where the three ladies had partaken of a delicate mid-morning lunch, and now Marion paused with a blouse in one hand and an evening dress in the other, to say suddenly:

"Emmaline, I don't quite know what to do about the Sheriff's Ball in Flodmouth next Tuesday. It is so awkward. Of course it is no use my ceasing to go out because poor Stephen Croft—and yet——" She broke off. "What would you do, Emmaline?"

Emmaline felt almost flattered at being appealed to by one who was always so well able to manage her own affairs, and she looked thoughtfully at the green wings in her hand.

"It is not as if there had ever been anything definite, dear," said Mrs. Russell. "If there had been—and a will—there would have been obligations. Six months at least. As it is——"

She paused, having put it most delicately, as became the gaiters.

"I know Mother wants me to go," said Marion impatiently. "But what do you think, Emmaline?"

"I should go," said Emmaline with decision. "After all, people nowadays do not think it necessary to shut themselves up because they have

lost a friend. They have grown more sensible, and try to amuse themselves so as to distract their thoughts. I should certainly go. But I should wear my black. And not dance anything but waltzes."

"Emmaline is not so clever as you, Marion," said Mrs. Russell tenderly. "But she is always so wise."

Then Marion, who was near the window scrutinising a silk underdress, chanced to look out.

"Here is Beatrice," she said.

"Oh, well, she will not come up here," said Emmaline. "I have thought it better to keep on those terms. But I must confess that she never intrudes in the least."

"Still, it is trying for you to have her here, dear," said Mrs. Russell sympathetically.

"You are such a sweet, unselfish old thing," said Marion, kissing her sister, to whom she was genuinely devoted.

Emmaline looked plaintively patient and smiled.

"I try to do my best," she said, "but I am not sure that Martin always appreciates——" She broke off with a little sigh.

"I am sure he doesn't. He is too much engrossed in his own affairs," agreed Marion at once.

"But there is not another husband in the world like Martin," said Emmaline.

"Well," said Marion, remembering once more that though Emmaline might hint at imperfections in Martin, no one else might—"well, then I will

arrange to go to the ball with the Wainwrights. Mr. Wainwright said his mother was most anxious that I should do so. But I will wear my black, as you say, and my hair done rather plainly with nothing in it." She sighed with genuine regret. "You must not think I am unfeeling. Poor Stephen! But it could do him no good."

"Martin won't go," said Emmaline, delicately touching her eyes with her handkerchief. "And he won't let me. He seemed quite horrified when I suggested it. He was more unpleasant than I have ever known him. He said: 'Then I suppose if I died, you would go over to Paris the month after to find something more cheerful to think about, like Lady Walker!' He said it in a most dreadful tone. I wept. Oh! there is some one at the door. Yes, what is it?"

"I—Beatrice," she said.

The ladies looked at each other meaningly, and then, after a perceptible pause, Emmaline said sweetly: . .

"Come in, dear. We are only looking over some ancient rags and tatters."

Beatrice entered quietly and said in a low tone:

"Emmaline, there is news of Stephen Croft!"

"What! What!" said all three, gathering round her.

"He is safe," said Beatrice. "He only went cruising in the Dutch canals. It is such an open season that they were not frozen yet."

Mrs. Russell sat down because her knees trembled, but she said very angrily :

"The idiot ! Then he was not dead, but only in a Dutch canal ! I consider it culpably inconsiderate."

"He is very sorry. He had no idea," said Beatrice.

"Where did you see him ?" said Marion. "Why did he not come to tell us himself ?"

"I met him on Bank Island," said Beatrice. "He went up to his house to telephone Martin and his own office. He is coming soon."

Then she went to the window and looked out, saying with her back to them all :

"He—he asked me to tell you because—because——"

She paused, but Marion *had* to be told before he came.

"He asked me to tell you because we got engaged."

She drew a long breath, and all the bare trees in the garden ran together as she looked at them. It was far more dreadful than she had thought. At last, after a silence that seemed very long, Emmaline gasped out :

"You !"

Beatrice turned round.

"I—I know it is unexpected," she said. "I—I never expected it myself. It—it just happened."

"But he has always liked a fine-looking woman !" burst involuntarily from Mrs. Russell. "He has

never been known to look at anybody without a presence. Stephen Croft—and you !”

That helped Beatrice a little.

“ Anyway it is all settled,” she said.

“ Only to-day, I suppose ? ” said Marion, speaking at last.

“ Of course. Only an hour ago,” said Beatrice.

“ Well, he always was erratic,” said Marion. “ I suppose his engagement is just in keeping with the rest.” She turned to her sister. “ Emmaline, what about this pink satin ? ”

“ The whole thing is incomprehensible ! Incomprehensible ! ” said Mrs. Russell, looking very severely at Beatrice. “ But of course I offer you my congratulations.”

“ I do hope you will be happy,” said Emmaline, kissing her sister-in-law.

“ So do I,” said Marion, also offering a cheek.

“ But I should be sorry to marry Stephen Croft myself, though he is all right as a friend. He is too erratic for my taste. And I could never fancy a widower somehow, could you, Emmaline ? ”

“ I think it often answers very well, dear, when a woman is no longer quite young,” said Emmaline gently.

Every one, in fact, was very much surprised, and no one was quite whole-heartedly pleased but little Jane; for though Martin was glad for his sister to marry his best friend, he could not help feeling that Marion had been rather badly treated.

Still, there was a very gay lunch, to which Martin

hurried home, and the general joy of finding Stephen Croft alive again was only slightly dimmed by his matrimonial arrangements.

Beatrice was too happy to feel pin-pricks, and Jane sat near her in a whirl of joyful excitement. She kept looking at the engaged couple with shining, curious eyes to see if the mysterious process of "getting engaged" had made any difference to their appearance. At last she clasped her little brown hands in an ecstasy of gleeful anticipation.

"*Two* funny ones getting married together!" she said. "Oh, what funny little boys and girls they will have!"

Croft grinned and ate his cheese, but Emmaline continued to flow on pleasantly about the Dutch canals, so it was all right. Only, after the repast, Mrs. Martin drew her daughter aside:

"Jane," she said seriously, "you must never talk about the babies people are going to have. Do you understand?"

"Why not?" said Jane.

"Well——" Emmaline cast round in her mind. "Well, they may never have any, and then they would be disappointed."

"But everybody has babies when they get married," argued Jane, to whom it was an interesting topic.

"No, they don't. Look at that lady and gentleman next door to the chapel."

"Um," said little Jane, considering. Then she brightened up. "Yes, of course," she continued,

"some do go wrong on the way here. Cook's cousin got one of those. Cook told Nannie that the goldy-haired baby's mother wasn't married. So it must have got left by accident under the wrong apple tree. Wasn't that awkward, Mammy?"

"Why?" said Emmaline.

"Why! Why, because cook's cousin had no house of her own to keep it in, of course," said Jane, laughing. "Can I go and play with the Johnsons now?"

"The Johnsons?" said Emmaline. "Oh, you mean your dolls in the dolls' house. Very well."

"Mummy, *don't* call them dolls," pleaded Jane.

"But they are dolls, dear," said Emmaline.

"That's just why," said little Jane.

But Emmaline thought the child was talking nonsense and said, rather sharply:

"I really think I must send you to school: then you will grow more like other children."

But school had no terror for sociable Jane, and she sat down happily in her old place before the dolls' house.

She began to play at a wedding with her dolls, of course, as a wedding was in the air; so she made Mr. and Mrs. Johnson forget that they had been married long ago and possessed several children who were obliged to sit permanently when at home because of being too tall to stand; and she gave them a wedding all over again—which shows once more what a delightful world Jane's was, and how much nicer than the only one that grown-ups know.

Then she began to get tired, and went and sat in the window with her little brown hands folded, thinking about what her mother had said to her.

She thought and thought, and looked out at the broad piece of sky above the fir trees towards that place where the babies came from. She knew exactly what it was like. An immense, vague room, full of pale light, where thousands of new babies waited in rows to be sent away, and God walked up and down saying which was to go next.

"Nannie," she said, looking up. "Mrs. Blake was ill in bed after her baby came wasn't she?"

"Yes," said Nannie shortly.

Jane gazed up at Nannie with her solemn brown eyes.

"I see," she said. "The Blakes have no apple trees of their own. So Mrs. Blake got worn out looking for her baby in all the other gardens. I do hope Mr. Blake will plant an apple tree in his garden," she added earnestly, "so that Mrs. Blake doesn't have to get so *dreadfully* tired looking for a baby next time."

CHAPTER VII

It froze hard in the night, and the next morning when Beatrice awoke a pale sunlight was shining in at her window. The footsteps of the postman and gardener rang cheerily on the gravel walks. A robin sang loud and shrill upon her window-sill. And to everything a voice seemed to be given when Jane burst into the room with a joyous :

"Auntie! Auntie! Isn't it a splendid morning? It makes you feel as if you were going to have eggs for breakfast though you *know* it's only porridge on Wednesdays. Oh! Oh! I do feel jolly, don't you, Auntie Beatrice?"

But Emmaline was less susceptible than her daughter, to the influence of the weather, and she sat, cheerful but resigned, pouring out coffee with a determined lightness that would have made far harder-hearted people than Beatrice uncomfortable.

"Martin went by the early train," she said, with a smile and a sigh. "Poor fellow! He is determined to try and keep this house on, in spite of your leaving us. Anyway, as we did not give notice in October, we have it on our hands until next autumn!"

"Oh, that will be all right," said Beatrice

quickly. "Martin and I will be able to come to some arrangement——"

Emmaline shook her head.

"He is very unpractical in some ways, poor boy," she said. "I did suggest that you might be inclined—as Stephen is such a rich man—but Martin was most unkind. He spoke to me most rudely: as he did about the Sheriff's Ball." She lifted her handkerchief delicately to her eyes. "I know it is not your fault, Beatrice, but we never seemed to have these disagreements before you came."

"Well, I shall soon be gone," said Beatrice.

Emmaline glanced up over her handkerchief.

"When?" she said.

"We thought of the beginning of February," said Beatrice.

"Oh, well, you are both old enough to know your own minds. There is nothing to wait for," said Emmaline. Then a woman's instinctive interest in a wedding overcame her natural annoyance and she added: "Have you thought what you are going to wear?"

"Oh, some old lace of grandmother's, I think. It has gone a lovely colour with age. There is enough to cover a simple wedding-gown," said Beatrice calmly. But it was all so new to her still that as she spoke the whole winter world seemed full of wedding bells, and the garden boy whistling sweetly and shrilly outside sounded to her like love's herald blowing through a silver pipe.

"Well," remarked Emmaline, rising from the table, "perhaps I ought not to say so: but the whole thing still seems to me incredible."

Beatrice laughed gaily.

"So it does to me," she answered. "But here is Stephen coming up the path. So I suppose it must be true!"

"Stephen—at this hour!" She looked thoughtfully at Beatrice, as if trying to solve a puzzle. "He really does seem to be tremendously in love. Oh, here he is!"

As she spoke Croft came in, looking happier than Emmaline had ever seen him, with a sort of wild radiance about his odd face and piercing eyes, which differed from ordinary cheerfulness, as the strange sunlight before a storm differs from the placid glow of a midsummer noon.

"I had to come to make sure it was true," he said. "I knew it was up to about three o'clock: and then in that horrid hour just before dawn I began to be afraid."

"Really, Stephen!" said Emmaline. "Well, I must go and see cook. Beatrice will have to come down to that some day, though she is up in the clouds at present." Then she went, smiling, out of the room, for she was determined to be on very excellent terms with her rich brother-in-law though she was extremely annoyed with him.

"My little girl," he said. "My little thing of spirit and fire that no one knows about but me. Beatrice, you kept a veil over your real self until I came. A

you put it down again when I'm not there. I can never tell you the charm—the exquisite secret delight. I lay awake all night thinking of you.”

“I slept because I was so happy,” said Beatrice.

“And this morning,” he continued, then he broke off again. “Here, sit beside me. Hold my hand. I must be sure I have you safe. He grasped her fingers tightly as she slipped them into his, and went on: “This morning I began planning how to redecorate the house for you. I imagined you in every room——” He stopped and loosed her fingers and went to the window. “No, not in every room. We won't use the pink sitting-room, Beatrice.”

“You must not let your mind dwell on that,” said Beatrice very gravely. “You did wrong. You have been sorry for ten years. I am sure that God and she will have forgiven you.”

“But I don't forgive myself,” he said.

He stared out of the window for a moment, and then came back to the sofa.

“It shows how I trust you, that I can tell you this,” he said. “Still I ought not to have mentioned it. I know that.”

Beatrice jumped up.

“Do you think I want new furniture if you are going to pick and choose which of your thoughts are suitable to share with me?” she said. “Oh, Stephen, can't you see that you make me happier by telling me everything than by any other gift you could choose in all the world?”

He pressed her close to him.

"I say, Beatrice," he murmured, "I have been trying to think of what I could do to please you. You are nervous about the boating. I'll sell my boats."

"No," said Beatrice, touched and yet laughing. "You are evidently not meant to be drowned. I expect you are being saved to be hanged, as Nannie remarked yesterday. We will keep the boats."

"Well," he said, "remember it is your doing that I keep the boats."

"I'll remember," said Beatrice.

"Will you come with me into Flodmouth to-day to choose new carpets?" he said abruptly.

Beatrice laughed again.

"Oh," she said. "I'm like Jane—I *do* think you a funny man. And I love you for it."

"But won't you come?" he urged.

"I think it would be better to wait for a few days," she said. "I will go with you next week."

"Well"—he rose—"I really must be at the office to-day. I have an important appointment. I suppose I had better be off. I shall need all I can earn, with such a grasping, avaricious wife."

So she accompanied him to the station, and as they walked together down the village street there were heads bobbing excitedly at every window behind the little frosted gardens; for the news had already flown through Marshfield, and everybody was intensely interested in the love affairs of

Stephen Croft. He had so markedly the power of arousing curiosity and interest. But they did feel Beatrice to be a sort of anti-climax.

Still there was quite a pleasant sense of flutter among the Marshfield ladies not absolutely in their first bloom, and Miss Battersby at the post office, who had begun to give her appearance up, came out that day in a pink bow with little tasselled ends.

She explained this to herself by saying that a white flannel blouse needed a little relief on a cold morning; but the fact was that some pretty hope, which had seemed dead within her, was lifting its bright face once more to the cheerful day.

Beatrice called there for stamps on the way home, and Miss Battersby patted the pink bow and preened herself, and looked over the counter at the future bride of the man who had always figured in her imagination as a hero of romance.

"Twelve penny, Miss Fawcett?" she said aloud. But within she was jubilantly shouting: "If she can—anybody can—I can!"

"Lovely day," said Beatrice.

"Beautiful," said Miss Battersby. "Er—might I venture to offer my congratulations to you, Miss Fawcett?"

"Thank you," said Beatrice. "You are very kind indeed. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Miss Fawcett," said the post-mistress aloud; but within she shouted again: "It's true! It's true! I'll order a new hat this very day!"

Then she turned to her assistant and said :

" I only put off getting a new hat on account of the open weather. I shall see about one to-night as I go home." She paused, and her school board pronunciation deserted her. " You'd think Mr. Croft would have wanted more for his money. But men's like eggs—you never know what's inside of 'em until it comes out."

" To think that she should have put Miss Russell's nose out of joint," said the assistant.

So the village knew all about it, just as everybody always does know all about everything; only those most concerned invariably remain blind to this common fact of human nature, being providentially supplied at the time of each happening with a sort of temporary blinkers.

And the first person to call and congratulate Beatrice was Miss Thornleigh, who came into the room with hands outstretched and a very genuine pleasure in Beatrice's happiness.

" I am so glad," she said. " For your sake, I mean, though I must own that I should not care for a man about the house myself. They seem to want so much meat, and crumple the chair covers. But in an establishment such as yours will be, dear Beatrice, I dare say you will not notice this so much."

Beatrice kissed her friend, feeling very glad to find some one at last who was whole-heartedly satisfied with her engagement. But after a little while other visitors arrived, so that they had not

much chance for private conversation. Miss Thornleigh was rather silent, hovering upon the outskirts of the group surrounding Beatrice, and rather more incoherent than usual. In a brief interval over the teacups Emmaline whispered to her sister-in-law: "That woman has been here two hours and a half. What can she be staying for?" And Beatrice whispered back: "Oh, if only she is enjoying it I am so glad!" To which Mrs. Martin replied: "Does she *look* as if she were enjoying it?"

There was no doubt that Miss Thornleigh looked bothered, so Beatrice could only leave it to sit down by her with an air of being disengaged for years when the rest of the visitors had departed.

"If you would excuse me for one moment, Nurse wants me," said Emmaline, making her escape.

"And now," said Miss Thornleigh, "I can ask you my question. Have you any objection to telling me, in strictest confidence, exactly when you are to be married?"

"We think January, about the end of the month," said Beatrice, a good deal surprised.

"Ah!" said Miss Thornleigh, drawing a deep breath, "how relieved I feel!"

"Why?" said Beatrice, not unnaturally.

"Because," said Miss Thornleigh, drawing confidentially closer, "I want to give you a blue Persian for a wedding present. And dear Judy is expecting, but I did not know whether the kitten would be old enough to send."

Then she went away, saying once more how pleased she felt, and Beatrice walked with her through the thickly-gathering hoar-frost to the gate.

There was an unusually long spell of frosty weather that year, and Christmas approached in all its fitting glory of red sunsets across the snow, and sparkling hours when it was a glory to be alive. Jane and Bobby talked all day long about Santa Claus, and had deep secrets together in dusky corners of the nursery. The Johnsons of the dolls' house were in a permanent state of undress, most unfastened to the weather, because new Christmas toys were being made for them, and Old Ted sat in a corner more depressed than usual, because he was so neglected.

There is nothing in the grown-up world in the least like a child's Christmas. It has the fresh joyfulness of that magic time before the sun learned to make shadows.

It began for Jane on Christmas Eve, as she lay in bed with the firelight sparkling on the holly leaves, and a slight, aromatic fragrance of warm evergreens in the room, which she did not think of then; only afterwards, as long as she lived, her heart was vaguely stirred by it.

Jane lay in this pleasant twilight, looking about her and occasionally touching her stocking by the bed's head to make sure that it was still there. She began to feel drowsy. Nannie had left her window open a crack for dear old Santa Claus—he came by windows instead of chimneys when

little girls had fires in their rooms, for fear of getting his feet burnt—Auntie Beatrice had said so—and she always——

Jane was asleep.

An hour or two later she stirred a little and smiled while Martin and Emmaline held their breath like burglars nearly caught; then she settled again into a profound slumber and they crept on tiptoe about the room.

“An orange in the toe,” whispered Martin, who smelt that fragrance of warm evergreens and felt his heart stirred vaguely, as Jane would do some day. “Mother always put an orange in the toe.”

“There is no room for one. Oranges used to be less in your day or stockings bigger,” said Emmaline, pushing and pulling.

“Now—sweets next—then a shilling!” said Martin, tremendously excited.

But at last it was all finished, and Martin stood with his hands through his wife’s arm, first looking through the open door at Bobby’s cot in the night-nursery beyond, and then at little Jane.

“They’re good little bairns,” said Martin.

Then he bent and kissed his wife in the firelight, and his eyes were not so clear as they might have been, which was the reason, perhaps, why the whole place seemed to swim in a misty radiance, more beautiful even than a young man’s dream of marriage.

After that they went quietly away, closing the door. And just at that dark time before the dawn

when things seem queer and different, Jane awoke with a start. The room was dark now, save for the quavering shadows cast by the night-light, and Jane had been dreaming that she heard Santa Claus's cart-wheels on the tiles. The rattling sound was still in her ears as she sat bolt upright in bed, staring out under a mass of dark hair, her little heart thumping against her side.

Then she remembered that Santa Claus went away at once if he saw children awake, so she dived hastily under the bedclothes and remained there for what seemed several hours. It was actually almost a minute, and little Jane under the bedclothes felt a breathless sense of fear and curiosity and joy such as grown-ups may taste once or twice in the great moments of existence; but even then it is less absolutely new—less exquisitely fresh and wonderful.

At last Jane peeped with one eye—all seemed as usual. She ventured the other—sat up—and cast herself in an ecstasy of joyful anticipation upon the stocking.

She fumbled with her presents, and tried to see them in the semi-darkness, and never intended to go to sleep again; but somehow the next thing she saw was Nurse by her bedside in the full morning light.

Then came breakfast, and every one in a gay Christmas humour: the table loaded with gifts, round which Bobby capered, hitting a drum with the head of a black doll, and hunting and finding

perfect happiness. Everybody kept turning to smile at the little, sturdy boy, for it is very sweet to be in the same room with some one perfectly happy. Beatrice was as near that state as a person may be who is over three, when she unwrapped a diamond necklace with the fine stones all set singly on delicate platinum chains, so that they hung like dewdrops caught in some magic moment and made everlasting.

Beatrice held them up to catch the firelight, and smiled at her lover, who sat near to her.

"Fire and tears," he said in a low voice, "just right for you, Beatrice." Then Emmaline ceased talking to Bobby and began to attend to her guests again, so he said no more.

After breakfast every one felt a slight sense of fatigue, having exhausted themselves with admiration, and Jane remembered something which took her up to the nursery.

"I've forgotten my prayers, Nannie," she remarked. "Should I say them now or leave them till to-night?"

"Say them now, of course," said Nurse. "Kneel down at once."

So Jane said her prayers.

"You can get up now," said Nurse. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Jane shortly.

"Well, come and let me put your hat on then," said Nurse with some impatience, Jane scowled round at her.

"Can't you leave me alone a minute?" she said. "I have been asking God for things for years and years, and I think it is almost time I said 'Thank you.'"

Then they all went down the village street to church, and the same idea, in a way, did seem to animate the whole of Marshfield. Bits of red holly on every window-sill twinkled gaily through the bright glass, and people stamping down the road through the prickly, sunny morning, called to one another: "Seasonable weather! Wish you a Merry Christmas!" But they, really, like little Jane, were feeling impelled to offer up a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Soon there was a stillness on the wide, sunny street, where every bush in the front gardens glittered with hoar-frost, like trees from those gardens of Paradise where the children go to play when they leave here.

Then people came out from the churches and chapels, and stepped briskly along, saying only nice things to one another. And Stephen and Beatrice walked home with Miss Thornleigh, though they wanted to be alone, because she had a blue nose and a shabby hat; for that is one of the queer, upside-down reasons that the spirit of Christmas gives us.

"I wonder——" Miss Thornleigh paused at a turning. "Perhaps you would not care to accompany me as far as the common? I am going to give poor Rupert his Christmas present."

"Well, I'm afraid——" began Croft, who thought there was reason in all things.

"Yes, yes, let us go," said Beatrice, with an eye upon that pitiful hat. "Who is Rupert?"

"The horse," she said. "I gave him a name. I thought—it might make him more human, you know."

"Not that awful animal!" said Croft, who now caught sight of him standing dismally by a black shed.

"I think his character may have been soured by unkindness," said Miss Thornleigh very apologetically. "He was in a carrier's cart. Always pulling up short. It must have been very trying. But I rather wanted you to come with me because there are some rude boys about and I thought they might laugh. Do you think you could just hand him the carrots and sugar, Mr. Croft? The grass is rather long here."

So, in full view of the Marshfield populace, a magistrate and Justice of the Peace fed the principal malefactor of the town from his own hand.

"It is putting a premium on vice," he said as he returned across the hoar-frosted grass.

"Thank you! How good of you!" flustered Miss Thornleigh. "The boys daren't shout rude remarks at you. Oh, look at the dear thing; I am sure he has quite a grateful expression on his face. You can do anything by kindness." She lowered her voice: "Curiously enough, the gardens he enters nearly always belong to people who do not

love animals. Instinct, Mr. Croft, is a wonderful thing."

So they came back, both Rupert and his protector greatly cheered by the encounter; and when Miss Thornleigh said farewell she added brightly:

"Now I must go in to Aunt. She is wonderful, Aunt is. I let her taste the plum-pudding when it was being made, and she said at once: 'Not enough brandy. Too much treacle. Chuck it away!' I did not throw it away, and I had no more brandy in the house, but I am sure she will enjoy it when it is boiled. She can eat *anything* at any hour—Aunt can—and here am I, at my age, unable to touch plum-pudding."

Her eyes sparkled with pardonable pride as she said this, but then some thought seemed to strike both her and Beatrice, and to cast a shadow over the brightness of their faces.

"Mr. Wood always came to see her on Christmas Day," said Miss Thornleigh. "This is the first Christmas—poor boy——" and her lips began to tremble a little.

"I wish he was here," said Croft.

Beatrice said nothing, but her eyes filled with tears.

"He is happy," said Miss Thornleigh. "He is all right."

And their thoughts all kept a little vigil, on that Christmas morning, beside the memory of a friend in heaven.

Then the Vicar's wife passed by, and, after

greeting Miss Thornleigh, she walked back with Croft and Beatrice, saying that she had been away for some weeks on account of the Vicar's health, and they were both delighted to hear of the engagement. Mrs. Wylie was a great friend of Emmaline, and she went in for a few words before luncheon.

"*What* a surprise," said Mrs. Wylie confidentially in the hall. "But a third person, however nice, is rather a tax, so, on the whole——" She paused.

"Yes, on the whole," said Emmaline. "Do come in, dear."

So she went into the billiard-room, where the presents had been placed, and talked rapidly about the various societies in which she and Emmaline were interested, firing off such initials as U.S.E.B. and R.L.V.K. with a sureness of aim which was quite bewildering to an outsider.

Jane sat open-eyed, fascinated by Mrs. Wylie's conversation, but when the lady had departed she said to Beatrice in the low tone which she reserved for theological questions :

"Auntie, I thought it was not polite to talk about God at a party."

Fortunately, the luncheon gong rang at that moment, so Beatrice was relieved from the necessity of trying to explain a sentiment which prevails unspoken in Marshfield—and elsewhere.

At last the children's day drew to a happy close, and Jane went to say good-night to her aunt and Croft, who were sitting before the drawing-room fire.

"Auntie," she said, lifting her face to be kissed, "did you ever feel so happy that you almost felt misrubble?"

Beatrice took Jane on her knee and held her close.

"I do now, darling," she said.

Croft came close and put his arm round both of them.

"We all three do," he said.

Then followed a happy silence of complete understanding; they were so very different, and yet they understood each other so perfectly.

"Well, good-night," said Jane at last. "I wish I had had *one* less chocolate biscuit."

"That is how I feel too," said Croft, laughing.

"That is another part of Christmas."

CHAPTER VIII

It was the middle of January and the time of the wedding drew very near. Linked photographs of Beatrice and Stephen appeared in all the local papers; but they were of that vague sort which do not reproduce favourably, and in them the engaged couple scowled out upon the newspaper-reading public after the usual fashion of such pictured lovers, as much as to say: "*We're in for it now, but you take care!*"

Still the printed matter underneath showed that things were all going merrily forward towards a most fashionable and interesting wedding. Gifts from various public bodies were spoken of, and the forthcoming luncheon, which Mr. Croft was giving to his clerks in a temporary erection opening from the billiard-room of the house in Bank Island, was referred to in terms of discreet enthusiasm. When Beatrice went up the stairs of the big draper's shop to choose a travelling-coat, elaborately coiffed assistants laid their heads together and whispered, with the thrill which comes from viewing even the tail-end of a romance: "There she goes! The girl that is going to marry Mr. Croft of Bank Island!"

And sailors in far places, anchored near palm-

grown beaches, received letters from home, and remarked to each other in terms of nautical strength that the owner was about to be married again at last.

Croft sat in his office attending to business as usual, but he felt all the time a sense of triumphant jubilation.

Rumours of vessels frozen up in Archangel or the Baltic—tropical storms on the Australian coast—ice-floes on the Atlantic—all the big things of nature seemed to rush like a gale through the office, accentuating Stephen's sense of being more alive than he had ever been before.

And when Beatrice went to be fitted for her wedding-gown, Madame Laurence came forward with her air of dignified assurance and spoke for the whole of Flodmouth trade.

"We are all greatly gratified that you should be buying your entire trousseau in the city," she said. "But you are following the traditions of Mr. Croft's family. They have always spent their money in the place where they earned it."

"Oh yes, of course," said Beatrice rather vaguely, for the wedding-gown was just being spread out before her happy eyes.

But Emmaline made the fitting response.

"It is Miss Fawcett's wish to identify herself in every way with the interests of Flodmouth," she said with great dignity.

Beatrice laughed suddenly.

"Really, Emmaline! You talk as if I were a

princess about to make an alliance with a crowned head!" she said. "What will Flodmouth care whether I take an interest in it or not?"

Emmaline pretended not to hear, she had so much tact, and she only fingered the exquisite lace with a gentle, smiling:

"How *very* sweet, Madame Laurence!"

But she did wish that Beatrice had a more proper sense of her own dignity. She could not help sighing a little as she thought how impressive Marion would have been.

Beatrice allowed her sister-in-law to make all the arrangements for the wedding, and there was no doubt that Emmaline had a real talent for organisation of that sort. And Marion so delighted in the display of her gift for management that she was, after a while, induced to give her valuable assistance.

Only on one point Beatrice was firm. She would have but a single bridesmaid, and that must be little Jane. Otherwise she cared for nothing but the fact that on February the 11th she was going to marry Stephen Croft. Love had come to her in so great and powerful a guise that everything else seemed dwarfed and by the way.

"Oh, my love, my love!" she said to him on that evening when she had been fitted for the wedding-gown. "It is too good to be true. I did not know such happiness *could* come true."

For she had no thought of keeping back from her lover how much she loved him.

"Beatrice," he said, infinitely touched by her simplicity, "I swear I'll never cause you a moment's unhappiness that I can help."

It was the evening of a large dinner-party at the Fawcetts' in honour of the future bride and bridegroom, and soon after this Emmaline sailed into the room with a slightly heightened colour, but an air of forced serenity.

She wished to convey the effect that a dinner-party of eighteen was as nothing to the Fawcetts, and she very nearly succeeded. Only the heightened colour and an accentuated precision of speech betrayed her.

"These winter blossoms are so delicate, are they not, Stephen?" she said, touching a bowl of flowers with her little finger. "By the way—as you are seeing Beatrice every day, we thought perhaps it would be better if you did not sit near her at dinner. Beatrice quite agreed, did you not, dear?"

Beatrice laughed.

"Indeed, yes! What could we find to say with all those people listening? I should have had to read up the dinner topics in that daily illustrated paper."

"Just as you wish," said Croft. "Of course I always like to be near Beatrice. And I think it is more usual——"

"Really, Stephen," said Emmaline, with a little laugh, "we shall have to label you the perfect lover. But I thought perhaps it would be nice if

you took in Marion. You and Marion are such old friends."

Croft stared—then a light slowly dawned on him, and he suppressed a grin.

"Oh, all right," he said.

But he knew, and she knew, and Beatrice knew that it was a clever arrangement planned by Marion to show that she was perfectly satisfied. She would sit triumphantly in her best dress by the hero of the evening, and who should dare to pity her then?

It was an odd arrangement on such an occasion, and as such intensely distasteful to Emmaline—but she loved Marion even more than she loved the conventional right thing, and it is impossible to say more for her sisterly affection than that. Still, she was less smilingly composed than usual when she went forward to greet her guests.

Marion came rather late, and very soon after her arrival they all went down to dinner, Beatrice on the arm of Hobson, the husband of Jane's friend, the little bride, who was still in that happy state of matrimony when a young husband wants everybody else to get married.

"Where are you thinking of going?" he said to Beatrice in a sympathetic undertone half-way through the fish.

"To Sicily," said Beatrice.

He bent nearer.

"Don't," he said. "What you want on a honeymoon is just peace, and good living, and plenty of quiet walks. You try Penzance."

He grew almost fervid in his description of that watering-place, and Beatrice listened to him happily and thought what a dear boy he was—almost nice enough for Jane's dear little bride. Then she glanced across at Stephen and saw him light-heartedly talking to Marion, as unconcerned as if they had only met this evening.

It seemed odd to Beatrice that he could do so when he had undoubtedly behaved badly to the girl beside him, giving her to understand that she was preferred before all others, and then leaving her without a regret. Beatrice felt no faintest desire to hand Croft over to her rival, for those feelings do not arise in real life, but she did wonder. She had not as yet learned how callous a man is to a woman whom he no longer wants. It is a law of nature—but a woman always has it to learn.

Next to Stephen and Beatrice the happiest person in the room was Martin Fawcett. He sat at the head of his table, as he loved to do, with his friends around him, celebrating the engagement of his dear sister to his best friend. Still, he did not feel it was all too pleasant to last, because he was still so like his daughter Jane—he would always, whatever happened, go on thinking that nothing was too good to be true.

But Lady Walker, whose daughter-in-law Emma-line might have been, sat on Martin's right hand, and picked a little doubtfully at her cream of peaches, glancing at Croft between whiles.

She had known him all his life, and she re-

remembered that stormy first marriage very well, with its tragic ending.

However, Emmaline soon gave the signal to rise, and Lady Walker murmured placidly to Beatrice, over her immense bulk, as they went across the hall :

“So delighted. There is no need to wish you happiness, dear; with a man like Stephen you are certain to be happy.”

Then the ladies talked together about clothes, and characters, and complaints, and children—the four c's which comprise the whole of polite female after-dinner conversation, or used to do : for topics less soothing to the digestion now sometimes intervene. All around was a pleasant murmur of low voices and rustling silks, and after a while Marion went to the piano.

She had only sung the half of one song when Croft came in with a laughing excuse. Then he spoke a word or two to Beatrice, and she accompanied him to a sofa near the piano.

He did not speak, but sat near her, leaning back upon the cushions in absolute content. But Beatrice felt almost annoyed that Marion's music still had such a charm for him. She was not exactly jealous, but her feeling was a little like the sudden ache of a forgotten wound.

Lady Walker looked across at the group of three and murmured to a friend :

“People could never understand that first marriage of Stephen's; but I could quite well.

It was the girl's voice that attracted him. He is not exactly a musical man, and yet a certain type of singing has an extraordinary fascination for him."

"Will the new Mrs. Stephen like that?" said the friend.

"She won't mind a button if she has any sense," said Lady Walker briskly. "Stephen might have had Marion and the voice, and he chose Beatrice Fawcett without it. What more does she want? Only you see the explanation now of his first marriage. It took place before he had learned not to mix up his taste for music with his taste for matrimony."

Then the little bride approached.

"How is my friend Jane?" she asked. "I have not seen her for ages."

"Oh, very well indeed," said Emmaline, "and most happy at the thought of being a bridesmaid!"

But that was a mistake, as most conjectures are which we make about the feelings of other people, even when they have only been seven for a fortnight; and Jane was at that moment so very miserable that even the recollection of her bridesmaid's frock could bring no consolation.

For her mother had decreed that when she was seven she must sleep without a night-light, in a new little bedroom of her own some distance away from the nursery. It was all white dimity and daisied paper, and in the daytime an abode of bliss; but at night it was not so nice, though she had not yet been really afraid.

For it is strange that a child will lie awake in the dark every night for a week and feel no fear, until, suddenly, for no reason at all, the dark grows alive with terror.

So to-night Jane woke up and lay staring as usual with bright eyes into the dark. Then, suddenly, for no reason at all, she began to feel afraid. At first she tried to hide from her own fear and crept low down under the bedclothes. But though she could not thus see the outside dark, she could feel it; the horror of it crept closer; hung over her. She lay quivering under the bedclothes desperately afraid.

Then a sound cracked through the dark from the wardrobe: one of those strange noises which come in the night and never in the day; and it was to Jane as if a ghostly minute gun had signalled forth all sorts of horrors.

Memories of tales which children are told because no one knows of the fear they have left behind—grim pictures from old fairy-books—vague tales of burglars and ghosts, overheard and partly understood—all these crowded round little Jane until, with a desperate, whimpering cry, she flung herself out of bed.

But it was with the dark itself she wrestled as she dragged, panting, at the door; and that alone seemed to be hunting her as she fled down the lighted staircase towards the sound of human voices.

It was a crime of which Jane would have deemed

herself absolutely incapable under any stress of fear—to burst in upon a grown-up dinner-party in her nightdress. But she was too much relieved to think of that as she stood, dazed and trembling, within the brightly-lighted room where the dreadful dark could not follow her.

For a breathing-space that was enough. Then the familiar place seemed so different at this hour, filled with gaily-dressed people, that the queerest sense of strangeness came over her as she stood trembling by the door in her little nightdress.

“Jane!” gasped her mother.

Jane looked round the room with a sort of desperate entreaty in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I was so frightened of the dark.”

She waited, folding and unfolding her little brown hands.

“Come along, dear,” said Emmaline firmly.

“It is babyish to be afraid of the dark.”

Jane glanced back as she went at the grown-ups all safe in that lighted room. Was there not one who could understand?

And that look went straight through a Paris gown and many layers of adipose tissue to the heart of Lady Walker, who sat within view of the door.

“Let Jane come to me,” she called out in her big, friendly voice. “I remember!”

“I really must insist,” began Emmaline, when Croft and Beatrice emerged from behind the piano.

"Stephen," said Lady Walker, "you and Beatrice must plead with Emmaline. You are privileged persons to-night."

"Oh, well, it is all wrong, of course," said Emmaline, who wished to be especially gracious to Lady Walker, "but I suppose I must give in."

So the culprit was wrapped up in a sable cloak which the little bride ran and fetched from the hall; and, besides the sense of safety, Jane enjoyed the knowledge that she was doing something gloriously wicked, which she would have to pay for afterwards, and which could never happen again.

Jane glanced at the comfortable mountain of flesh billowing round her, then put up a little finger to touch the diamonds which blazed on her friend's chest.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

Lady Walker looked down over her three chins at little Jane.

"I expect it is because I have never really grown up," she said.

Jane waited just a moment, then she threw her head back and peal after peal of clear laughter rippled through the room.

Not grown up!

It was really such a glorious, outrageous joke that she forgot all about the dark.

Lady Walker laughed too, until the lap on which Jane rested shook like a mountain just before an eruption; then she looked up at Croft and said gaily:

"Stephen, you ought to join my pantomime-party on Wednesday afternoon. Beatrice is bringing Jane, you know. It is a company from Leeds, and quite good, I believe."

Croft shook his head.

"Very sorry, Lady Walker, but I really have not the time. Up to the ears in work, just now, you know."

"Oh, Uncle Stephen!" said Jane. "Oh, do come." She turned to Lady Walker. "You see I have started to call him Uncle Stephen already, though Nurse says not—and that there is many a slip, whatever that means—but I don't care about old slips, should you?"

"Not a bit," said Lady Walker, and they all laughed; for any sort of slip between the cup of joy held out and the happy lips bending to take it seemed really quite impossible as Beatrice and Croft stood together in that gay, flowery room, so assured of prosperity and all the pleasant things of life.

"I made a poetry," said Jane, who was growing very excited and a little beyond herself. "It goes like this: 'Uncle Stee and Auntie Bee are going to be married on a Thursdee.' Isn't it rather a splendid poetry?"

"The most splendid I ever heard, Jane," said Croft, looking at Beatrice.

"Then you will come to the pantomime?" said Jane. "Oh, it will be so much more fun if you do, won't it, Auntie Beatrice?"

"Do, if you can," said Beatrice, smiling at her lover.

He thought a minute.

"You really wish it?" he said. "Well, nothing is impossible unless you make it so. I'll come if Jane will promise to hold my hand during the frightening parts where the theatre goes dark. I should not like to cry and disgrace the party."

"I was only four when I did that," said Jane indignantly. Then she smiled again and leaned back against Lady Walker. "It was just a joke," she said. "Isn't he funny?"

"Well, I never regarded him as a humorist," said Lady Walker, looking up at Croft with a queer little twist of the lips.

"Jane," said Emmanaline, approaching once more, "you must go now. You have had a lovely time. Say good-night and go at once."

Jane got up obediently and held up her face to her protector.

"Whisper," she said; then she put her lips close to Lady Walker's ear and said in a tickling, childish whisper: "Can you get new Grannies?"

"No," said Lady Walker. "Why?"

"I was going to ask you if you would mind being one of mine?" said little Jane.

Then she went off to bed.

On the Wednesday, Croft sent the car for Beatrice and Jane and met them at the theatre. The band was tuning up as Jane sat down in the

very front of the box, and a lady reporter in the stalls noted at once that the bride-to-be looked radiant in dark grey with a white plume in her black hat. For Croft and his betrothed loomed large, at that moment, in the public eye of Flodmouth. But as Beatrice stood for a moment beside Jane it was felt with some disappointment that she was too small for the part—a little slim thing with dark eyes, who would pass unnoticed in a crowd anywhere. However, when Stephen bent over to speak to her, and she smiled back at him, ladies glanced discreetly over their programmes and felt that the afternoon's entertainment had already begun.

"You made me come," said Stephen. "I slipped out of the side door and left no end of letters to sign. Well, whatever happens, it is your doing."

"I will take the responsibility," said Beatrice. "The worst that could happen is that you might make me ill with chocolates. Give me the box."

Then the curtain rose, and Jane went at once into that glorious world which the play of *Cinderella* creates for a little child.

No one can tell the lovely, innocent dreams which pass through the imagination of a little girl like Jane as she watches the Prince stride about in white satin and spangles, and makes up her mind to marry one like that when she grows up.

"Auntie," she whispered, clasping her hands,

"I s'pose you would rather have Uncle Stephen after all? Even now you have seen the Prince!"

Beatrice smiled and nodded, then turned and spoke to Croft over her shoulder.

"Stephen, Jane wonders whether I *can* stick to you now I have seen this beautiful prince?"

But to her surprise he did not reply at once, and when he did it was with apparent effort:

"Oh, Jane has yet to learn that the principal boy is always a fat girl, has she?" he said. Then he added impatiently: "I hate that woman's voice. It has been sweet, but it has grown strident and vulgar."

So Beatrice left him alone, and he sat gloomily in the back of the box, while she reflected that he was probably out of temper at having been persuaded to come to the pantomime against his will. Only, if he were going to behave in this way now, when he did anything against his inclination or convenience, what would he be like later on?

A little cloud floated across the absolute blue of Beatrice's heaven.

But Jane was perfectly happy, and engrossed at that moment in laughing at a comic song sung by a man with a large red nose and a very small round hat.

"Oh dear!" she exclaimed, exhausted with merriment, "why does he keep on saying he won't go home till morning when he is so tired? Look! He's tumbled again! He's tumbled again! Oh, *isn't* he a funny gentleman?"

Lady Walker glanced at the lovers out of her shrewd little eyes, and moved nearer to Jane.

"Yes," she said, "he is. Thank goodness, Jane, that you and I are young enough to enjoy a pantomime."

So they hung together over the edge of the box, and clapped after every song, and got tremendously excited when the golden coach came for Cinderella, and she and the Prince went away into that golden country, which was as plain as plain at that moment to little Jane, where married lovers live happily ever after.

It was a place of wide spaces and green grass, where you could drive on and on in a golden coach through a golden air to the very edge of the sunset.

But it is impossible to talk of dreams that really come very near to you, and Jane never thought of telling any one that she intended to marry a prince in white satin with a golden coach at his disposal. She only dreamed of it at night when she went to bed, and always pictured herself entering the golden country just at the drowsy moment when she started off down the long slopes of sleep.

She was rather silent on the way home, partly because she had a great deal to think about, and partly because she was worn out with enjoyment; so she leaned against Beatrice's shoulder in a state of blissful fatigue, listening to the disjointed conversation that passed between the lovers.

"What is the matter, Stephen?" said Beatrice

at last. "Surely you are not angry because I persuaded you to go to the pantomime?"

"No, no," he said, rousing himself. "I am not quite such a boor as that—though I do seem——" He broke off and then added, glancing at Jane: "I say, Beatrice, are you very tired?"

"No," said Beatrice surprised.

"Well, I want you to come for a tramp with me when we have taken Jane home, will you?"

Beatrice glanced out at the wild sky and shivered a little. Then she looked at Stephen's face, which was drawn again into the old furrows, and said she would go. He had seemed so different since their engagement that she almost hoped she had exorcised the demon of restlessness, but it was evidently there, ready to come back for any cause, or, as it appeared, for no cause at all. Still, whatever he did or said, he was Stephen. She loved him so greatly that she loved his very faults, because they seemed to bring him nearer to her.

But she said nothing more to him until they were walking along together across the bridge which led to Bank Island. There she paused and watched an old tree waving lean arms against the sky. The moon had not yet risen, but the horizon was already luminous, and the wind drove in great gusts across the unprotected fields.

Then she said at last:

"There is a storm coming."

He started out of some uneasy thought.

"We will go up to my house. I want to talk

to you without the feeling that Martin or Emmaline may come in at any moment. And the new drawing-room carpet has been put down. I should like you to see that."

"But we shall be late for dinner," said Beatrice.

"What does that matter? Besides, there is time enough. Will you come?" he said.

"I will if you really want me, but not for the drawing-room carpet," said Beatrice. Then she added, with a smile: "It was on nights like this that you used to go out and fight the wind and waves, wasn't it, Stephen? I thought you had got over that."

"So did I," he said. Then he turned and put his arm round Beatrice. "Poor girl," he added, "you have made a bad bargain, I am afraid. Are you beginning to rue it?"

"I shall wait until you make me," said Beatrice cheerfully. "Come along. I feel a spot of rain."

By the time they reached Stephen's door the rain was blowing in wild gusts against the lonely house, and the gale shrieked like some lost spirit among the trees of the small plantation which surrounded it. You might have fancied that the spirit of the bleak waste around was angry, and wanted to tear down everything to its own dead level.

But to Beatrice there was something exhilarating in that scurry through the wind and rain, and she stood breathless under the lights in the hall, with her hair all spangled by raindrops and her eyes shining.

Stephen, too, had shaken off his gloom for the

moment in that quick run, and he laughed as he helped Beatrice to remove her coat.

"You little storm-spirit," he said. "I believe you love it as I do."

He kissed her, and then became uncomfortably conscious of the presence of the head housemaid.

"Well, Jones, what is it?"

"Might I speak to you for a minute, sir?"

"Is it anything important? If so you can tell me now. Miss Fawcett will not mind."

The woman came forward.

"The housekeeper has asked me to tell you that she was obliged to go home. She was taken ill with a sudden attack of influenza."

"But we can't do without her. What nonsense! Ill or well she must stay in the house," stormed Stephen.

"She left at three o'clock, sir, and does not expect to be able to come back before the wedding," said the housemaid.

Stephen thought a moment, then he said abruptly: "Very well. That will do. We shall manage somehow," and with that he opened the door of the library.

"Come in, Beatrice," he said. "There is a good fire here."

Beatrice walked to the hearthrug.

"What on earth shall you do?" she said.

"Oh, we must get along as best we can for the next few days. I must let the caterer from Flodmouth take the whole thing in hand. He is

very competent." Stephen paused. "The fact is," he added, "that the woman has done it out of spite. She has had a glorious time here, and was very angry when I gave her notice. Emmaline was perfectly right when she advised me to make a clean sweep of the lot. The servants here have done just as they liked. So long as they made me comfortable, it did not seem worth while bothering."

"Oh, well," said Beatrice. "I shall soon put things right when I come. And for a few days it really does not much matter."

He pulled a big chair forward.

"Sit down here," he said.

Then he stood looking down at her for a moment, the firelight playing on his blunt features, which gradually softened to a grave tenderness.

"When you come that will be your place," he said. "My wife. If I am tired or restless or bothered I shall not have to go out and find you—you'll be there. It seems almost too good to be true."

Beatrice looked up at him, and though she did not speak he was answered.

After a while she said gently :

"You brought me here to tell me something, Stephen. What is it ?"

He made an impatient movement and began to pace backwards and forwards.

"Oh, I don't think after all—there is no need—it was only an idea," he said.

"Tell me, Stephen," she said.

"Well—I've thought——" He broke off. "Look here, you ought to know the circumstances of my first marriage. People will no doubt talk about it in your hearing. You ought to know the bare outline. But I hate speaking of it."

"Then don't," replied Beatrice. "What made you suddenly think of this to-night?" She paused. "Why—was there anything said at the pantomime? Did Lady Walker——?"

"No," said Croft, continuing to pace up and down. "No. It was a woman on the stage. The one who took the part of the Prince. She rather reminded me of my late wife. I began to think then that there is no use in trying to bury the past out of sight. It—it always rises and hits you in the eye when you least expect it." He spoke now from a distance, by the writing-table. "I first saw her in a Comic Opera in Flodmouth. I followed her to other places. She used to smile at me from the stage, and I thought I was the biggest man in England. The other girls used to look and smile too. I thought it was romantic, you know. I was such a fool. I always wanted romance. Then I married her. She was a good girl, but she found matrimony dull. And she had thought I should go on being like beautiful, bountiful Bertie in the Comic Opera. She had her dream too, you see, only I turned out to be extraordinarily different. I can see that now."

He paused, but Beatrice said nothing. She only kept her dark eyes fixed on him.

"Then her family used to interfere. They did not come to see us much, but she often went home and took them everything she could lay hands on. Poor Gladys! She was very generous. She really loved giving. But there was never any money left to pay the bills. My Uncle was alive and in the firm then, and I was a comparatively poor man. Besides, I got sick of hearing what her mother said I ought to do. As a matter of fact, I behaved like a silly, spoilt boy, which I was." He paused. "I believe that's all. I don't think any one will be able to trouble you by telling you things about my first marriage that I have kept from you. I wanted to avoid placing you in the wrong position. Now, don't let us speak of it ever any more."

He went to the window and looked out, saying in a different tone:

"Oh, the car is round. I told them to order it."

Beatrice rose and went towards the door, feeling suddenly a very long way off from her lover.

"We shall just be in time for dinner," she said lightly.

He looked at her with sombre earnestness.

"I have spoilt everything," he said. "That was what I feared. But I was so anxious to make matters right for the future. I was a fool—you want to leave the future alone."

"You have spoilt nothing," said Beatrice, with an effort, ashamed of her foolish jealousy of the dead, but unable quite to banish it. "Of course

not. I respect you for telling me all about it. It was awfully good of you."

Then they went out to the car, and talked aimlessly on general topics as it swished like a storm-chariot through the wind and rain and whirling leaves. But just as they neared the village Stephen suddenly put his arm round Beatrice and held her to him.

"Don't let anything come between us," he said. "I think I should go mad if anything came between us now."

She pulled herself away from him.

"Oh, I hate it! I hate it that you ever had another wife but me!" she said passionately. "That's what it has done for me. I am mean enough to be jealous of the dead."

He took her forcibly back into his arms, using his great strength with care so as not to hurt her.

"Beatrice, I love you as I believe no man ever loved a woman before," he said. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"Oh, Stephen, forgive me," said Beatrice with quick compunction. "I used to be a reasonable being. I don't know what has come to me."

"It is because you love me, dear," he said solemnly. "There is no love without jealousy but the love of God."

And it has to be a high moment in which a man of Croft's type talks about his God.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN the car drew up at the End House Emmaline was peering anxiously out into the darkness; but with the certainty of Beatrice's arrival her anxiety changed into annoyance.

"Where have you been?" she said sharply.

"Surely you did not forget that Madame Laurence was sending a woman over to fit your wedding dress at seven o'clock?"

"I have been looking at the new drawing-room carpet," said Beatrice. "I quite forgot the dressmaker. I am so sorry."

"If you were seventeen——" began Emmaline, with excusable irritation. Then she bit her lip.

"Oh, well, I have put dinner off for an hour. The dressmaker is in your room. Will you go up?"

Croft grinned in the background.

"Forgive us, Emmaline," he said. "We won't get married any more after Wednesday."

Emmaline walked up the stairs.

"I was in love with Martin," she said. "No girl ever more so, or I should not have chosen him. But I should as soon have thought of flying as of going out into the wind and rain on a dark night when my wedding gown was waiting to be fitted." She reached the landing, where her voice could not

be heard by any one but Beatrice, and her annoyance culminated as she stood with her hand on the knob of the bedroom door. "I consider it scarcely decent," she said. "You will find, Beatrice, that the conventionalities must be observed by any woman who wishes to take her proper place in Society. It is not the thing to go off to your fiancé's house at night and alone so soon before the wedding."

Then she went in, feeling pleased with herself and more satisfied with the world, for Marion had been there that afternoon, and had shed those tears at the sight of the bridegroom's gift of a pearl necklace which she had been able to restrain when she lost the bridegroom.

So as Emmaline loved her sister deeply, with a clannish mixture of pride and affection, it was a consolation to be unpleasant to Beatrice with the full approval of her conscience.

The lace gown lay on the bed, and a white sheet was spread on the carpet. A woman in black hastened forward to assist Beatrice in removing her out-of-door apparel, and five minutes later she was no longer a quiet little person in dark clothing, but a radiant being in filmy lace and pearls. As she stood there with her little slim figure drawn up, and her dark hair dishevelled, and her eyes shining, the wedding gown seemed as natural to her as the plumage of a bird at pairing-time: just the same pretty outcome of the intense need to appear desirable in the eyes of her beloved. It was quite incongruous when the fitter took a

fragment of the lace between her finger and thumb and remarked: "I think we might take a *lettle* more off that shoulder. Just a thought! What is your opinion, Mrs. Fawcett?"

And, as no nice woman is ever indifferent to a wedding gown, even when it adorns a relation-in-law of whom she does not approve, Emmaline approached with a searching glance to give the matter her best consideration.

"No!" she said at last solemnly. "Leave well alone. It is impossible for Miss Fawcett to look better than she does at present. You have done *wonders*."

Beatrice laughed. "I'm going to show myself to Stephen before the miracle goes off," she said. "Who knows? I may never look like this again."

"Indeed, Madame, you must not allow Mr. Croft to see the gown," urged the dressmaker. "It is most unlucky for the bridegroom to see the bride beforehand in her wedding dress."

"It is not the right thing at all," agreed Emmaline. "Really, Beatrice, every one considers it unlucky."

Beatrice stood on her white sheet smiling at them on the dark carpet beyond; and it was as if she stood upon some island of the blest, looking out at dullness and sorrow as things which could never touch her any more.

"I don't believe in luck," she said. "Anyway I shall chance it." So she ran past them down the stairs to the library, where she found Croft and

Martin seated before the fire, and they both jumped up at her entrance.

"Well, will it do?" she said, pausing just within the door.

"So that's the wedding gown," said Croft quietly enough; but he looked at her in the way that every woman—if she is truly a woman—would like to be looked at in her wedding gown by the man she loves.

Then Martin's voice came cheerily across the silence.

"Why! Bee, old girl. I didn't know you could look so splendid."

He put his hand on her shoulder, and as they stood so they realised just for a moment that they were nearer to each other in one way, though so much farther off in all others, than they could be to any wife or husband. A host of common memories came crowding up which nobody else could share. They caught a glimpse of the loneliness which comes when nobody else in the world remembers. That was why Martin said, à propos of lace wedding gowns: "Do you remember that lace party-frock you spilt stewed plums over?" And why Beatrice felt an odd throb of pain and pleasure as she answered: "That was the party when you fought Arthur Walker for an india-rubber pig."

Then she went upstairs to show herself to Jane, and found that young person in the act of going to bed with all the evidences of a recent storm about her.

"This is my wedding dress," said Beatrice,

looking down very tenderly at little Jane, who would wear one herself some day, and perhaps remember.

"Oh, how beautiful, Miss!" exclaimed Nurse.

"Oh, doesn't your Aunt look lovely, Jane?"

"Y--yes," said Jane, who could not stop sobbing with rage all at once. "But it is only a lace party-frock, like mine. I shall be married in satin sewed with shiny silver things, like C—Cinderella."

"Jane has been naughty again," explained Nurse. "She put out her tongue at me."

"But the proud sister did it this afternoon and everybody laughed," said Jane.

"Oh, that was different," said Beatrice hastily.

"People do things on the stage that are never done at home."

Jane cast herself back on the pillows and wept again.

"Why—why," she wailed, "is home so different from the pantomine?"

Beatrice knew how Jane felt: she had felt the same: so has everybody else.

Both Beatrice and little Jane had the same habit of waking early, and if any one could have been in both bedrooms at once on that Saturday morning they would have noticed how the two faces alike changed and lighted and grew grave with the passing of different thoughts, so that it was quite possible to guess of what nature they were; every one knows how who has watched a child thinking.

So Jane first thought about baby brother kicking his shoe into the bath and then shrieking with jubilation while he hit Nurse on the nose with the teaspoon, and her little sleep-flushed face took on an expression of shocked admiration. What a boy he was! Then her thoughts wandered—or, no, they did not wander, for a child's thoughts have not yet grown heavy-footed enough for that—they just hopped about like little chattering birds and alighted upon Jane's bridesmaid's frock.

White—with a blue sash—and a blue bonnet.

Her lips parted and her eyes grew quite luminous with joy and pride.

Then the thoughts hopped off again quite inconsequently to the children next door. Jane grew serious. Her mouth drooped a little at the corners. For she was not allowed to play with the children next door.

There was a long landing window from which Jane often looked at them. She was not a lonely child, because she had baby brother and a great many other people to care about her; but still there were moments when she pressed her nose against the glass of the landing window and longed to play with the children next door.

She used to go there when the grown-ups were too engrossed in baby brother to notice her, or when she had been naughty, or when she was sorrowing for a departed kitten. She sat at such times in her coign of vantage with her eyes very wide open and her little thin hands folded, watching

intently the fascinating way in which the next-door children pulled each other off the swing into the dirt, and the exquisitely humorous faces they made at the Nurse when she came to fetch them in.

Still, she never thought of wondering if her mother was right in forbidding all intercourse over the wall, because she was still at that time when a mammy can do nothing that is wrong. It lasts but a few years at most, only it makes up to a mother for all the pain that is bound to come after. It makes up—that little golden time—for all the pain of being a mother.

So Jane lay thinking about the children next door, wishing she could get up and run out into the bright winter sunrise. For the children were playing outside before breakfast as they often did, annoying the neighbours very much indeed by their shrill shouting; but to Jane the sounds that came through the open window were the call of all the other children in the world, begging her to come out and play.

It came—that magic call—from merry little niggers kicking in the sun—from fur-clad winter babies under the strange light of the Aurora Borealis—from pink and white Marshfield infants going gaily hand in hand to school—from all the children in the world who are free to go and play with all the rest.

So no wonder that Janey was unable to resist on such a sparkling morning, or that she dressed with an utter disregard for right and left or back and

front, or any other of the essential considerations of the toilette.

She opened her door a chink and dressed with an ear as alert as a little rabbit in the woods. If only she could get out before the bath water stopped running! If not, she would be lost, for Nannie would come to fetch her.

She trembled with the exquisite joy of dangerous adventure as she ran out in one boot and one bedroom slipper. All that grown-ups feel when they turn their back on the sheltered life and adventure forth on the dangerous open road Jane felt as she ran across the bare, winter garden without her breakfast or her bath—only more so, because in her case the sensation was purely splendid; it held no dull alloy of before or after.

She ran behind the house to the high rockery, from which place alone it was possible to see the next garden. Then she looked up at the windows which twinkled in the red sunrise, and began to climb the rockery. She fell and hurt herself, but that only made her the more determined to go on. It was the sting in her cut hand which, somehow, gave her the courage to shout out in a shrill, nervous voice :

“Hullo! Hullo!”

The children ran and stood under the wall.

“You!” said the biggest boy. “Where’s your Nurse, baby?”

“I’ve run away. I’ve come to play with you,” she said, breathless, dirty, triumphant.

"Oh, you think yourself too grand for us," said the girl.

"I don't, I don't!" cried Jane eagerly. "I watched you swinging. I loved to see you."

"Don't believe you," said the girl. "You never came to our Christmas-party. We asked you."

"They never told me!" said Jane, with flashing eyes. "I do, *do* love you. I want to play with you." She cast round desperately in her impetuous little mind for a convincing argument. "Will you believe me if I give you my brooch with little pearls on—the one I 'dore—look out!"

Oh, the dramatic Jane as she stood, panting, wild locks tossed in the breeze, and flung the brooch she 'dored among the group below. She had then that strange feeling of doing something daringly forbidden and knowing she should be sorry for it afterwards, and yet all the more daring it, which grown-ups only experience at the cost of things which are as precious as life itself.

"Get away—we don't want your brooch!" shouted the eldest boy.

"What's it like?" said the girl.

"It's there! There!" shrilled little Jane, pointing.

But it was not there, and after some further searching the next-door children went indoors and the adventuress returned, as adventurers often do, with all the longing for the open road taken out of her for the moment. But it comes back. There.

is nothing in the world more certain than that. It always comes back.

Jane was lucky enough to have time to scramble into bed before Nurse arrived, because the happy hunter had been in a perfectly uproarious mood that morning after a night of pursuing Teddy Bears over mountains of white sugar, and he naturally disdained the frilled garments of an English gentleman approaching three.

So Nurse dressed Jane in a hurry and pulled her hair very much in-combing it out, telling her that pride must suffer pain.

"But why has hair got pulls in it?" said Jane, winking her eyes hard to keep back the tears.

"Why does everything have something?" said Nurse, who was a pessimist. "I'm sure I don't know. I only know how things are."

Then they went in to the belated nursery breakfast.

Beatrice, meantime, had been drinking her early cup of tea, and now she lay, as little Jane had done, with the thoughts making lights and shadows on her face—only her thoughts did not hop with gay irresponsibility from one subject to another, because she had grown up. They followed a steady, shining pathway, with something very glorious just four days in front of them. They were apt to pause, breathless, at that sight, and to wait in a sort of glory of anticipation.

For it was now only four days to Beatrice's

wedding. And as she lay there she could see that the suit-case, which had arrived the night before, was placed ready in her room. Her future name was printed in clear black letters on the leather—Mrs. Stephen Croft.

With a sudden throb of the pulses she pictured herself on the honeymoon, standing in the great Greek theatre at Taormina, which she knew so well, with the sunset giving to the ruins themselves and to the Sicilian coast below a beauty that is not unearthly, but of the dear earth at its best : just the place for a very human couple in search of the right Paradise.

Beatrice lay back on her pillows picturing it all to herself, with her dark hair about her and her happy soul shining through her face as if a light were held behind it, then the brightness vanished and a little furrow came between her eyes. She reached out her hand and took an envelope with bank-notes in it from the table by the bedside and counted them. There were five of twenty pounds each. She put them back and thought deeply. After a while her face cleared again. She sprang out of bed, dressed quickly, and went downstairs with the envelope in her hands.

She was rather late for breakfast, and Martin had already reached the front door on his way to the early train when she crossed the hall.

"Martin!" she called.

He paused with his hand on the latch.

“ Well ? ”

“ Here ! ” she said, running up to him and putting the envelope into his hand. “ The trustees allowed me far too much for my trousseau, because I am marrying a rich man, I suppose. I have lots of money left. You must take this for the wedding cake and things, of course. Please do, dear Martin, I have no use for it.”

He pushed it back, and as he did so he seemed to assume almost huge proportions—this little slim man in the dark-blue overcoat.

“ No,” he said. “ If I can't have my only sister married from my house without being paid for it I'll turn out and go somewhere else. There are things——” He paused. “ Come, don't look like that, old girl,” and he gave her a brotherly peck. “ But I can't take it. You must see for yourself I can't.”

Beatrice's lip trembled, for she was rather emotional in these last days, and she said in a low voice :

“ Oh, Martin, I am so disappointed. I was so pleased at the thought of bringing it down to you. I hurried to catch you before you went off, thinking all the time how jolly it would be. And now you take everything the wrong way.”

“ My dear old girl, I understand exactly, but there is my side too. Think how little I have ever done for you of all we used to plan. You must let me do this, Bee.”

Then he looked at his watch, made a hasty exclamation, and began to run down the path.

Beatrice went into the breakfast-room with the rejected offering in her hand and sat down by the table, where Emmaline was still eating delicate particles of toast and reading her letters.

"Good-morning. Coffee?" she said brightly. It was part of her creed to be very bright at breakfast-time.

"Thank you," said Beatrice. Then she burst forth: "Emmaline, can't you persuade Martin to take this hundred pounds? I have no use for it at all. The trustees gave me more than I needed for my trousseau. And the cake and champagne and so on, ought to come out of the money provided for my marriage."

"Martin is peculiar in some ways," said Emmaline, with a little sigh which was still resignedly bright. "I have had to learn that when he makes up his mind on certain points I have no influence over him at all. I would not say so to any one but you, Beatrice. Still, the fact remains. It is a great trouble to me, but I try to bear it as I ought to do."

"I suppose——" Beatrice looked at the clear, fair, charming face and the immaculately-braided hair. "I suppose you couldn't—you needn't——" She broke off, and then said hurriedly: "Emmaline, men have no idea what a party costs—and poor old Martin has been so worried about money matters—couldn't you just take it and say nothing about it? I should feel so much happier."

"Beatrice!" said Emmaline. "You are asking me to deceive my husband."

“Oh, I do beg your pardon. I only thought——” stammered Beatrice. “Let us say no more about it.”

There was a silence, in which Emmaline looked down at the teacups like a meditative Madonna, and Beatrice munched toast in guilty discomfort. At last Emmaline raised her eyes.

“But,” she said, “perhaps after all I might use the money for everybody’s good and tell Martin afterwards, when he is in a more reasonable mood. There could not be anything wrong in that, I think.”

“Oh, thank you!” said Beatrice with fervent, sincerity. “It is awfully nice of you. But don’t you think it would be a pity to tell Martin at all? He has plenty to worry’ him, poor old boy!”

Emmaline rose and smiled at Beatrice with a sort of majestic sweetness.

“When you are a wife, Beatrice,” she said, “I think you will understand that perfect candour is the only basis for married happiness. I shall certainly tell him: sometime.”

Then she went away to the children and the cook, and Beatrice finished her breakfast, feeling herself to be a person of no moral account. But when she had swallowed the last sip of coffee she began to smile a little, then to chuckle, and finally the room echoed with peal after peal of laughter.

Perhaps it was the last spoonful of coffee which conveyed the necessary stimulus to the brain; perhaps she was already getting far enough away

to see in focus; anyway she suddenly began to perceive the funny side of Emmaline.

"Mrs. Stephen Croft. A sweet woman. Her husband worships her. The members of the Mothers' Union rise up and call her blessed. Oh, that *must* be me! I *must* find out how Emmaline does it!"

She wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and glanced at the mirror, her eyes dancing with merriment. Then she shook her head.

"No good," she murmured. "I have the wrong sort of look. Nature did not make me up properly for the part."

She walked to the door and paused again, looking back over the years of a long girlhood that was nearly at an end.

"I have never been one of the safe sort—secure of my place," she said to herself. "That is not a gift of circumstance; it is a gift of nature. It seems strange to think that I should be going to have a solid position of my own in the world."

Then she remembered that love was a miracle which overrides the ordinary limitations of nature, and went upstairs to write a letter of thanks to Miss Thornleigh for a cat collar. The blue kitten was still too young to be presented, but it would, D.V., as Miss Thornleigh said in her note, be awaiting the arrival of the happy pair when they returned home to Bank House.

Miss Thornleigh appealed to her Creator in this connection with no light irreverence, but because,

as she said, blue Persians were so delicate that it seemed like tempting Providence to leave the D.V. out.

Beatrice was just signing her name when Jane came into the room and stood silently at her elbow.

"Well, Jane? What is it?"

"Shall I have to wear my pearl brooch at the wedding?" asked Jane anxiously. "You said so; but does it matter?"

"Why, yes. You have no other suitable to pin your lace collar," said Beatrice. "Of course you must wear it."

"Really and truly?" said little Jane, turning very red.

"Yes," said Beatrice.

"Then," said Jane, flinging herself upon the floor, "I've lost it! I've lost it! And Mammy will never let me be a bridesmaid after all."

Beatrice looked down at the scrap of despairing humanity on the carpet.

"Rubbish!" she said. "Mammy will be angry at your losing it, of course, but she would never punish you like that for what was, after all, an accident."

Jane sat up, her hair in wild confusion, her eyes streaming.

"It wasn't an accerdent," she sobbed. "I threw it over the wall to the girl next door—and it got lost—they couldn't find it though they tried. Oh dear! Oh dear! I ran out this morning

before breakfast—and climbed the rockery—in one bedroom slipper. Oh, Auntie!” and she flung herself down again. “You know what Mammy is when I disobey. She’ll never let me—never!”

“Why did you go?” asked Beatrice.

“I don’t know,” said little Jane. For now she could not remember the feeling which had made her run out into the garden.

“But you must know,” urged Beatrice.

“I don’t know,” repeated the despairing Jane.

“Then why did you give away your brooch?”

Jane remembered that, and the dull look vanished.

“They didn’t want to play. I thought that giving them it would make everything jolly,” she explained.

Beatrice bent down and took Jane on her knee, pressing the little thin figure close to her.

“Oh, Jane, Jane!” she said. “We mustn’t do it, you and I.”

For the child’s words had somehow made a mirror in which she saw herself more clearly than ever before.

“Mustn’t give things?” said little Jane.

“No,” said Beatrice. “It is not the giving—but we don’t do it from the right motive.”

“What motor?” said puzzled Jane.

But Beatrice was thinking things out for herself.

“We—we don’t do it to make other people happy. We just do it to make ourselves happy—as you did when you threw your brooch over the

wall. We must give that up. It's no good. It leads all wrong."

"I know. They made horrid faces when they went in to breakfast," said Jane.

But Beatrice found it quite impossible to explain further what she was only learning herself, so she just put on her hat and went to the next-door house, where the lady received her with some natural coldness. However, she found the brooch and brought it back safely to her agitated niece, who had directed operations from the rockery top.

"Well," said Jane philosophically, trotting along by her aunt's side, "it doesn't matter much when you get things back."

"But you don't," said Beatrice.

"But I have!" laughed little Jane.

And as she laughed a robin sang upon a laurel bush near by. The two sounds made a very perfect harmony—there was a certainty of joy and happy life in the world that morning.

CHAPTER X

BEATRICE and Emmaline sat in the library of Bank House waiting for Stephen to come and fetch them. He and Martin were at present taking luncheon in the temporary dining-room which had been erected to accommodate the large office staff of Croft and Co., shipowners. It was a pleasant day and the library window stood slightly open, so that the distant sound of voices and laughter from the luncheon party could be heard across the garden.

"They seem to be enjoying themselves," said Emmaline, joining Beatrice at the window. Then, as they looked out idly at the distant river with the ships riding upon it in the sunshine, they noticed a woman coming up the drive: evidently some one to see the servants, for she went straight to the side door after pausing uncertainly for a moment.

But there was something odd about her manner, perceptible even at that distance, which made Emmaline say carelessly—

"She looks rather like the ghost of a departed housekeeper come to haunt the scene of past depredations."

"Oh, she is too smart for that," said Beatrice.

"They are all smart in these days," said Emma-

line. "The reposeful person in black silk and a gold watch-chain now exists only in magazine stories."

And they turned from the window to talk about the decorations of Marshfield church for the wedding.

"I wish we could have been married early in the morning, just walking across the garden to the church without any fuss," exclaimed Beatrice.

"It would never have done," said Emmaline solemnly.

"Well," said Beatrice, "it cannot be altered now. Stephen would have a big wedding and you backed him up."

"He is very proud to have you and he wishes the world to know it," said Emmaline. "He almost makes himself ridiculous. You might be a royal princess. He is very much in love with you."

Beatrice glanced down at her seated sister-in-law, her eyes full of laughter and tenderness.

"I quite agree. It is queer," she said.

"I did not mean that, of course," said Emmaline with dignity, but she flushed slightly all the same, and hoped that marriage would soften Beatrice; there was sometimes an uncomfortable sharpness about her.

"You will have to try and remember, dear," she added gently, "that you are Mrs. Stephen Croft."

"I will try," said Beatrice. "Did you find it

difficult to remember that you were Mrs. Martin Fawcett ?”

“I have a different temperament,” said Emmaline, so obviously thanking God for that, that Beatrice laughed again.

“I seem to laugh about nothing to-day,” she apologised. “Ridiculous of me. I must be ‘fay.’ Something must be going to happen.”

And at this moment Stephen looked in at the door, saying gaily :

“Come along. They are just going to make the presentation. I want you both to be there.”

He put his hand through Beatrice’s arm and Emmaline swept along beside them with an air which made it seem almost like a procession. She saw herself giving dignity to many such occasions, and began to feel that there was a bright side to this marriage after all. Even the waiters from Flodmouth who were hurrying about the rather disorganised establishment looked after her with admiration; and she was pleasantly aware of it. She knew, deep, deep in her own heart, that she would have made an excellent Royal Personage.

But Beatrice was too happy to care about anything but Stephen’s protecting touch upon her arm. She was his. For all their lives, and before all the world, she was going to be more and nearer to him than any one else : that was enough.

As the ladies entered the great room the guests stood up. The decorations were magnificent and the luncheon had been the very best that Croft

could command: for it was a great pleasure to him to entertain, as his most honoured guests, the men who had served him so well, and when he sat down again near the head of the table with Beatrice beside him, he was about as happy as is possible for any mortal to be. His old restless look had gone, leaving behind it only such an impression of past storms as made the present settled happiness of his face the more noticeable.

"Mr. Willet is going to speak," he said to Beatrice in a low tone. "He is the senior member of the staff, a splendid old fellow."

Then Mr. Willet rose in his place, fingering the notes of his speech in his waistcoat pocket. But he did not need them because the luncheon and the jolly company had made him feel that the crowned Heads of Europe were his brothers. Flodmouth and all belonging to it floated far below any concern of his in a sort of golden haze. He was an abstainer—but that was how he felt.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is with very great pleasure that I rise to congratulate the Head of our Firm on his approaching marriage. As a very small mark of our immense affection and respect—(great applause, during which Mr. Willet waited, almost as happy as Stephen and Beatrice)—"I repeat—our immense respect and affection—we beg to offer him and his future bride a silver tea-service. May they often in the future enjoy from it the cup"—Mr. Willet began to goggle upon the door behind the bridal party—"the

cup"—a scuffling noise distracted every one's attention, but Stephen, of course, was bound to keep his eyes steadily fixed on the speaker—"the cup that inebriates but does not—that cheers but does not inebriate—"

"Sir!" interrupted an agonized waiter at Stephen's elbow. "We can't do nothing with her. She fights like a feund. She says she has an appointment with you."

"Who?" said Stephen.

"A lady—I mean—well, a lady," said the waiter.

"Tell her to wait," said Stephen, hardly to be disturbed from his state of beatitude. "Reporter or something, I suppose."

"But she 'it us!" remonstrated the waiter, naturally indignant at this attitude.

"Keep her for a minute or two, then I will come and see what it is," he said, less equably. For there are few men in this world, even the best, who would not feel some qualms of discomfort if an indignant, strange lady forced her way into their wedding festivities. It may be only a platonic past—still it rises before them *then*.

"But she will come now. She's laying about her with a big umbrella," urged the man in a desperate undertone. "You can't expect no hired waiter to risk getting a black eye in the height of the season. It isn't reasonable. It isn't right. Oh, lor!" he gasped out, "here she is!"

"Tell her to wait!" roared Stephen.

"Wait!" shouted the woman as she burst into the room, brandishing an umbrella with a heavy knob to keep the waiters at bay. "Wait! I have been waiting for ten years!"

She was really rather fine, in the most oddly grotesque way, as she stood Amazon-like, swinging the umbrella round her, with the pale black-clad waiters dodging and ducking to avoid a blow.

"Who are you?" said Stephen, staring at her, some depths in him beginning to be afraid while he was as yet conscious of no fear. "Who are you?"

"As if you didn't know!" she said. "Can a man forget his own wife? Even after ten years? No!"

The fear rose, reached his consciousness, but he fought it down.

"You are mad!" he said, still staring at her. "My wife is dead. The dead don't come back."

She laughed, showing her even teeth.

"But this cat came back," she said. "Awkward, only so it is!"

"No, no," he said in an odd, low voice. "You are not my wife. Gladys is dead!"

"You thought so. You hoped so." She glared at him with distended eyes. "You coward! You thought——"

But Martin suddenly laid a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"If you don't come into the other room at once,"

he said, "I shall have you forcibly ejected. This can't go on."

She glanced at the men who filled the tent and gave in to overwhelming odds.

"Very well," she said sullenly. "I'll come."

As she went out she nodded over her shoulder at the curious, excited clerks who had thrown their attempted discretion to the winds and were staring after her in open amazement.

"Good-day," she said. "Hope you will know me again. Charmed to have met you. So long!"

"Gentlemen," said Stephen, standing for a moment at the head of the table, "I must ask you to excuse me for a few minutes."

"Stephen!" said Beatrice at last.

"Come, dear," he said in a dull, weighted tone, as if sensation were deadened for the moment. Then he went up to the woman who was still waiting defiantly in the doorway and said with a grave bow: "Will you please come this way?"

It was so strange, like a scene in a mid-Victorian melodrama, and yet with things in it which made it so piercingly real.

When the library door was closed on the Fawcetts and Stephen Croft and the woman who called herself his wife, there was a moment's pause which no one dared to break because the issue of what came next must be so tremendous.

"Well!" began the woman at last. "What have you to say for yourself? Eh?"

"You know I thought you were dead," said

Stephen. "You let me go on thinking for ten years that my negligence and temper had murdered you. Isn't that enough? And just when I was beginning to forget and to be happy——" He broke off and sank down with a groan by the table. "Oh, my God!"

"What right have you to be happy?" said the woman. "If you wanted to be rid of me, why hadn't you the pluck to shoot me and stand your chance of swinging for it? But no. You took the easier way. You flung off after a dreadful scene and never wrote until you heard that I was dead. Then you were ready to do anything. But it was too late."

"Stop!" said Martin. "You are making him out a devil. He was not that. He was only an inexperienced lad who went off in a rage. And he never thought of injuring you. You always seemed so strong, so wonderfully full of vitality and health."

She glanced round at Martin, narrowing her eyes.

"Oh, then you remember me too?" she said.

"Yes," said Martin reluctantly, "I do. You are changed, of course. But no one could fail to recognise you."

"Well," said the woman, "I can assure you that when I got better from my illness I was as anxious to be free from Stephen Croft as ever he was to be rid of me. Do you hear that, Stephen?" she continued, turning towards him. "I hated the

dull life I led with you. I wanted to go back to the stage and all the old fun. I never wished to see you or hear of you again. So I made them write and tell you I was dead. And that I died hating you. And that the only kindness you could do to those left behind was to keep away from them for evermore. But we moved and left no address to make sure."

"I can't believe—I can't believe——" repeated Stephen, still with the same stunned dullness.

"If you want any more proof," she said, "then here is your ring. You'll remember what is engraved inside it. 'True till death.'" She laughed and turned to Beatrice. "Here, take it! It'll do for you."

Then Stephen sprang up and placed himself between the two women.

"I won't believe it! I can't! You are so altered. You are not Gladys."

She pushed her face close up to his.

"I have changed because I have grown older. But not so much as you. Can you tell me that you don't recognise me? You can't!"

"Were you"—he cleared his throat and spoke with difficulty—"were you acting in the Flodmouth pantomime?"

"Yes, it was that that did it!" she said. "If I hadn't seen you there with your promised wife in all your glory the idea would never have come into my head. But it seemed such a shame, all at once. You and she sitting there. Lords of every-

thing. And that——” She broke off and continued more calmly: “I only got off this afternoon at great trouble and expense. I had read all about your party and knew I should find you at home. We leave Flodmouth to-night.”

“You have no legal claim on Mr. Croft, I believe,” said Martin. “It is a plain case of desertion. You cannot make him take you back.”

“Take me back!” She turned fiercely on Martin, towering above him. “Take me back! I’d die first!”

“I shall be glad to do anything——” began Stephen. Then he sank down, groaning, with his head in his hands. “Good God—what is a man to say or do in a case like this?—it is terrible!”

“Do!” said the woman. “Marry this lady on Wednesday next as arranged, of course. It appears to be within your legal rights. And I am sure I shall not object.”

Beatrice tried to speak, but she could not. At last she managed to say in a low voice just above a whisper—

“Why did you come? If you don’t want him, why did you come?”

“I wanted to hit him hard. I’ve done it.”

And there was in that question and that answer all the essential part of every fight between two women over one man. The ugliness of it was as apparent to Beatrice as if she had suddenly seen herself brawling, with torn garments, in the open street.

"Oh!" she moaned, shuddering back into a corner.

Then the woman went to the door, opened it, and paused to look round with a sort of contemptuous good nature at the group she was leaving behind.

"I don't want anything of you, Stephen," she said. "You will never see or hear any more of me than you have done for the past ten years. Only somehow I couldn't bear all the fuss that was in the papers about the wedding—everybody making you out to be so perfect. I had to take you down a peg. But now I have done it, I shall leave you alone. You can't"—she paused and the good-nature vanished—"you can't hate me more than I hate you."

"Gladys!" said Stephen starting up, and the name went quivering home to the depths of Beatrice's being. "You can't go like that. I must make some proper arrangement. Leave your address."

"I shall not," she said. "It appears that we are both free. So much the better. I am making a good living, but I would not come back to you or touch your money if I were starving." She paused and added theatrically, "Farewell for ever, Stephen Croft."

Then she went away down the path with all the clerks and the waiters crowding like flies round the windows to look at her going.

Beatrice sat quite still in her chair, her small face drawn and white, her hands folded tightly

together, and Stephen forgot there was any one else in the world as he flung himself down beside her and leaned his bursting head on her shoulder.

"Don't look like that," he said hoarsely. "It's been a bad dream. We must forget it."

"You can't forget," said Beatrice, and she continued to stare over his head at the pattern of the wall paper. She remembered the twisted scrolls most vividly for all her life—seven counting from the window—and all being drawn with a red-hot iron on her brain.

"Come, you must pull yourself together, Stephen," said Martin. "We can easily get"—he paused for a word—"the lady's address, as her stage name is known to all Flodmouth. And there are those men. You must see them before they go. What are you going to say to them?"

Stephen got up and straightened his shoulders; his eyes were bloodshot, a strand of hair fell over his forehead, and his face was purplish red.

"I'm going to thank them for the tea-service and ask them to wish for a fine day on Wednesday," he said. "My wedding day."

"But, Stephen," said Emmaline, "that cannot possibly be. Even if it were legal, and Beatrice would consent, you would have to obtain a divorce and make everything quite secure. This is dreadful. But if you were married to Beatrice and then found out afterwards you were not married, oh, Stephen, that would be too terrible to think of!"

"Yes, Stephen," said Martin with decision, "even if Beatrice is willing, we shall have to get the matter satisfactorily cleared up before there can be any marriage. You must see that, old chap?" And he put a very kind hand on his friend's shoulder.

Stephen shook it off and faced round on them all like a tortured animal.

"I don't see anything. I won't think of anything. I am going to be married on Wednesday. Come, Beatrice. Come and show yourself. You must be there too when I thank them for our wedding present."

"This is madness, Stephen," said Martin.

"Have you no sense of what is proper?" asked Emmaline indignantly.

But Beatrice rose and went to the door, her little figure erect, her eyes shining clear like stars on a frosty night.

"Come, then," she said, walking swiftly before her lover into the luncheon room.

There was a great babel of talk as she approached, but it died away into a kind of rustling silence when she entered. She paused at the head of the long table, and by the time Stephen reached her she had already begun to speak in a high, nervous voice which could be heard all over the room.

"Gentlemen," she said, "we are sorry to have left you so long. We hope you have been able to entertain each other. We must now thank you for your most beautiful gift. But a domestic

calamity has occurred in Mr. Croft's family. Our wedding is indefinitely postponed."

Then, on the breathless end of that, Stephen caught her by the arm.

"How dare you?" he whispered fiercely. "How dare you? What do you mean by it?"

She glanced at him and saw that the shock of anger against her had set his brain working again in a normal groove; then she began to laugh hysterically.

"Wouldn't you call — that — a domestic calamity," she whispered back, gasping for breath. Then with an immense effort she controlled herself, whilst Stephen finished the speech for her.

"My future wife and I raced each other for the right of speaking first," he said in a gay voice that went oddly with his haggard face. "She won this handicap, but I think you will all agree that the Matrimonial Stakes will be mine." He was conscious of talking absolute nonsense, and something in his head beat like a sledge hammer, but he went on in the same strain to the end, leaving the gaping clerks to make what they could of it.

And immediately it was over the guests came up one after the other to shake hands with their host and say farewell, while Beatrice went back into the library, where she found Emmaline weeping bitterly, with Martin by her side vainly endeavouring to comfort her.

"Think of what people will say!" she said. "And I know Beatrice will marry him in the end

if it proves to be legal for her to do so. She is very much in love with him. And she has so little sense of what is fitting to restrain her."

"Poor old Bee. I think——" began Martin.

Then Beatrice walked in and stood by the fireplace, holding out her cold hands mechanically to the blaze.

"Don't worry, Emmaline," she said. "It's done. It's over. I have finished it. Now we had better go home."

Emmaline lifted her head, and after staring for a moment at the forlorn figure standing so quietly there by the fire, she ran across the room and took Beatrice in her arms as if it had been her own little Jane.

"Come home and lie down, dear," she said. "Martin and I will take care of you. You have not lost everything. You will always have us."

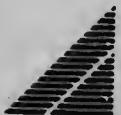
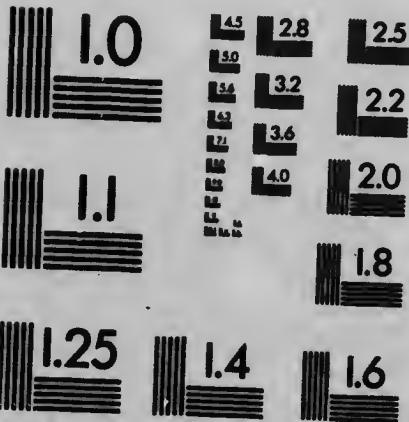
And as Emmaline went towards Marshfield in the motor-car she felt nothing but the tenderest pity for the poor girl who sat back in her corner looking dully out upon the bleak, darkening fields. She wondered what Beatrice was thinking about, and wished from the bottom of her heart that the first Mrs. Croft had remained comfortably buried. Martin sighed and frowned, but said nothing either, so Emmaline talked on and on about the weather and the children in a continuous stream, doing her very best; for there was, to her, something almost indecent about silence in company.

And when they alighted at the End House she



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felt that she had helped everybody over a terrible half-hour, though she again wondered what Beatrice could have been thinking about as she sat white and speechless in the corner of the car.

But the fact was that Beatrice did not think at all. She had reached that stage of misery when a merciful oblivion steps in, and she was surprised, almost, even in her dull apathy, to find that she did not suffer. Nothing seemed to matter at all.

"Come and lie down, dear," said Emmaline again in the hall, and Beatrice thought with a faint sense of amusement that lying down was Emmaline's cure for everything. She wondered vaguely if lying down were any good for a broken heart. Then she wondered, more vaguely still, whose heart was broken. Not hers, of course. There was a sort of heavy blank where her heart had been.

The fire was lighted in her room and she lay quite still, watching the flames flicker on the ceiling. After a while Emmaline brought her some tea—that queer visible sign of one woman being sorry for another—and Beatrice wished very much that she would go away again. At last she went, and Beatrice was alone with the flickering flames once more.

It was almost pleasant because she did not feel anything, like the blessed lull that comes in a mortal illness between two spasms of agony. The flames began to die down but she would not move. She was afraid of moving lest she should begin to feel.

Then she heard Stephen's step in the hall and the pain began to stir, so that she knew she had a heart still and covered her ears to keep out the sound. But it was no use. The ears of her heart could hear it through everything, and the pain grew and grew until her heart seemed breaking.

A heavy knock sounded on the door.

"Emmaline would not send you a message," Stephen said. "If you do not get up and speak to me, I shall come in."

Beatrice felt her lips grow dry. Oh, the agony of pain!

"Go down and I will come," she said.

She could hear him give a sigh of relief, even through the closed door.

"That's all right," he said.

He felt sure of her if she would only see him, because he knew her weakness. She so loved to make people happy—and how much more the man whom she so dearly loved.

CHAPTER XI

CROFT was pacing up and down the morning-room when Beatrice opened the door, and he came hastily towards her, controlling his voice to say quietly enough :

“ Beatrice, what were you thinking of to speak like that to the clerks ? ”

She sat down on a high chair near the door, because her knees gave way under her.

“ I didn't think,” she said. “ I only felt. I was desperate. I had to make everything flagrantly irrevocable. I knew my own weakness and acted by instinct. I was hurt until I couldn't think, only I had to make it so that I could never go back.”

“ But you believe, as I do, that—that she has no further legal claim upon me ? ” said Croft.

“ That is not the question,” said Beatrice.

The blood rose to his forehead and the veins began to stand out in his temples, but he tried to speak gently.

“ Beatrice, I can understand what a shock this has all been to you. It has been a terrible shock to me as well. But we must look at the matter in a reasonable light. So far as I know there is no real barrier to our marriage. In any case——” he

stopped abruptly. "I'm not going to let you throw me over. If there were a thousand women holding me back I'd fight my way through them to you."

Beatrice leaned her head back against the wall; life seemed to be ebbing from her as if her soul were bleeding.

"You loved her once. You married her. She has done nothing wrong, Stephen."

He came quite close and stood frowning down at her.

"Do you know how many of your fellow creatures you condemn when you talk like that?" he said.

"Is there to be no more happiness for those who have loved once—and given up loving?"

"Oh, Stephen—I know nothing about the rest. I can't judge for other people. It's just that I—I can't!"

"Then you don't love me," he said. "If you did you would know that nothing in the world matters a straw so long as we have each other. What is a little scandal to us, Beatrice? Nothing. Less than nothing." He paused. "You can't be going to let the thought of that ruin all our lives?"

"It's not that," said Beatrice, just above a whisper.

"Then what is it?"

She put her hand to her head.

"I—I don't know, Stephen. Only I can't do it."

"You can torture me like this without a reason!" he said. "It is incredible. I know you don't mean it. But the bare thought of living without you drives me mad. Why, night after night I've lain awake planning how I could make you happy. I was smoking only two pipes a day because you thought I smoked too much." He lowered his voice and looked half-ashamed. "You'd have made a better man of me. You needn't be afraid of that. I'd—I'd started to say my prayers again like I did when I was a little chap. I wanted to be all right when you came to me."

"Don't," said Beatrice, turning her face away from him and closing her eyes. "Oh, I can't bear it! You are making it too hard for me."

He looked down in silence at the little spent figure on the high chair, then he took her in his arms and carried her to the sofa near the fire, placing her gently upon the cushions.

"To think that I have done this—I, who wanted to shield you from every breath of trouble," he said, still keeping his arms about her.

"You couldn't help it," she said. "My poor boy, you couldn't help it. Oh, my poor, poor Stephen!"

And they clung together for a moment, feeling an infinite consolation in their sense of nearness to each other. The sorrow pressing its sharpness in upon them gave a strange ecstasy to their embrace.

Then Beatrice pushed him away and stood up-

right—a little thing of fire and tears as she had seemed to him when he first loved her. And he put his hands on her shoulders, looking down at her with a mist before his eyes.

“My own girl,” he said. “I knew you would be brave enough in the end. And I’ll give my life to making you happy. But I am not afraid. You will be happy because you make me so. That’s you!”

She looked up at him—a long, long look—but she did not see him. She was seeing herself mirrored once more in the transparent soul of little Jane.

“I can’t marry you,” she gasped out, “because you would not be happy!”

And the words she had said to little Jane ran like an undercurrent beneath those she was speaking aloud: “Jane—we mustn’t do it—we mustn’t do it!” She saw now how this very realisation of her own weakness had given her power to withstand Stephen’s arguments, for when strength is made perfect in weakness it becomes impregnable.

“Beatrice,” he flung himself down beside her, burying his head on her knees, “you’ll kill me. I can’t bear life without you. You must come to me. I swear to you that I shall never know a moment’s regret. Our life together——” He broke off and groaned. “If you knew how you are torturing me!”

Beatrice lifted his head from her lap and made him look at her.

“Don't you think I suffer too?” she said. “Is it likely that I should bear such misery as this for nothing? Why, if you had committed some great crime and were being driven out into the wilderness alone with all men pointing at you I would go with you, laughing for joy because we were to be together. I am weak enough to do anything in the world for you, Stephen, but injure you. I will not spoil your life knowing it beforehand. I can't explain, but I know. I don't judge for any one else, but with your temperament and mine the thing would be wrong. You felt remorse all those years for having left your wife as you did; the shock of it when you were a boy upset your nerves, and you repented out of all proportion to your fault. But it has left an aching place. And when we were married all sorts of things would remind you—it would be like an east wind blowing on the painful spot. There would always be a shadow between us. Your old restlessness would return, only worse, and where would it lead you?”

“Then am I to remain a celibate because you won't marry me? My wife won't have me back at any price,” he stormed. “Good heavens—these women! Talk reason, Beatrice!”

Beatrice stared at him out of her strained eyes, trying to find words to tell him what she felt; but it was impossible. She shivered a little, as people do when they become conscious of the dread loneliness that surrounds every human soul.

“It's no use. I can't explain,” she said finally.

"But I know I must not marry you, even if it is permissible, while your wife is alive."

"Then you want to send me back to her if she will take me?" he said. "Is that so? You want me to go back and atone for my past faults?"

"No!" she cried.

She had, somehow, never thought of that, and the "No" came from her like the cry which follows an unexpected blow. But the idea pressed upon her, stifling her with its insistent power.

"She is my wife," said Croft, following up his advantage. "I left her. She has never done any wrong, as far as I know, but keep away from me. Shall I see if my increased income will tempt her home again?"

Beatrice leaned back on the cushions. She felt stricken to the heart, and yet—ought she to send him back? Oh! what ought she to do?

The sudden vision of the first Mrs. Croft keeping the waiters at bay with an umbrella rose before her.

"No," she said, "I don't send you back."

He began to laugh.

"You foolish child," he said. "Do you think you could if you wanted? I shall marry you."

Then there was a fumbling at the door-handle, and Martin came in, looking very harassed and unhappy.

"I have rung up the theatre," he said. "Er—er—Miss Daisy Milton—that is her stage name, came to the telephone. But she declined to appoint

a meeting. Upon my word she seems sorry she ever made herself known. I don't know what to do next. We shall have to put the matter into the lawyer's hands. Of course you cannot possibly marry until everything is satisfactorily settled." He turned to his sister and said very gently: "You understand that it must be so, don't you, Beatrice? We are doing all we can."

She stood up erect before the two men and pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"It is all settled," she said. "You need not trouble any further; I am not going to marry Stephen while his wife lives, even if I may."

"She is very fond of me, you see," said Croft, "but not fond enough to marry me in spite of some unpleasantness. There are a great many like that. Only I thought she was different."

Then he went quietly out of the room and out of the house; and in his very quietness, being the man he was, there was something which made them feel afraid. They stood for quite a long time, staring at the blank doorway where he had been and holding their breath.

"Are you sure you are right?" said Martin.

"Who can be sure of that? I don't know," said Beatrice, beginning to weep. "I've only tried I can't do any more."

Martin put a kind hand on her shoulder.

"Emmaline will think you have taken the right course, old girl," he said. "And you can generally trust her judgment."

She wiped her eyes, and choked down the
so. . . threatened to overwhelm her.

"You talk like that I shall run after him and
fetch him back," she said. "Isn't it time to
dress for dinner?"

So Martin followed her into the hall, infinitely
sorry for her, and a little distressed, as well, that
she was never quite just to Emmaline.

CHAPTER XII

DURING dinner and the whole of the evening Beatrice talked incessantly, with a spot of crimson on each cheek and unnaturally bright eyes. She was guarding the wound which she could not bear any one even to approach, much less touch with words, and it seemed incredible to her when she looked at the clock that the time was only half-past nine.

She glanced at Emmaline, who opened her mouth with a concerned expression and was about to speak, and she dashed wildly into an account of the Holy Week at Seville; but at a quarter to ten the subject was exhausted. How could you—she felt despairingly—say so much about Spain in a quarter of an hour? How did lecturers manage?

Then Martin glanced up from his pipe with a look which made her know that a remark concerning Stephen was about to follow, and something called out in the depths of her: "If they begin to talk about it, I shall die." "If they begin to talk about it, I shall die!"

But of course nobody of Beatrice's temperament ever does die of sorrow; they have to go on suffering. And when she had finished with the forests above Lausanne the clock pointed to ten o'clock—

the hour at which the afflicted may creep away to bed, without obviously hiding themselves, to bear their agony alone.

"I think I will be off now," she said. "Good-night Martin; good-night, Emmaline," and she kissed them both lightly on the way to the door.

"Beatrice dear," said Emmaline, holding her gently by the sleeve, "there is something I must ask you."

Beatrice stood very still. It had come then. She braced herself to bear the touch of that terrible smarting-place, but the room went dim about her, and she turned deadly white.

"Yes?" she said.

"Martin has put in the papers that the wedding arranged will not take place. We had to do it on account of the guests who were invited."

"Very well," said Beatrice.

"And about the presents? But Monday will be soon enough for that. They will have to be sent back, of course."

"Of course," echoed Beatrice.

"Martin and I will see to that," said Emmaline, with genuine kindness. "How very, very hard it is! I am so grieved!"

"Poor old Bee!" said Martin. "I wish there was anything in the world we could do for you."

"I always had a sort of feeling," said Emmaline, wiping her eyes, "that there was something not quite right about it all. I think Marion unconsciously felt the same. That was no doubt why

she kept him so at arm's-length all the time he was running after her. He paid her so much attention, and yet it never got any further."

And indeed she did think that there was a little cherub who sat up aloft, especially guiding the pathway of the Russells—a sort of genius of the gaiters, who came down at once when anything touched what they embodied. A marriage broken off within four days of the wedding—a wife turning up from nowhere—such things could not have happened to Marion. It would not have been allowed.

"We Russells have a sort of instinct, I believe," she concluded.

"How convenient for the Russells," said Beatrice, going towards the door. "What a beautiful place the world would be if every one were gifted with the Russell instinct."

But the little spirit of bitterness died down at once, because bitterness was no part of Beatrice, and she came back again with an effort, forcing herself to kiss Emmaline's fair, flushed face.

"I'm a brute," she said. "You and Martin are being so good to me. I'll—I'll keep my end up after to-night. I will indeed."

Then she went upstairs to bed and locked the door.

For a few minutes after that she felt almost happy. The relief of being able to cast herself face downwards on the bed and let the tide of misery sweep over her, instead of fighting against

it, was so great that for a very little while it almost seemed like happiness.

But the agony soon began. It seized her like a live thing, torturing her almost past endurance. She listened to Martin and Emmaline coming up to bed—to all the common, usual sounds of closing the house for the night—and they seemed strange, like sounds heard through a maze of pain.

She was no child, but a woman on the eve of marriage to the man whom she loved with all her soul; she was an ardent woman—a spirit on fire. And such love burns up everything else; now there was nothing at all left.

At last, towards morning, she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. She had not, as many would have had, the comforting certainty that she was behaving in a fine and noble manner. She could not feel at all sure that she had done right. She only knew she had done her best.

Even when full daylight came into her room she slept on, her face looking so little and worn among her dark hair. At last the housemaid at the locked door awakened her, and her first thought was not of Stephen, but of her black evening dress. What was that for? She started up and remembered everything. She was of those who awake all at once, not by blissful slow degrees; and she knew immediately that she must get up to a world that pitied her, in which there was no Stephen.

But there were no traces of tears on her face when she arose to remove her evening clothes and

do her hair, because she had not cried at all. Her tears all seemed to be sealed up in some place in her forehead, where they caused a dull ache that was worse than pain.

Then she heard Jane's gay footsteps and expectant thump on the door. It was the child's custom to share her aunt's morning tea on Sundays, and nothing in the world tasted so delicious as the sugary tea in a saucer and the piece of thin bread and butter. It was another of the glorious things which made Sunday splendid to little Jane.

"May I come in, Auntie?" she called.

Beatrice put her hand to her head.

"No. Go away!" she said sharply.

There was no sound at all for a minute, then dispirited footsteps could be heard trailing back again towards the nursery.

Beatrice listened. Then she flung open the door. What was the use of two people being miserable where one would do?

"Come back, Jane," she said. "I drank all the tea: I was so thirsty. But you can have the sugar."

Jane came in with something bulging underneath her pinafore.

"It's a s'prise," she said gleefully.

For surprises were the joy of Jane's life; she would do anything to get one or give one, and she had not yet learned that they are nearly always unpleasant. But she and Beatrice never would learn that—even in their last extremity, there

would always come to them, after a little time, a sense of something glorious round the next corner. If all on earth failed, the ultimate hope would grow more shining clear, for they were made like that.

"Well, what is it?" said Beatrice, trying to seem interested and not succeeding.

"Auntie!" said little Jane, her lip beginning to quiver. "It's a real splendid s'prise that I have been making for ever so long. I worked it myself for a wedding present, pink to go with your new droring-room. Isn't it lovely?"

And she held out a most hideous mat worked in pink silk on brown perforated card.

"Thank you, dear," said Beatrice, kissing the little upturned face. "It is a lovely, lovely present. I shall keep it all my life."

"Knew you would! Knew you would!" said Jane triumphantly, sitting on the mattress and springing up and down. "And that silly old Nannie told me not. I was going to save it till your real wedding day, but something"—she broke off hastily—"something made me bring it now."

"What was that?" said Beatrice, brushing her hair. She did not seem to feel at all this morning. Nothing mattered.

"Oh, I'm not to tell," said Jane. "Nannie would be vexed if I told. She says I have ears like a ferret. Have you ever seen a ferret, Auntie?"

Beatrice took the child on her knee.

"Tell me why you brought it, dear," she said.

"Well, I heard them saying all your presents

would have to go back. It was last night I heard them say it. And they said you wouldn't get a husband at all. Cook said that to Nannie, and Nannie cried, and yet they both seemed pleased. It *was* funny, Auntie. So I brought you mine directly I got up, to make sure. You shall have mine, Auntie, however naughty you have been."

"My own dear Jane," said Beatrice, feeling the tight clasp of the eager arms about her neck.

"Whisper," said Jane, with a sparkling face.

"Well?" said Beatrice, turning her ear.

"Do tell me what you did, Auntie. It must have been something awful for them to take all your presents away. Did you"—she paused, and continued in a shocked tone—"did you put your tongue out at Mr. Wylie?" Mr. Wylie being the Vicar with a long face, and the embodiment of all sacred things in the eyes of little Jane.

"No," said Beatrice.

"You didn't throw your best hat into the fire?"

Beatrice did not speak, for she was not listening, her eyes being fixed aimlessly on the window.

"Auntie!" Jane gave her a little shake. "You never"—her face expressed what she felt—"you never told a story?"

"Come, Jane," said Beatrice, rising, "it is time you went back to the nursery."

"It's not time yet," began Jane; then she stopped and stared up with wondering eyes into her aunt's face. "You do look ill and queer," she said.

But somehow her child's soul had reached out and found the desolation in the soul of Beatrice though she was not herself aware of it, and she became suddenly on fire with a desire to help. There must not be such misery in the world! She never dreamed of any such words, of course, but that was the cry which surged through all her being.

"Wait a minute," she said breathlessly, and scampered off, black legs twinkling and dark hair flying behind her.

"Here!" she shouted as she scampered back again, calling out the words before she was in the room, "here's my own fairy watch—that Uncle Stephen sent for me to wear when I was a bridesmaid; I'll give you that! I'll give you that! I'll give you my own fairy watch, I will!"

She pressed the little leathern case into Beatrice's hand and burst out crying.

"I'm not crying—because I want it back——" she sobbed. "But, oh, it is so lovely—it is so lovely!"

Beatrice knelt down by little Jane and put her arms about her.

"Keep it, darling," she said. "It is too little for a grown-up person like me. Fancy how silly a great big Auntie would look in a little girl's watch. Now, wouldn't she, Janey?"

"W—would she?" sobbed little Jane, brightening up in spite of herself.

"Why, yes, everybody would say: 'Look at that great, big, silly Auntie in her little niece's

watch ! ' Then how uncomfortable I should feel," urged Beatrice.

"It is horrid, being laughed at," said Jane, beginning to smile through her tears. "I hate it. Don't you ?"

"Of course I do," said Beatrice, and she fastened the little watch, enamelled with blue forget-me-nots, by its slender chain round the child's neck. "There, you can begin to wear it now."

"Before the wedding !" said Jane.

"There"—Beatrice paused, because something caught in her throat—"there is not going to be any wedding, Jane."

For a second Jane forgot even the watch, and clung round Beatrice's neck.

"Oh, Auntie, I'm so sorry you are not going to marry Uncle Stephen after all. I wanted you to be Mrs. Uncle Stephen. We would have had such fun together."

"Well, never mind," said Beatrice, leading her to the door. "You must go out with Nurse now, and perhaps you may see the garden boy and he'll say: 'Please, Miss, can you tell us the time?' and you'll say: 'I believe I have my watch on. Let me see.' Won't that be a joke ?"

Jane laughed gaily and all the trouble was forgotten.

"That's just how the garden boy talks," she said. "You *are* funny, Auntie !"

Then Beatrice closed the door, and sat down on the edge of the bed, able at last to weep those good

tears of sorrow which wash away bitterness from the hearts of women.

It was a strange sort of Sunday morning that followed, for nobody went out. Emmaline sat at her writing-table countermanding orders to tradesmen, while Martin paced uneasily about the house and Beatrice went back to her room to write some necessary notes.

But every time a step was heard on the drive, or the front door-bell rang, she started up from her chair and waited with a heavily beating heart until the noise subsided and she knew it could not be Stephen coming.

About half-past twelve, when church was over, the Vicar and his wife were ushered into the library which was immediately beneath Beatrice's room, and she could hear a booming of voices, low at first, but increasing in volume. Every now and then the Vicar blew his nose, punctuating in that way his expressions of sympathy according to his unconscious habit, and when Beatrice heard through the floor a particularly sonorous blast she felt sure they had now got to Stephen. It was a salute to the sorrows of the master of Bank House.

Poor, poor Stephen !

She laid her forehead on the cool writing-paper, and the dreariness of that Sunday morning pressed round her like something visible, the sympathetic nose-blowing, for some odd reason, seemed to give the final touch to her sense of dull desolation.

Then Mrs. Russell and Marion came in and swelled the party downstairs, truly sorry, both of them, and yet unable to help feeling a dismal sense of satisfaction.

"Poor Beatrice! How sad! But it always seemed a little strange, if you know what I mean," said Mrs. Wylie. "She is a dear girl, but she somehow never seemed *quite* the one——"

"Well, we have always liked him, as you know," said Mrs. Russell. "In fact I greatly regretted at one time that Marion only cared for him as a friend. But now I see it was providential." She lowered her voice and added in all sincerity: "It is wonderful, Mrs. Wylie, how things do work together for good for those who try to do right."

"Mother, he never asked me to marry him," said Marion, ever truthful.

"No, dear," said Mrs. Wylie. "But a nice girl never allows a man to propose unless she is going to marry him."

Then, conscious of knowing most things about earth and heaven, and really anxious to make the two places more alike, Mrs. Wylie rose to depart.

"Come, James," she said.

"I am truly sorry, truly sorry," said Mr. Wylie, blowing a final blast. "Give my kindest remembrances to Miss Fawcett. No blame attaches to her, of course, poor young lady."

"No, poor Beatrice, she could not help it," said Mrs. Russell, preparing to depart with the Wylies.

Then they went away down the path together,

talking in low tones and stirred by the exciting episode to a keener zest in living. And yet they were sincerely sorry and would have put things right again if they could, even at some personal sacrifice; for people are like that, of course. But when they parted at the turn of the road, Mrs. Russell with silk skirts delicately lifted, Mrs. Wylie with sensible boots and an over-trimmed hat, and Marion in grey tweed, they brought out at last what had been hovering at the back of their minds during the whole interview.

"I can't help feeling," said Mrs. Wylie in a low voice, "that I should know instinctively if my husband were alive in the world. Even if I saw his funeral, and yet there were any mistake, I am sure I should feel it. And I am convinced that the vicar would be the same, about me. Should you not, James?"

The Vicar shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "I don't think so. We must not judge—"

"You mean," interrupted Mrs. Wylie, "that you could think of any one else while I was alive?"

"Not if I knew it, dear," said the Vicar, who was a just man, even if he had a long pale face and a habit of punctuating with his pocket handkerchief.

"Well, I am like you," interposed Mrs. Russell with her usual tact. "I cannot help feeling that in a sacred thing, like marriage, dear Mrs. Wylie, one would have intuitions which"—she paused, rather at a loss, but only for a second—"which

would warn one against forming new connections," she concluded triumphantly.

"I think I shall persuade Beatrice to go away with me for a time," said Marion. "Otherwise she may fly off at a tangent and insist on leaving Marshfield altogether."

"A sensible plan," said the Vicar.

"How wise! But just like you," said Mrs. Wylie. "By the way, could you come and help me with the Mothers on Thursday? We are rather in difficulties, and you always straighten things out."

"Very well," said Marion. "I shall be glad to do what I can."

Then they parted to go their separate ways and eat roast beef with the sauce of conscious goodness. But it is, after all, a splendid thing to be in company when goodness is so high; thought that it was to be good.

In the afternoon Martin wandered out into the garden with the children, then strolled alone in the fireless billiard room, unable to settle down to anything. At last he put down his pipe and came into the drawing-room where Beatrice and his wife were reading before the fire.

"I'm going across to Croft's," he said abruptly. "Hang it—the man has been my friend all these years—he's done nothing wrong. I shall go and see how he is getting on."

"He went off in a rage. He will not see you," said Emmaline. "I think"—she paused and

glanced at Beatrice—"I think it would be more dignified, Martin, if you were to wait until you heard from him. What do you say, Beatrice?"

"I—oh, I don't know. He is very angry of course. I don't suppose he will want to have anything more to do with us," said Beatrice, bending over her book.

Martin went near to her.

"I say, Bee," he said, "I won't go if you would rather not. After all you are the one to be considered. It was really as much on your account as my own that I was going. I thought you might like to know——" He broke off.

Beatrice looked up from her book. It was no use pretending any longer.

"I want to know more than anything in the world," she said. "I—I feel as if I should die if I went on like this—hearing nothing, and knowing nothing."

"I'll be off now," he said.

"Shall you be back in time for tea?" said Emmaline.

In time for tea! Beatrice longed to beseech him to run all the way there and back, that she might sooner hear news of Stephen, but she said nothing.

"Oh, yes, I shall be back for tea," he said.

It seemed incredibly callous to Beatrice that they should bother about tea when she was on the rack—every one knows this unreasonable irritation who has ever suffered—and she sat staring at her

book, without seeing it, for fear Emmaline should talk to her.

The time seemed endless, but still she would not go up to her room and hide. She had a deep feeling, which her mind was still too disturbed to put into words, that there must be no more slinking into corners to weep. A great calamity had befallen her and her spirit was rising to meet it.

She loved Stephen. She would love him all her life. Her life was not going to be worse for his love.

That was what it amounted to in her soul. Dim yet, not surely grasped even by herself, but waiting until the first, surprised agony should give place to the dull ache of realisation.

After a while the maid came in with the tea, and the curtains were drawn, shutting out the grey end of the wintry afternoon.

"Martin is late," said Emmaline over the cups and saucers.

"Something must have kept him" said Beatrice.

Then the pleasant, clinking sound of tea-making, and at last Martin came in rubbing his hands.

"Cold outside," he said, standing before the fire.

"Very cold."

"Well?" said Emmaline.

Beatrice could not speak, but she looked at Martin.

"He's gone away."

"Where?" breathed Beatrice.

"Don't know. I couldn't start questioning the

man. He said: 'Mr. Croft left orders, sir, that if any one called I was to say he had gone away from home!' You couldn't go on after that, could you?"

"That is so like a man," said Emmaline. "A woman would have found out something more, I am quite certain. Where can he have gone?"

Martin sat down heavily, and pushed up the dark strand of hair that was always straying on his forehead, to the intense annoyance of his wife.

"I don't know," he said. Then he blurted out suddenly: "I hope to goodness he has not gone after that woman!"

"Oh, he would never do that," said Beatrice.

"I don't know," said Martin, with the irritability of some anxiety. "He is such a queer chap. Just the one to go off at a tangent and make it up with her so as to atone for the past. He was morbid on that subject. And you sent him away, Beatrice."

"Yes, I sent him away," said Beatrice, as he paused for an answer.

Emmaline looked, outraged, across the glittering silver and china.

"It would be preposterous! Unthinkable!" she said.

"It is just the sort of thing that people do," said Martin, "or the world would be a jolly sight easier place to live in than it is. We could get on all right if it were not for shrewd men doing mad tricks and fools wise ones. That's what upsets all

our calculations." He got up and took his cup. "You never know. Nobody knows anything about anybody. But there is one thing certain, he will be a miserable man if he goes back to that woman."

"Awful creature!" shuddered Emmaline.

"No, not that," said Beatrice. "There was—" she groped in her mind—"yes, there *was* something almost noble about the woman in spite of her vulgarity. I cannot reconcile her with the idea I had of her before."

"Noble!" said Martin. "Hitting waiters with an umbrella and behaving like a——" He broke off. "I knew her before. More by reputation than personally: but she was not the sort that runs straight for long. I hope to goodness he has not gone back to her."

"Well, in any case Beatrice did what was right," said Emmaline, taking another cup of tea. "There is a plain right and wrong in every question."

Beatrice looked across at the happy Emmaline who found it so, and then at her brother, who sat frowning uneasily.

"I get muddled," she said. "I wish I could see plainly. But I have tried, Martin."

He smiled across at her: the quick, bright smile which belonged also to her and little Jane.

"Good old Bee," he said. "That's what does it: trying. You get there sometime."

"You find happiness in the end," added Emmaline.

Martin said nothing, but he had not meant that, and Beatrice knew he had not meant it. They both saw, for a moment in the pleasant, well-lighted drawing-room, that high vision which has no name.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Marshfield malefactor had been leading a blameless life of late because he was occupied all day in leading odd loads of turnips and potatoes and coal about the village, and at night slept the sleep of the just labourer. But for three days past his master had been laid up with rheumatism, and on Sunday afternoon Miss Thornleigh took him a superb offering of bread and sugar and carrots. She was feeling unhappy about Beatrice, and that prompted her to go out and make somebody happier, and the only available person she could think of on that Sunday afternoon was the apricot-coloured horse.

The consequence was that about three o'clock in the morning, when Beatrice ought to have been in her first sleep, and all Marshfield lay dreaming in the still moonlight, there came a clattering sound of iron shoes on the pavement, and the malefactor lolloped down the street throwing out his hoofs on either side and snorting in triumphant ecstasy.

He shuffled at a little trim garden gate, and a window went up above. The man shouted—the malefactor snorted and tramped; he was not hungry for wall-flower seedlings, but he was out for blood, as the saying goes, and he was enjoying

himself gloriously; the man rushed forth in great undress, bawling wicked words and waving a stick; neighbours' windows flew up too—the apricot-coloured horse tossed his great fiddle head and cantered along the pavement, waking echoes everywhere in the still place.

Then he stood still for a moment at the corner, making the most grotesque shadows on the empty street, while he winked maliciously at the moon.

Marshfield was awake; so he trotted contentedly across the common to his old shelter.

Lights shone from little twinkling windows now, and behind the closed blinds cold husbands crept back to bed again, talking first of the Marshfield malefactor and the law, and going on naturally from that to the topic which had been upon everybody's tongue since morning.

“It was a clear case of desertion.”

“How could she take him when he's another wife living?”

“I should ha' stuck to him.”

“She's done wrong.”

“She's done right.”

So ran the talk through the village street, as contradictory as the thoughts which were trailing round with weary insistence in Beatrice's brain and would not let her rest.

For, however we may have tried to do our best—and more people do than anybody knows—if ever a doubt is to come at all, it will reach us when we are awake at three o'clock in the morning. And

Beatrice realised that one part of a woman's life was ended for her. A girl of twenty, though the future seems walled up with despair, still feels unconsciously that the world of love is still open to her. But a woman of thirty who has lost her lover feels with a dull, deep certainty that love has gone by for ever. And though this may prove to be a mistake, that does not alter the leaden finality of it at the time.

Beatrice sat up in bed and looked across the long years to come and was afraid. I think if she could have risen and gone across the moonlit island to her lover she would have done so, like any of the women of old who have run through the moonlight to the beloved, asking and giving only love.

But there are front doors, now, and astonished servants answering the bells; you may be aflame with romance in these days, but it is so safely difficult to be romantic. Therefore Beatrice would almost certainly have remained in bed even if Stephen had been at home in Bank Island, and as it was she lay watching the blank window until the dawn came, her feet and hands like ice, her head burning.

Then the dawn began to make the sky faintly luminous, light steadily shining through the darkness until all was light.

Morning was there, when everything looks different, and faith and hope come back again to people who are trying to do their best.

And after breakfast there was the urgent business

of arranging for the return of wedding presents; a packer to be sent for from Flodmouth; Marion, discreetly sympathetic, on the telephone, to be spoken to because she knew the right packer to engage: all the unpleasant, sordid details which have to hamper the end of everything in this world, even life and love.

About eleven o'clock Emmaline, glancing out of the window of the room where she and Beatrice were engaged in writing addresses, exclaimed impatiently:

"Miss Thornleigh! Please see her in the drawing-room, Beatrice, if she has come to call on you."

So Beatrice went into the drawing-room, where the recently-lighted fire still crackled dismally, and found Miss Thornleigh nursing a basket with a flushed face and a nervous air.

"I hoped—I thought—the morning seemed the best time to catch you alone, dear," said Miss Thornleigh, and Beatrice winced already at what was coming.

"Oh yes. Though we are rather busy——" began Beatrice, when there was a loud meow from the basket.

"Hush! Hush! My precious! I have brought you to your new mistress," said Miss Thornleigh, opening the basket. "The—the fact is that dear Bluebell has developed more quickly than I could ever have hoped," she continued, turning to Beatrice, "and I felt it would be a great

convenience if you would take her at once. She—perhaps I may be forgiven for saying that she is a beautiful creature. And I always find something so comforting about a cat. They like being petted. It—it is rather comforting to find something that likes being petted, you know.”

All the loneliness of her life, and her kindness and her delicacy, shone through those nervous, halting words as clear as daylight.

“Thank you, Miss Thornleigh,” said Beatrice; then she forced herself to add: “It is awfully good of you. Of course you know that I am not going to be married.”

“I am so sorry,” said Miss Thornleigh simply; then she added what all Marshfield felt: “It seems such a pity that you did not lose him in a more dignified manner, dear. It was like a page of a penny novelette.”

“Yes,” said Beatrice. “It seems as if it could not be real. Even now it seems so.”

“The unpleasant things generally are real,” said Miss Thornleigh, not bitterly at all, but just as a fact which life had taught her. Then she sighed a little. “We all have our memories. I, too, have known what it was to love and then lose.”

“I never knew,” said Beatrice, her heart going out to the odd-looking old maid with a kitten on her knee.

“Nobody ever knows. That is just the best and the worst of it,” said Miss Thornleigh vaguely. “But at least I lost him with dignity, poor dear!”

"How was it?" said Beatrice, putting her hand on Miss Thornleigh's knee beside the kitten.

"It—it was not quite so definite as your affair," said Miss Thornleigh, flushing, and with eyes brighter than usual. "But on the day before he sailed—he was in the navy, you know—I looked at a rose tree and said to him: 'Oh, what beautiful roses!' and he said to me: 'I see some better ones here,' and he looked at my cheek in a way there was no mistaking."

"And what happened then?" said Beatrice.

"Oh, nothing more," said Miss Thornleigh. "He died at a Chinese station during his voyage. But I know what he meant. I am sure he would have come back for me if he had not died."

Then she rose and added:

"So you see, dear, I quite understand."

And Beatrice, in a little stir of feeling between laughter and tears, saw what had kept Miss Thornleigh young: it was the possession of a dream that never could grow old.

After she had gone away the day wore itself on to afternoon, as the longest day will do at last, and Marion arrived at tea-time, solidly radiant. She had been to Flodmouth and had travelled there in the same compartment as Mr. Wainwright, and he had proposed and been accepted.

"My darling Marion!" said Emmaline, kissing her sister. "How delightful! What a surprise!"

"Yes, I was most astonished when Charles spoke. I never dreamed of such a thing," said Marion.

And so queer is human nature that they thought they were speaking the truth because they put what they wanted to think into words.

"I am so glad, Marion," said Beatrice, approaching the bride-elect in her turn.

The two tall, fair sisters stood towering robustly over the little figure, straight and slim as a flame, that came between them.

"Dear Beatrice," said Marion very kindly, "it does seem cruel to come here with news like this when you are in such dreadful trouble."

"I wish it had not happened to-day, even though Marion is so happy," added Emmaline, kissing her as well.

For they were sorry and they meant to be kind—so very few people really mean to be unkind that it makes you wonder why there should be all the unkindness in the world.

"I ought not to have told you this afternoon," said Marion with compunction.

"Rubbish!" said Beatrice, laughing. "Why you don't suppose I expect all the world to remain celibate to keep me company. That would be too much. The—the supply of Persian kittens would give out. One disappointed female—one kitter—Miss Thornleigh seemed to consider that the golden rule. I believe she thought a deaf aunt over eighty an added consolation, but that has been denied me."

"Oh, Beatrice!" said Emmaline.

And very soon the sisters went out together i

order to break the news to Mrs. Russell with great precaution, because the little gaiters demanded that a daughter's marriage should be regarded at first as an immense calamity. As they passed the apricot-coloured horse, Marion said :

" Really, I should not wonder if Beatrice got like Miss Thornleigh. She spoke of her trouble in such a queer way—and laughed. Fancy, laughing ! "

" I thought her remarks in rather bad taste, myself," said Emmaline, with gentle precision. " She is always a little odd. Poor Beatrice ! "

Then they talked of Mr. Wainwright, and Marion showed that she was already feeling for the helm of " Charles's " existence ; he would be managed, but he would be managed well.

Meanwhile Beatrice sat on in the dusk, and when the maid came to draw the blinds she was sent away again. Firelight and the scent of flowers filled the pleasant room, and through the wide window there was a glimpse of the great river, gleaming under the last streak of the sunset, with the great ships moving silently up and down.

She got up and stood by the window, looking out at the dim river. A great calmness fell on her after all the strain and hurry of the past three days, and she could think of the man she loved, quietly, largely, without distraction or bitterness.

At the same moment he was sailing along with a good, stiff breeze and all sail set. He felt the pull of the ropes and the movement of the helm as if

they were live things, companioning his loneliness. He had to go to the water for comfort and to assuage the agony of restlessness which possessed him, for the love of the water was in his blood. A Croft had been a sea-captain in the time of the Armada—until two or three generations back they had all in their youth done business in the great waters and settled down to control on land only when the meridian of life was past.

As Stephen Croft sat in his boat with the keen water swishing by her bows the storm and madness began to die down within him. For two nights he had lain at a little rough inn up a creek, remote from every chance comer in this wintry weather, and now he was becoming master of himself.

He looked back towards the place where he knew Marshfield lay, just as Beatrice was gazing out at the last streak of the sunset, and he loved her more than ever he had done before. She seemed to him to burn like a straight flame in a world of wavering things, and his whole being was on fire with love for her. The self was burned out of him, love during that hour, and it became something very clear and noble, a little like the high passions men used to feel for an ideal, and yet deeply human.

The water swished over the side of the boat and he steered cautiously, then let her gibe with much more care than usual. For the first time in his life he was afraid lest an accident should befall him because in that case people might blame Beatrice and she might accuse herself.

Beatrice turned from the window as Jane fumbled at the door, opening it with her hands full.

"Oh! All in the dark, Auntie!" she said.

For, when you are little, the dark is not a condition, it is a thing. And it is an enemy. Only when childhood has passed can people begin to make friends with the quiet dark.

Beatrice turned on the light, and as the house stood on the one little eminence in Marshfield, the great uncurtained window gleamed like a star to Croft when he saw it far away on the other side of the river. It answered to something within him that was straining unconsciously towards a distant star.

"Auntie! They'll see us," said little Jane in a shocked tone, trying to pull down the blind. She had an immense sense of the proprieties.

But in doing this with Old Ted in her arms she knocked over a glass vase and the glory immediately faded from earth and sky. Her face reddened, her eyelids blinked—she went straight down to an abyss of desolation.

"Now I've done it!" was her inadequate verbal expression. "And I meant to be so speshly good. Nannie said I might only come if I was speshly good. She is so sorry for you, Auntie. I heard her telling cook."

"Oh, is she?" said Beatrice, picking up the pieces of glass.

"Yes; Auntie"—Jane folded her little brown hands together—"is it your last chance? Can't you ever get another?"

"Another what?" said Beatrice, standing up straight and staring at little Jane.

"A young man. So that you can have another wedding just as nice. I want you to have another wedding just as nice," said Jane anxiously. "You could, if you got another young man, couldn't you, Auntie?"

"Oh, come and help me to pick up these flowers," said Auntie.

"But you could?" persisted Jane.

"Yes. Now we will put these pieces of glass into the fire, and then we shall see what we shall see."

Jane forgot her worries.

"Something funny?" she said, her face alight with anticipation.

"No, something pretty."

"Oh, well, that's the next nicest," said Jane, seating herself on a footstool, with a contented sigh.

The fire burned very brightly, throwing pretty red lights upon Beatrice and Old Ted and little Jane. They found great comfort in each other's company, and Old Ted's pink flannel knickers made a pleasant patch of colour on Jane's white frock.

"Poor Old Ted can't sit down," said Jane, dreamily eyeing the fire.

"Can't he? Why?"

"Too tight in his seat," said Jane, turning on Beatrice a concerned maternal eye. "I forgot about him sitting down when I made them. But he doesn't mind." She clasped him tight. "Baby brother went into knickers to-day. I wasn't going

to have Old Ted left out. I pricked myself. But I made them ! ”

You saw, in a sort of flash, with what a jealous passion little Jane would love her children.

“ How does Bobby like suits ? ” said Beatrice, her mind’s eye filled with the picture of the happy hunter striding about the nursery in ridiculously broad, short breeches more aggressively male than ever. “ Did he pull your hair again this morning ? ”

“ He scarcely ever does, ” said Jane angrily. “ He is a dear little boy. I love him. ”

Then Beatrice knelt down by the fire and cautiously raked among the ashes. There was a faint “ tink. ” That was the sound of magic coming. She lifted something up.

“ Look, Jane ! ”

“ A whip ! A whip of glass ! ” said Jane.

“ What’s this ? ” said Beatrice, picking up another piece of glass which had melted and run through the hot fire.

“ A bird ! A fairy bird ! ” said Jane, breathless with ecstasy.

And perhaps female grown-ups who stand before the windows of the greatest jewellers’ shops in the world, being allowed to choose whatever they will, may feel something of the rapturous expectation which Jane knew then—but not all—because there are limits to the glittering wonders they expect.

“ Now, ” said Beatrice at last, “ you will have to go. ”

Jane walked obediently half-way across the room and then stood still.

"I broke the vase. That means early bed or no jam to-morrow. But it's been worth it."

"Still, you must learn not to be so careless, Jane," said Beatrice feebly, rather disturbed at the lesson she had managed to convey.

Jane grasped Old Ted more firmly and set her determined little face towards the door.

"It's been worth it!" she repeated.

But at the door she paused again, after her queer habit.

"I do wish, Auntie," she said earnestly, "that you could get another one. Never mind. Perhaps you will."

Then, deep in thought, she marched upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning, being the Tuesday after that Saturday when Miss Daisy Milton swooped down on Marshfield, there was a whitish-yellowish impenetrable fog which hid the river, and through it the fog-horns dully hooted, with now and then the high note of a siren whistle. Emmaline was indoors with a bad sore throat, and colds crept almost visibly about the wet roads.

Every leaf in the little Marshfield gardens dripped with moisture, and as Beatrice went down the village it seemed that she walked covered with a veil of tenderest grey shot through with gold, so that her face was hidden from the bright, curious eyes, that looked out upon the street.

But when she entered the post-office the little line which the past nights had graven at the left corner of her mouth, and the unfashionable cut of her rain-coat, were plainly to be seen in the light of the gas above the counter.

Miss Battersby, the postmistress, stared at Beatrice, moistened her lips, opened them as if to speak, closed them again and finally jerked out breathlessly :

“ Postcards, you said, I think ? ”

“ Yes, one packet, please,” said Beatrice.

The postmistress put her hand in a drawer, drew it out, put it back again, and exhibited all the signs of excited emotion. Beatrice's engagement had caused her to put on a pink bow; the end of it had made her feel vaguely that there was less hope and joy in the world, but beneath all that was the queer triumph of the woman who has been left out when another has to join the ranks. And yet these mingled feelings did not account for so acute a state of mental disturbance.

Beatrice turned from the counter.

"D-damp to-day," exploded Miss Battersby, stammering in her eagerness to detain Beatrice. "Awful weather for—for the beds."

"Beds!" said Beatrice. "Oh, you mean the gardens!"

"No, no. Beds in houses. Damp beds. Beds that give you cold."

"Yes—I suppose——" began Beatrice, not unnaturally surprised.

Miss Battersby craned her head over the counter, staring eagerly at Beatrice.

"Beds where you get pneumonia," she said in a high, tense voice, "where you get pneumonia that may kill you." She paused and threw out the next words with such extraordinary emphasis that they seemed to hit Beatrice's consciousness like pellets. "Nurses! Temperatures! Doctors! Specialists!"

"Miss Battersby——" said Beatrice.

"Then you don't know!" said Miss Battersby.

"Know what?" said Beatrice, startled and uneasy at last.

"Why—telegrams sacred—may be dismissed—but a woman's heart——" she drew a long breath. "Miss Fawcett, Mr. Croft came home last night. Our doctor saw him this morning. Damp bed at some little inn. On an empty—er—interior, I understand, in his overwrought condition. Pneumonia supervened." She paused again, pleased with the phrase. "Pneumonia supervened, and the patient's condition is now critical. They wired for a specialist an hour ago."

Beatrice went grey about the mouth and clung to the counter; Miss Battersby felt sincerely sympathetic, but she was, all the same, enjoying the time of her life.

"Has the nurse come?" said Beatrice with an effort.

"Yes," said the postmistress. "But the house-keeper is away. The household's all sixes and sevens. He won't get a fair chance. A man all alone in a great house like that left to indifferent servants and a trained nurse. He ought to have somebody of his own, he ought."

"When is the specialist expected?" said Beatrice. "Why didn't they telephone?"

"Telephone's out of order," said Miss Battersby. "The specialist will be here at five o'clock. But, Miss Fawcett, you do understand that telegrams are sacred. You will not betray me?"

"No, no. You have been very, very kind,"

said Beatrice. She stood for a moment, looking down and thinking rapidly, then she held out her hand. "Thank you. You have been very good to me," she said simply.

The facile tears sprang to Miss Battersby's eyes as she clasped the hand held out to her. She felt she was living in a romance.

"I'm glad you came in here," she said excitedly. "It does seem a thing that a fine adventurous gentleman like Mr. Croft should meet his end in a damp bed. If he had been drowned, now, I could have understood it. It would have seemed in keeping. 'Home they brought her warrior dead.' He did seem one of that sort. But a damp bed——!"

"Good-bye—and I shall never forget——" said Beatrice, going towards the door.

"You are leaving your postcards!" said Miss Battersby, almost resuming her usual manner at the spur of business. "*And* your change. Good-morning."

Then she pulled down her blouse and patted her hair and came out of the door to look after Beatrice as she hurried down the village street. The fog was lifting now, and gazers out of the little twinkling windows could see her slight figure as she fled, pursued by fear, towards the End House.

But when she got there, and ran up to Emma-line's bedroom, she saw at once that the news had arrived before her.

"Beatrice! You have heard?" said Emma-line

hoarsely, from the bed. "Poor Stephen! Oh, it seems terrible that he should be laid low in this way, after all the risks he has run. I can hardly believe it."

For, just as all Marshfield considered that Beatrice had not lost her lover with dignity, so all now felt that Stephen was not dying as he had led them to expect. There was something of high romance about him. He had made them expect something finely dramatic. And now he was going to die of a damp bed!

"I suppose Miss Battersby did not exaggerate," said Beatrice, forcing herself to be calm. "I suppose there is—there is very little hope?"

"I am afraid not, dear," said Emmaline, very gently. Then she paused: "Perhaps, Beatrice, it is all ordered for the best. Everything seemed so difficult. I think it is very likely best for him, and best for all."

A very real and shining goodness illuminated Emmaline's face as she spoke, but Beatrice's whole being rose up in rebellion.

"No!" she said. "It can't be best for him to die. He must live. I won't let him die."

"Dear Beatrice, I can understand just how you feel, but what can you do?"

"I don't know," said Beatrice. "That is what I am going to see."

"You're not"—Emmaline started—"you are surely not thinking of going to Bank House? After all that has happened? Impossible!"

"I must go, Emmaline," said Beatrice.

"But it would not do," urged Emmaline. "You live with us. You must consider us a little. Imagine the talk there would be if he got better."

"Emmaline, just think if it were you and Martin," said Beatrice.

"That is different; we are married," said Emmaline.

"I must go," repeated Beatrice. "I can't leave him there alone in a houseful of servants. I am going to look after him."

"If I could accompany you it would, perhaps, be quite correct," said Emmaline. "But you must not go alone." She sat up in bed with her hand to her painful throat. "You simply must not. Why—that woman may turn up if she hears Stephen is dying. She was just the common, emotional kind of person who would like to be in at a tragedy. Oh, Beatrice, fancy if you were to meet there! Two women, in a way, fighting over his prostrate body. Like a low melodrama." She paused, and added once more, "Impossible!"

Beatrice went up to the bed and took Emmaline's feverish hand.

"Good-bye, Emmaline," she said. "I've got to go, you know."

Emmaline lay back again on her pillows.

"Martin will be coming out this afternoon if he can possibly manage it," she said. "In the meantime, Beatrice, the least you can do is to take a cab and keep the blinds down. There is no

need to let all the village know where you are going."

"They'd know if I went in a patent safe with a Chubb's lock," said Beatrice, "but I will do as you wish."

Emmaline watched the door close and composed herself to rest in the light, airy room among her soft pillows. After all, she need not trouble herself. Beatrice could make flippant remarks and never shed a single tear. She did not possess those tender feelings which had come to Emmaline herself through being a Wife and Mother.

Emmaline glanced again at the portraits of her husband and children by the bedside and fell into a light sleep.

Beatrice, meanwhile, was pulling the pretty trousseau gowns out of their cardboard boxes and stuffing them hastily into a trunk which she intended to take with her to Bank House. Earlier in the morning she had gone into the village in her old rain-coat because she had not the heart to touch these wedding garments, but now she wanted to look her best for Stephen. If he knew her, he should see something gay and pleasant. If memory goes with us through the gates of death, he should not take the memory of a grief-sodden woman.

It was a sort of pagan idea, no doubt, that made her want him to take something gay with him through the gates of death, and she was not conscious of having the idea: she was only con-

scious that she wanted to find her prettiest gowns in a tremendous hurry.

At last she was ready to go, and as she went through the hall she encountered Jane and Bobby and Nurse, who were going out for their morning walk. Her eyes were shining, and she was as erect as a flame in her rose-coloured gown: there was about her, impalpably, the clear vividness of a flame, and little Jane felt all this, though she could not have told you about it, when she ran forward calling out—

“Auntie! Auntie! Are you going to be married to Uncle Stephen after all?”

“Hush, Jane!” said Nurse angrily, turning very red with sympathy for Beatrice, but thinking all the same what an interesting thing it would be to tell Cook. Then she added aside in a low voice “Jane does not know.”

Beatrice was in great haste to go, but she looked down at little Jane and was obliged to stay.

“Jane, Uncle Steve is ill,” she said, afraid lest some one else should tell the news wrongly and frighten the child. “I am going to see him.”

“In your best frock?” said little Jane. “You must be careful not to spill anything on it. You do look lovely! He will be sorry he can’t have you for a Mrs., won’t he?”

“Have you any message to send him?” said Beatrice.

Jane stood frowning with contemplation.

“Give him my love,” she said at last, “and te

him not to worry about you. I heard Mammy and Daddy saying he was worrying about you."

"My dear little Jane!" said Beatrice, kissing her.

"I mean," said little Jane, very gravely, "that if you wear those best clothes every day you will soon get another. Nannie said the other day to Cook that clothes more than half does it."

"I never did," said Nurse, scandalised.

"I expect you've forgotten," said Jane, "for you really did. But you always say you have a mem'ry like a sieve, don't you, Nannie?"

"Mem'ry 'ike a thief, Nannie," gurgled the happy hunter, not knowing in the least what he was talking about. "Thieve—Nannie—Thieve—Nannie." And he thumped gaily on the nearest chair with his trumpet.

"Good-bye," said Beatrice, getting into the ramshackle Marshfield cab.

"Good-bye," shouted the children.

"I do hope, Miss," said Nurse in a low voice, closing the cab door, "Mr. Croft may get better."

"He will," said Beatrice. "We are not going to let him die."

"You can't, somehow, think of him dead," said Nurse. "He always seemed so much more alive than other people. Good-morning, Miss."

Then she went down the road with her charges, feeling a sort of miserable elation, as if she were living in a novelette. And Beatrice drew down the blinds of the cab so that the crows should not see

her as she was drawn across the flat spaces of Bank Island.

But when she arrived Croft had fallen into an uneasy slumber, and the nurse would not allow any one to enter the patient's room without orders from the doctor. So instead of Beatrice smoothing his fevered brow with her cool fingers as she would have done if she had been one of Nannie's real heroines of romance, she had to sit downstairs and look out of the window, while every dreary minute seemed like ten.

At one o'clock a maid came into the room and asked Beatrice if she were remaining for lunch and when she replied that she intended staying in the house for a day or two, the woman, who was under notice, looked insolently surprised.

"I am afraid we can't make you very comfortable, Miss," she said. "These trained nurses make so much extra work. And we are short-handed as it is, because James, the manservant, is away on holiday and has not got back yet."

"Anything will do for me," said Beatrice.

And indeed she felt unable to eat, but she roused herself to do so lest she should break down when Stephen needed her. But after she had swallowed sufficient food to keep up her strength she sat once more by the window and saw the midday sun first make the mist all luminous, and then shine through it with that pale golden radiance which is quite unlike summer sunshine. Most rare. Most exquisite. It is like a tender sunshine of the soul.

And as Beatrice sat watching the ships go up and down the opalescent river, she saw one or two with the broad bands on the funnel which showed that they were doing business in the great waters for the man who lay upstairs and who might never see the clear waters of the world any more.

Beatrice pictured him battling with wind and storm, his face turned towards the quivering sail; it seemed, as nurse had said, impossible to think of him without life—strong energetic life.

She sat there, her hands folded quite still upon her lap, and prayed for Stephen until her soul almost seemed to leave her body in quest of the Immortal Helper who is just beyond—only just beyond—and yet so hard to reach.

Then the blinds were drawn and night closed in on Bank House—those interminable hours of darkness that all watchers know, when they seem to be shut in with silence and fear.

Martin and the specialist and the local doctor all arrived together, and after that came the intolerable period of waiting, when the clock ticks out: "No hope! No hope!" and little marks are left engraven on the soul that never go away—one for each tick of that clock in the silence.

"They are a long time," said Martin at last.

"Yes," said Beatrice.

And then stretched another interval of silence.

"I hear them coming," said Beatrice.

Martin went to the door and the doctors came in. The specialist glanced curiously at Beatrice

in her gay gown, but the local doctor whispered: "Was to have been married to the patient to-morrow," and left it at that.

"Well?" said Beatrice, standing straight and still with her eyes fixed on the specialist.

"It is a serious case. But we are doing all we can. While there is life there is hope."

And that was all he could say during the interview which followed, though both he and the other doctor enlarged on it with the kindness and sympathy which most medical men seem miraculously able to feel, in spite of their familiarity with such scenes.

Martin went with them to the door, and as Beatrice stood alone in the room with the clock ticking out "No hope! No hope! No hope!" something indomitable stirred again within her. She turned and faced the clock as if it were a live thing.

"I hope! I hope! I hope!" she cried aloud.

Then the hospital nurse entered quietly and said in a composed, cheerful voice—

"Mr. Croft is wandering again. But if he seems quiet later I will fetch you. The doctor said you could just come in for a moment."

"Nurse, what do you think of him?" said Beatrice.

The nurse shook her head.

"He is bad. Very bad. And his temperament is against him. But everything is being done that can be done."

Then she went away and there followed another long, black interval of waiting. Finally a maid brought a message to Beatrice, telling her to go upstairs and walk very quietly into the patient's room without knocking.

They had put him in the pretty bridal room, all garlanded, and his wild, feverish face was shaded by delicate curtains of silk and lace. Beatrice crept into the room that was to have been hers and stood motionless by the bed.

"Hush! He has just dozed off," said the nurse.

So Beatrice remained standing, perfectly quiet, and when the nurse beckoned her to a chair she shook her head. She was praying again—her whole soul was going out in prayer—she scarcely noticed how the minutes slipped by. And she loved Stephen, as she saw him tossing in a disturbed slumber, more than she had ever loved him before. Her love felt strong enough to hold him back from death.

At last he woke up, and saw Beatrice standing straight and slim as a flame in her rose-coloured gown between the bed and the fireplace.

"Beatrice?" he said. "You here? Then it was all a nightmare?"

"Yes, dear," said Beatrice. "A nightmare."

Then he turned over and went to sleep again, and the nurse told Beatrice that she must leave.

She and Martin made no attempt to go to bed, and the doctor was remaining all night in the house

because the specialist had said that Stephen might die before morning.

"Martin," said Beatrice just before twelve. "I am afraid you will be dreadfully tired for work to-morrow. Won't you go to bed?"

He shook his head.

"Not unless you will. I don't want to. Poor old Steve!"

Then the clock struck twelve and they looked at each other and then looked away. It should have been Beatrice's wedding morning.

Martin went across to the spirit lamp and made a cup of tea.

"Here, old girl," he said.

"Thank you, Martin," said Beatrice.

That was all they said, but brother and sister came nearer to each other over those insignificant words than they had ever been before.

At last the blessed morning came, and Beatrice greeted it with that intensity of thankfulness that only watchers know. Another day had risen, and Stephen was still in the world.

She had a bath, and put on a pretty gown the colour of fresh violets. Directly after breakfast Martin had to go to business; but now, in the broad daylight, he began once more to think of Emmaline and her point of view.

"I shall come back to-night," he said. "Only if Stephen improves during the day you must return home. That woman may come any minute."

It is most undignified for you to remain here. And, of course, all this talk is very unpleasant."

"I will come as soon as Stephen is out of danger," said Beatrice. "Not before."

"But Emmaline thinks it would be a great pity for you to do anything which would cause any more gossip," said Martin. "She does not think of herself only, but she considers that it would be a great pity for you to seriously damage your—your prospects. Of course, you can't imagine such a thing now. But you may wish to marry some day—and——"

"Emmaline is very kind," said Beatrice, "She is like little Jane. She hopes I shall get 'another.' But you don't—do you, Martin?"

"Know the sort of idiot you are," said Martin, jamming his hat on fiercely.

"You're just the same—when you are not echoing Emmaline," said Beatrice.

"Oh, I don't know," said Martin. Then he added very simply, "My word! I am thankful I have a wife like that to keep me right. You don't know what a good woman she really is, Beatrice."

"Well," said Beatrice, "I do love her truly, because she makes you happy. And I will come home the minute Stephen is out of danger."

"You seem so hopeful," said Martin. "Poor old girl—I wouldn't——" He broke off.

"I will!" said Beatrice, head erect, eyes shining.

"He is going to get better."

She found it less easy, however, to keep up that attitude of resolute, high hopefulness during two more dull days and nights when Stephen's temperature went up again, and she was not allowed to enter his room for fear of agitating him.

But her spirit rose to meet the demand upon it, and though she was able to do nothing for Stephen, she exercised the power which hopefulness alone can give in a house of sickness. Every one, from the specialist to the scullery maid, was heartened unconsciously to do just that little more which may work a miracle.

CHAPTER XV

ON the third day Stephen took a turn for the better, and the high tension at which Marshfield had been living became relaxed. Beatrice was still not allowed to see him, for he remained in a semi-conscious state and it was feared that her presence might excite him, but at the post office—where Miss Battersby, the postmistress, seemed so “in it” that she might have been an aunt—and up and down the village street, there sounded a persistent little chorus like the hopeful chirping of birds when the frost is over.

“Mr. Croft? Oh, he’s getting better!”

Up and down the street and in and out of the houses rippled the pleasant words: “He’s getting better! He’s getting better!” And how they sounded in Beatrice’s heart only those can know who have watched a loved one near to death.

Lady Walker in her big motor looked out of her furs all smiling as she went down the road, and Emmaline felt she could get up that morning for the first time since her own illness.

Even Nannie, going with the children down the unsociable lanes she hated, was moved to remark to little Jane that she would not mind dying in the country because the few people there were there

did seem to mind, while in Flodmouth you might die with a gramophone playing, "Ip-y-addy, across the way.

"Is it true that Uncle Stephen's getting better?" asked Jane, stopping suddenly and folding and unfolding her hands in their pigmy dogskin gloves. "Are you *sure* he isn't going to die now?"

"Who ever told you he ever was going to?" said Nannie sharply. "I never did. Your mamma would be very vexed if she knew you had been told."

"I heard people talking," said little Jane. "Nobody told me."

And all the dumb suffering of little children who hear a part, and never ask the rest, or speak of it, sounded through those words.

Then, still staring hard at her nurse, her cheeks turned red and the great tears began to roll down them.

"I'm not crying for sorry," she sobbed out. "I'm crying for glad. I can't help it, Nannie. I thought of it every day and every night."

"Well, cheer up," said Nannie kindly enough. "I'll sing you a song if you like. There is nobody about. There never is."

Jane sparkled through her tears.

"Something funny," she said. "Oh, do let me be something funny, Nannie."

"What a one you are for the comic," said Nannie with a laugh. "I never saw any one like you."

"Well, Nannie, funniness gives me such a n

feeling inside—all jolly—doesn't it you?" said little Jane.

"Oh, I d'know—not unless it's somewhere where you pay," said Nannie. Then she lifted up her voice and sang a comic song with action, while Jane hung upon her words in rapturous enjoyment.

"How bee-aautifully you sing, Nannie," said Jane when it was over.

"Nannie—booful! Nannie!" shouted Bobby waving a little stick.

"I have thought sometimes of going into the perfession," said Nannie, touched, as all artists are by sincere applause. "But I don't know. There's for and against."

So she plodded on again down the dull, uneventful lane, picturing herself upon a platform in pale pink satin, while a Duke wearing very bright shoes and a coronet sued vainly for her hand to an accompaniment of violins. In an occupation so engrossing she quite naturally forgot Jane, who remained behind to grub in the ditch bottom and drew attention to herself at last by a shrill howl.

"Now what?" said Nurse standing still and looking back, irritated at being brought back with such an unpleasant jar from the land of dreams.

Jane detached herself from the mud and wet grass in the hedge bottom, and when Lady Walker motored by she saw a muddy and dejected figure plodding alone in the rear of Nurse and Bobby.

"Good morning, Nurse. Well, Jane?" she sang

out cheerily, beaming among her furs over the motor side. "What is the matter now?"

"I've been naughty again," said Jane with the dull hardihood of the confirmed criminal.

"Naughty again!" gurgled the happy hunter.

"Jane fell in the mud. She is such a careless child," remarked Nurse severely. "She pretended she was looking for violets for Mr. Croft my lady. She found out in some way that he was seriously ill. I never told her."

"I didn't pretend," flashed out Jane, standing squarely before the motor. "I was looking for violets for my Uncle Steve."

"Violets don't grow at this time of year. Don't be rude," said Nurse.

"Look here, Jane," said Lady Walker. "I believe I know of a place where we could find some even now." She turned to Nurse. "May I take Jane, Nurse? I will explain to Mrs. Fawcett."

"Like that!" said scandalised Nurse. "Oh, let me take her home and tidy her."

"I hate tidied children. Come on, Jane," said Lady Walker.

So they slid with a rush and a sound of silver trumpets down between the leafless trees, and Jane sat very still with her nose just peeping over a great fur scarf of Lady Walker's, and both ladies were quite happy, which is something to say in this weary world.

"Go round to the side entrance," said Lady Walker to the chauffeur. Then, as they walked

across a flagged walk to a group of violet beds under glass, she added in a confidential voice: "You may get in there and gather all you like. The head gardener can only kill me when he finds out."

"Is that a joke?" said the literal Jane.

"Well—yes," chuckled Lady Walker. "Only a very little one, though."

"A little joke for a little girl," said Jane.

Then she went off into peals of clear laughter at her own wit, and the fat lady in sables laughed, too, until she shook all over, and a little bird started singing like mad on an empty apple tree.

"Well," said Jane as she gathered the huge, sweet blossoms, "this is what I call fun, don't you?"

"I do," said Lady Walker.

She watched Jane pull off the violet heads with about an inch of stalk and fumble them into the queerest bunch in little eager fingers, and the thought of what her tyrannical head gardener would say made the thing almost an adventure.

"There!" said Jane at last, "now can we get into the car again and take them to my Uncle Stephen's house?"

A cloud came over Lady Walker's jolly face and she looked thoughtful for a moment, forgetful of little Jane.

"I have to go," she murmured. "Oh, it's hateful, but I suppose I must."

"Don't," said Jane with anxious politeness,

"if you really don't want. Perhaps Nannie will take them."

"No. Come on," said Lady Walker.

So, with another rush, and another sound of silver trumpets, they speeded over the bridge and along the flat roads of Bank Island; and in a few minutes they were shown into the room where Beatrice sat in her pretty, rose-coloured gown. When she caught sight of them she ran toward them with her eyes shining, and Lady Walker called gaily out across the space of carpet:

"It is true then? He's going to live."

"Yes," said Beatrice. Then she looked at Lady Walker, trying to keep back her tears, and at last she said, weeping: "You don't know what it has been! Oh, you don't know what it has been!"

"Poor girl! I know," said Lady Walker.

"But it is silly to cry now," said Beatrice, wiping her eyes. "Isn't it, Janey, when Uncle Stephen is getting better?"

"Yes," said Jane vaguely, intent on her view of Uncle Stephen. "I gathered them my own self from the portrait of the master of the house which did flatter his blunt features. 'Auntie,' she added in a low, awed voice, 'I don't see how they could have made Uncle Stephen into an angel, do you? He is so un-angelly.'"

"Dear old Stephen," said Lady Walker. "That is partly why we love him, I believe."

"I love him," said Jane. "And he loves

and Auntie. I expect he got ill because he was so diserpointed about not having a wedding. Auntie got ill too. Perhaps I should, if I hadn't had my fairy watch." She looked up at the two women and nodded her little head. "Never you mind," she added. "P'rhaps there'll be a wedding after all. She only wants another gentleman."

"Jane," said Lady Walker, "I want you to be very good and wait here alone for a few minutes while I speak to Auntie Beatrice: will you?"

"Strike me dead if I don't," said little Jane.

"*What!*" said a scandalised Aunt.

"That's what Cook says when Nannie tells her to keep a secret," indifferently responded Jane.

Then the two ladies went out into another room, and after closing the door Lady Walker said, very seriously:

"My dear Beatrice, I hate being the bearer of unpleasant tidings—I tried to put off the evil hour by taking little Jane to gather violets. But it is no use. I must tell you." She paused. "That—that woman is staying at the Blue Lion in Marshfield. She came late last night and is using her stage name, Miss Daisy Milton. My maid was spending the evening with the landlady, who was a former housekeeper of mine, and she told me when she was doing my hair this morning. There is no doubt about it."

"What shall we do?" said Beatrice, sitting down on the nearest chair. "Will she be coming here?"

"I should hope not," said Lady Walker.

"Well, she has more right here than I have said Beatrice.

"That is a ridiculous view to take, my dear girl," said Lady Walker. "She deserted him. She has no legal status whatever, I feel sure."

"Then what has she come for?" repeated Beatrice.

"To get what she can," said Lady Walker. "She has heard, of course, that Stephen was dying, and she is here to share the spoil."

Beatrice considered for a time, looking down, and then shook her head.

"No," she said at last. "I don't think that. There was something about her—oh, I can't explain it, but I feel that she is not an ignoble woman. I cannot understand her ever having behaved toward Stephen as she appears to have done. That is partly why the situation is so difficult. A woman like that who was certainly unfairly treated toward Stephen—and yet—oh, it goes round and round in my head. I can make nothing of it."

"You must forgive my saying that I think you behaved unjustly to Stephen. If it could have been proved that there was no legal impediment, you ought to have married him," said Lady Walker.

"I can't explain," said Beatrice helplessly.

And indeed it was impossible to explain to anyone else what she could not make clear to herself.

But the fact was, that generations of her ancestors had lived clean, narrow lives around the moor.

of the Flod, until the principle of one man, one woman had become, not an idea, but a part of their very flesh and blood.

It was not merely her mind or her heart which revolted from the suggestion of marrying a man while his wife still lived; it was herself, a narrowness and cleanness in her over which she had no power.

"I can't agree with you," she said at last. "Apart from myself there would never be any happiness for Stephen. You don't know him as I do—if he were conscious of any cloud between us his old restlessness would return, only in greater force. He would not be so well able to fight against it. No one can know where it would all end."

"What is going to become of him as it is, then?" said Lady Walker.

Beatrice jumped up from her chair.

"Every question you can ask," she said breathlessly, "I have asked myself ten thousand times. Every fear you can have, I have crazed myself over for hours. And there seems no way out. But I feel—I feel I must hold on. I can't reason about it. But I feel."

"You ought to consider his happiness," said Lady Walker.

"Do you think he would be happy?" said Beatrice wistfully.

"I do," said Lady Walker.

Beatrice waited a moment, picturing herself married to Stephen, but something within her took away all the glory from the picture.

"You forget all those years during which he suffered an agony of remorse because of his wife. He left her—not she him. You can't alter that. Some men would have got over it in a few months, but he suffered for ten years. You can't make general rules. You must consider each human being separately."

Lady Walker gathered her furs around her, feeling vaguely irritated with Beatrice's attitude, and she said rather coldly:

"I suppose you have considered the fact that she may be coming here. What shall you do then?"

"I shall be leaving to-morrow if Stephen continues to improve," said Beatrice dully. "I hope she may not come to-day. Somehow she did not seem the woman to come hanging round where Stephen was ill. But you never know. You never know anything."

And a few minutes later she stood on the step watching them depart, her bright hopefulness all faded now into a sort of dull acquiescence.

But through it darted a little thrill of apprehension every time a strange voice was heard in the hall, or at the door, until at last evening came and Martin with it, and she began her last night in the house which was to have been her home for life. About eleven o'clock the nurse came down to say that Stephen was much disturbed, and was constantly asking to see Beatrice.

"You had better come up," added the nurse

"but you must be very careful not to say anything which may agitate him further. It would be very serious indeed if he were to have a relapse. I doubt if we could pull him through again."

So Beatrice went upstairs at once, and at the door of Stephen's room the nurse held back.

"He wishes to see you alone," she said. "I will come in ten minutes. You must be very careful not to upset him."

Beatrice closed the door and went softly forward into the room. She wore a high lace evening gown with a crimson rose at her breast, and it, and her parted lips, made two startling patches of colour on the vague whiteness of her face and dress, even in that subdued light.

"I've come, Stephen," she said quietly. "I am so glad you are better now."

He stared at her, puzzled at first, then his wits cleared.

"Beatrice!" he said. "Of course it is you, Beatrice." And he tried to laugh. "I have had so many dreams. I hardly knew. Give me your hand, dear."

She sat on the edge of the bed and put her cool hand in his burning grasp.

"There! That's real enough," she said smiling. But her heart ached bitterly at the sight of his drawn face where every old line seemed scored deeper, as if with a chisel. His eyes blazed under the heavy brows, and his great shoulders lay inert upon the pillows though he tried to rise.

"Funny thing. A few days. Bowl a man over like this. What day is it? I forget," he said breathlessly.

"Friday," said Beatrice.

"Friday—Friday." He made an effort and raised himself a little on his elbow. "We were to have been married on Wednesday." He fell back with a groan. "Oh, Beatrice, all through my delirium I have been pursuing you over burning ground that was like fire to my feet. Always getting near and then not catching you. It has been terrible." He clutched her hand closer. "But you are here now. Here at last. And I shall not let you leave me until you promise to marry me. I have been through hell. I can't go through it again. Beatrice!"

"Stephen—dear Stephen—we must not talk of it now while you are still so ill," pleaded Beatrice.

"I shall die if you don't promise," he said, half delirious still, though Beatrice did not realise it. "I shall die—die. Do you hear that? I shall die like poor old Wood. And you will come with some other man to put flowers on my grave."

"Hush, dear, hush! You will make yourself ill again," said Beatrice.

"Then you won't? You won't! Oh, Beatrice, I can't live without you."

And he burst out crying like a helpless child. It was most terrible to hear the fierce sobs shaking him.

"Stephen! Stephen!" cried Beatrice. "What shall I do?"

"Promise!" he said, gasping for breath.

She stared at him, her great eyes wide and helpless in her white face. The old, overwhelming desire to make the moment happy swept upon her with irresistible force, taking with it feeling and instinct and that vague warning at the back of her soul which had been a greater barrier than either.

"I promise," she said in a low voice, just opening her lips.

"You are not doing it just to pacify me? You won't go back on it? You swear?"

"I won't go back on it," she said. Then Janie's queer words floated to the top of the wreckage in her mind and she added in a strange, dull tone, not realising what she said: "Strike me dead if I do."

He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"You'll marry me as soon as I'm better?"

"Yes," said Beatrice.

"I'll get better," he said. "Every beastly thing I take will bring me so much nearer you." He put his hand to his head. "No more running over burning earth to catch you up, and yet I almost feel——"

"Now," said Nurse at the door, "I am afraid I must ask you to go, Miss Fawcett."

He clung to Beatrice's hand.

"You mean it? You promise?" he said

eagerly. "You are not just humouring a sick man's fancy?"

"I promise," said Beatrice.

"Please," said Nurse.

"Kiss me and I shall believe," he whispered.

So she put her lips to his forehead and then left him; he following her with those pitifully bright eyes until the door closed upon her. But after a while he went to sleep and awoke calmer—towards morning he slept again—and when he awakened to the sunshine of a clear frosty morning he was practically out of danger, though a long period of inactivity lay before him.

As Martin and Beatrice sat at breakfast there was a ring at the front door bell, and after an interval the man-servant came to say, with a self-conscious air, that a Miss Daisy Milton had called and wished to know when Mr. Croft would be able to see her. She understood that he was recovering.

Martin started up and then sat down again.

"I won't go," he said to Beatrice in a low voice. "Better not. Least said soonest mended." He turned to the man. "Tell the lady that it will be some time before Mr. Croft is able to receive visitors. I will acquaint him with her wish to see him as soon as he is able to have a message."

The servant went out and Beatrice said impatiently:

"Oh, Martin! Can't you go to her? It seems dreadful to turn her away from the door like this when she—she— It was her home once."

"It's a miserable affair altogether," said Martin. "But what can I tell her if I do go?"

There was no answer to that, and so he finished his eggs and bacon and went off to business, anxious to make the most of every working hour that his wife might have more to spend. For it is a fallacy to think that an extravagant wife necessarily ruins a man—she sometimes spurs him on to make the fortune he would never otherwise have toiled to attain.

And about half-past ten the Marshfield cab arrived and took Beatrice home again. A great crisis in her life was over, and yet when she went into the morning room at the End House and saw Emmaline consulting with Nurse about the children's clothes it seemed as if nothing could have happened. Everything here was so unchanged.

"You can go, Nurse, and I will come up to you in a few minutes," said Emmaline in her even tones, still a little husky from the sore throat. Then she turned to Beatrice: "My dear girl—I am so glad you have come back. Now we must try to forget all this awful business and take life as if it had never been." She paused. "I suppose you know that woman is in the village? You remember I told you it would happen? Marion felt sure of it, too."

"Then it was bound to happen," said Beatrice, but, repenting herself of her ungraciousness, she added quickly: "You have all been very, very

good to me. I am so sorry to have caused all this bother."

She need not have troubled, however, for Emmaline was not impeded in life by seeing too much, and she replied in a gratified tone :

"Marion and I can often form a pretty correct judgment about things. She is clearer-headed than I am, but we both inherit a certain gift in that way from dear Mother. It is partly training." She paused and added generously : "I should not at all wonder, Beatrice, if you get just the same in time."

Beatrice was not a demonstrative person, but she kissed her sister-in-law then.

"Poor old Emmaline," she said. "You are very good to me, and I bring you nothing but troubles."

"Well, they are over now," said Emmaline with such real kindness that Beatrice was moved to blurt out suddenly :

"They're not! I have promised to marry Stephen after all."

"What!" said Emmaline.

Beatrice nodded without speaking.

"I am disappointed in you," said Emmaline, after a pause.

"I have done it and I must stick to it," said Beatrice.

"Have you told any one else?" demanded Emmaline eagerly.

"No," said Beatrice. "I did not mean to tell

you. But when you were so kind I suddenly felt it was unfair to keep you in the dark."

"Are you going to tell people?"

"No," said Beatrice. "I suppose we shall get married at a registrar's office quite quietly. There will be no fuss this time."

"I call that a sordid way of getting married," said Emmaline, fluttering her papers.

"So do I," said Beatrice.

Then she went up to her own room and lay on the bed, and slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion until luncheon time.

CHAPTER XVI

JANE walked in the garden where she had been sent to play while her mother and Nurse talked about nursery toilettes for the coming spring. Her eyes were on the ground and she thought deeply. Then she approached the garden boy.

"If you wanted to get married, how would you begin?" she asked, leaning forward from the gravel walk so that her question reached the middle of the brussels sprouts.

The garden boy looked up—grinned—and replied gruffly:

"You *are* a queer 'un. Dunno. 'Spose I should ask somebody to walk out with me."

"Thank you," said Jane, with grave dignity, and she walked away towards the gate with the air of one who is so bent on some purpose so strong that obstacles go unseen.

Half way down the village street she encountered the little bride, who was now a bride no longer.

"Hullo!" said Mrs. Hobson, only she still did not look extraordinarily unlike Mrs. Hobson.

"Hullo!" said Jane.

"Where are you going all alone?" said Mrs. Hobson.

"Shop," said Jane, turning red, but with her mouth more determined than ever.

"Sweets, of course," smiled Mrs. Hobson. "I say—Jane—do buy some from me and give them to yourself with my love. Here is sixpence. Won't that be fun?"

"*Won't* it?" said little Jane, sparkling and smiling, her grim purpose for the moment forgotten.

"Well, good-bye," said Mrs. Hobson, kissing Jane. Then she added impulsively: "I wish I had a little girl just like you."

"You'll be finding a little girl one of these days," said Jane. "Good-bye."

But when she had gone a few steps she ran back and added, looking up rather wistfully at her friend:

"I should order twins while I was doing. It is sometimes a little lonely when they come in ones."

Then she trudged on again with her sixpence firmly grasped and a queer attitude of do or die about her little upright figure.

It was with this same air that she marched into the village shop, and went up to the counter behind which stood a pretty young man with shiny red cheeks and china-blue eyes and hair in a yellow curl above his forehead. Jane had always admired him greatly, and hoped that Bobby might be like that later in life. She had, indeed, decided to marry him until she saw the Prince in the panto-

mime of *Cinderella*; but even now he remained in her mind a most desirable *parti*. That was why she had run away from the garden all by herself against every nursery law, and with the certainty of retribution before her; for it was clear that she could not get back home before Nurse came to look for her.

She stared at the rosy young man with anxious eyes, very solemn indeed, far too much engrossed to notice any one else in the shop.

"What can I do for you, Miss?" he said, showing all his nice white teeth in a glittering row.

"A packet of chocolates," said Jane.

"And what is your next pleasure?" said the young man, who was rather new to grocering and tremendously professional.

Jane came nearer, folding and unfolding her hands.

"Please will you walk out with my Auntie?" she said. "She is so nice. I am sure you would love her."

"What!" said the scandalised young man, who knew that only proper grocers succeed in life, and who meant to succeed. Then a chuckle from a lady behind caused his pretty colour to deepen from red to purple, and he added in a resentful tone: "Little girls like you ought not to know anything about walking out. Walking out indeed! Good-morning."

At that Miss Daisy Milton, for it was she, laughed outright.

"Why do you want him for your auntie?" she said, regardless of the young man's feelings.

"Well," said Jane, "she wants another, you see, and so I thought of him."

"Another? Another what?" said Miss Milton.

"Another person to marry, of course," answered little Jane. Then she flashed round upon the big smiling woman and threw out an impatiently dramatic arm. "Don't you *know*," she said, "that there must be a gentleman in every wedding?"

"Ha-ha!" laughed Miss Daisy Milton, winking at the rosy young grocer, who thought it most vulgar to laugh so loud as that in a public shop and retired behind a Cheshire cheese. "Ha-ha! Then can't your aunt find a"—she laughed again—"a gentleman for herself?"

Jane looked up into the gay, big-featured face, and shook her head.

"No," she said. "Auntie got one once, but he happened to have another wife he had forgotten about. So, of course, Auntie was obliged to give him up. It was very awkward, because we all wanted a wedding. But you can't have two wives unless you are a Bible story." She paused. "It does seem rather a pity that Uncle Stephen isn't a Bible story, doesn't it?"

Miss Daisy Milton did not reply. The laughter had gone from her face, leaving it heavy and lined, and she stood frowning in silence at the Cheshire cheese.

"Well," she said at last, addressing herself more than Jane, "it is easy enough to come to life, but it is a dickens of a job to know what to do next. You see"—here she smiled once more—"I am the lady who stopped the wedding. If I could do it again it would be all right. But I can't. Can I?" Jane considered.

"There isn't," she suggested tentatively, "a really pleasant way of dying?"

"'Fraid not," said Miss Milton.

So Jane said a polite good-morning to the pretentious grocer, who now was half-concealed by a butler's tub, and trudged heavily out of the shop. All the spring seemed to have gone out of her. It had seemed such a glorious plan and it had failed.

"Good-bye," called Miss Milton down the road.

Jane turned round and scowled at her.

"It's all you!" she said. "We were so joyful before you came. Why—*why* didn't you stop dead?"

Miss Daisy Milton looked very grave indeed, almost old, as she stood watching little Jane go down the street. Her clothes were not such as are generally seen in Marshfield of a morning, and the drab ladies in stitched cloth hats went by, never looking at all her way and yet knowing everything she wore after the miraculous manner of women. Upon nearly all the little windows odd, greyish white patches grew suddenly on the glass, which on closer inspection proved to be the cold noses of those who were enjoying to the full the

pleasure of living in a serial novelette without even a penny to pay.

The interrupted wedding; the intending bridegroom between life and death—the lady of his choice nursing him and the jealous wife lodging at the village inn, bidding her time, of course, for some dramatic coup: no wonder that every one felt stirred to a quicker sense of living, or that all the teacakes were sold out so early in the day as half-past two.

They all felt very kindly to Stephen as they drank tea and ate heavily-buttered cakes, looking out at the little gardens that were beginning to be gay with nodding snowdrops and early crocus: for Marshfield, like a thousand English villages, was turned once more into a garden by the first breath of early spring.

Every one had expected that Stephen would provide a spectacle, and he had done it at last. They took front seats and watched the door of the Blue Lion day and night. Miss Battersby, at the post office opposite, rose to a dizzying height of popularity; and the ironmonger's wife, who had formerly been distant though polite, now asked for the pattern of her blouse and invited her to tea on Sunday.

It was natural and inevitable, for the love of romance in kindly human people is as natural as the love of children.

When Miss Daisy Milton came forth from the doorway of the old inn, furs and feathers flying,

there was a stir all along the street and some excitable natures felt a desire to applaud, as if they were at the theatre. But it was almost as thrilling when she remained in the front room of the inn and sang with the window open; then all the little twinkling windows flew open too, and elderly ladies in caps and shawls listened with shocked elation to tunes that seemed to set the dead leaves dancing. Only the exceptionally sharp of hearing could make out the words, but an occasional line came clearly through each little window, and then people looked at each other and breathed in rapturous excitement:

"Fancy! Mrs. Croft of Bank House!"

It was better than the theatre. No trouble. No expense. No coming home late at night. And a far intenser dramatic interest.

But a great deal of good dress material was wasted in Marshfield just then, because if a person cuts out one sleeve, and then darts to be thrilled at the window, and then returns, both sleeves are apt to be cut for the same arm. Still, even so there was a jolly, stirred feeling of life about that made it seem worth while.

Emmaline remained indoors, visited at intervals by her mother, Marion and Mrs. Wylie, the clergyman's wife, as a person whose sense of propriety was most rightly sick unto death. And Martin swore when he caught sight of a fluttering hat one night in coming home. He detested what he called the whole beastly business.

"I won't have you going to Bank House while that woman is about the place," he said to Beatrice.

But Beatrice went every day to see for herself that Stephen was being well cared for, and after remaining with him for a few minutes, talking gaily and placidly lest he should excite himself, she came back again alone across the island, looking at the ships that went up and down like ships in a dream, and filled with the strangest sense of unreality, as if this present time were not a part of her life at all but something that had been put into it and would be taken away soon.

There was a corner where she turned towards the bridge which led to the reclaimed land of Bank Island, and just at that turning she could be seen from nearly all the little windows facing the Blue Lion.

"Now, she's going!"

"Now, she is coming back!"

"O—o—h! Here is the other one coming out of the Blue Lion. Fancy, if they meet!"

But they did not meet; only Miss Daisy Milton once came out into the street and walked towards the corner as Beatrice approached, then she hesitated and returned to the threshold of the post office, whence she watched, frowning thoughtfully, until Beatrice was out of sight.

Every day she sent the shock-headed boy from the Blue Lion to inquire for the master of Bank House, and at last he was reported well enough to receive a message, so she sat down and wrote a

stately note. Or, at least, it was stately at the start:

"Miss Daisy Milton presents her compliments to Mr. Stephen Croft, and will be with him on Wednesday at five o'clock if he is sufficiently recovered for a short conversation."

Then she nibbled her pen end and added, scrawling swiftly:

"For goodness' sake buck up and see me then if you can. I have waited on here until you were really better, but I am fed up for life with Blue Lions."

She dispatched this missive and then sat down to the piano, making all the glass goblets on the huge sideboard jingle with the vibration of sound, and sending her voice out in a triumphant burst which penetrated to the interior of the post office across the way.

Even Jane heard it as she ran along in house-slippers and dressing-gown with a coat fastened over it by one button and a cap of her father's on her head.

She had escaped from her period of rest after dinner, and dared not wait to make a more elaborate toilette because Nurse would hear; so she crept carefully down the stairs and out into the open garden and away—away—to do the desperate deed

which she had been meditating for at least five minutes every night since her interview with Miss Daisy Milton in the grocer's shop.

She met nobody, because two o'clock is the deserted hour in Marshfield; but the sound of singing had called many women to the windows, and they goggled with a tingle of fresh excitement at little Jane as she ran down the street.

Miss Daisy Milton, full of a warm vitality, sat singing near the big open window of the Blue Lion with the February sunshine full upon her.

Little Jane stood on tiptoe and peeped in, but Miss Milton did not notice her, because she was just beginning to practise a comic song. It was one about a flying machine with a nervous lady passenger who shrieked, and at first Jane did not like to interrupt; then she became interested, then entranced, and by the end she was rocking backwards and forwards with laughter, her desperate errand for the moment quite forgotten.

"Ha-ha-ha!" The clear laughter pealed through the still, sunny street and in at the big window.

"Hullo!" said Miss Milton, startled to hear it so near. Then she saw the small brown face just peering over the top of the window-ledge. "Oh, you!"

"My word! It was funny," said little Jane. But at that moment she remembered what she had come for and her face clouded; she began to look anxious. "Please," she said, "I've come to tell you I never meant it."

"You queer little girl! Meant what?" said Miss Daisy Milton.

"About wishing you were dead," said Jane.

"Oh, I remember, you wanted me to find a nice way of dying and I couldn't think of one just then." Miss Milton paused. "Perhaps I shall, sometime," she added.

Jane shook her head vehemently.

"No, no!" she said. "Please don't! Just go on living and we'll make the best of it. Promise! Promise you won't die." And she began to fold and unfold her hands in the old anxious way.

"All right," said Miss Milton easily.

"Thank you," said little Jane, with a deep sigh of relief. "Well, I must go back now, I am afraid," she added politely. "They think—well, they think I am in bed having my rest, you see."

"Cut along then," said Miss Milton. "I won't die until I'm forced—that's a sure promise. Don't you fret yourself about that."

"Thank you very much. Good-bye," said Jane.

"Good-bye," said Miss Milton. Then she came out upon the steps of the Blue Lion and watched Jane running down the street, and the people in the front seats watched them both. "Queer little kid," she added to herself. "Decent little kid. They say her aunt is just like her. If she is——"

Miss Milton stood a long time meditating at the doorstep of the Blue Lion, even after Jane was quite out of sight.

And the wildest surmises were rife in Marshfield that afternoon as to what the message of defiance could have been which they supposed Beatrice had sent by little Jane to Stephen's wife. It was very strange how this woman placed everything with which she had to do upon the level of melodrama, and her very nose did not seem so much a natural gift as a property bestowed upon her for theatrical purposes.

It cannot be denied that this curiosity about the lady at the Blue Lion extended far beyond the confines of Marshfield village, and even Lady Walker, who was a nice woman, went so far as to call upon her former housekeeper and the present landlady of the inn without any better excuse than a brace of partridges, which could equally well have been sent by a messenger.

On the same afternoon as that upon which Jane had called to request Miss Milton to go on living, Beatrice went up into the nursery and asked for a message for Uncle Stephen.

"Oh! if I *could* go and see him!" said Jane in her intense way, clasping her hands.

"But Mother is out at Grannie's—I don't think she would let you," hesitated Beatrice.

"Auntie," said little Jane, all flashing and sparkling. "I've got a lovely idea. Let us go before she comes back and then she can't not let."

Beatrice smiled down at the little eager face.

"I know Uncle Stephen would love to see you," she said, "but——"

"Don't, Auntie!" interrupted Jane. "Oh, *don't* 'but.' If I were a queen I should never, never let any one 'but.' It's 'butting' that stops all the nice things in the world."

"We should do some queer things without it," said Beatrice.

But Jane was naturally not interested in that.

"Oh, can't I go with you?" she pleaded. "I do so want to see my Uncle Stephen now he is not going to die." She paused and looked up rather solemnly at Beatrice. "There does seem to have been a lot about dying lately, doesn't there?" she said.

"Well, come and see for yourself how jolly he looks," said Beatrice, "and then you won't think any more about dying. You can bring Old Ted as well, if you like."

"Do you think Uncle Stephen would prefer his in his knickers, or just as he grew?" said little Jane. Then she answered her own question. "After all," she said considerately, "I think he had better not wear them. We must mind and keep very quiet. And it makes a person restless when they can't sit down."

"Really, Jane," said Nurse, who was fastening Bobby's tunic. "You talk about that old Ted as if he was real."

"He is real!" said Jane, flashing round on her a rage. "I—I shall hit you if you say he isn't real!"

"Hush, Jane! I shall not take you if you talk like that," said Beatrice.

But she understood quite well the anger Jane felt at the threatened destruction of a dream which she had almost managed to make real.

One of the newly-decorated spare rooms at the Bank House had been turned into a sitting-room for the invalid, and Stephen sat in a great chintz-covered arm-chair with violets all about him on walls and carpets and curtains. The afternoon sun shone full on the windows, and drew the perfume out of a bunch of real violets on a table near.

He looked idly out of the window and saw Beatrice come up the drive with little Jane, then closed his eyes again, filled with the strange peace of convalescence.

He seemed, at that moment, to be set in the midst of a sunshiny world full of the scent of violets, with nothing to do but live and be happy. He was still weak, and he wanted nothing but quiet and sunshine and the presence of Beatrice. He smiled a little. So Jane was here. Well, it would be pleasant to see Jane once more. The thought of her seemed to come back, like the rest of things, from an immeasurable, vague distance.

Then there was a knock at the door, and the Nurse ushered in Beatrice and Jane, and went away again, saying she would fetch Jane in five minutes.

"Come, dear," said Stephen to Beatrice as the door closed on the Nurse.

So Beatrice leant over him in the sunshine and kissed him gently, more like a mother than a lover.

"It is so peaceful," he said, keeping hold of her. "Beatrice, I wonder if other people feel peaceful like this all their lives."

All his stormy and restless youth looked out of those words—the instinctive craving for peace which such natures know, and which never gets satisfied on earth.

Beatrice smoothed back his unruly hair.

"I don't know," she said. But after a little silence she added suddenly: "Stephen, after all, I believe it is only the people like you who see the real beauty of peace. Calm is not peace, but those who have it think so. They don't see——" She broke off, and added in a different tone: "Here's Jane! You have not spoken to her yet."

"Hullo, Jane!" said Stephen.

Jane stepped very quietly across the room and stood before the big chair looking very solemn and shy. This was not the familiar Uncle Stephen who made jokes and climbed trees; it was a sort of stranger who had just come back from somewhere a long way off—the very edge of life. She did not think all this, but she felt it as she stood there in the sunshine, rubbing one toe over the other.

"Well, how do you think I look, hey?" said Stephen. "Surely I haven't lost my nose?" and he grasped it in pretended alarm.

"Ha! ha!" laughed little Jane, and flung her arms round him. It was no stranger, but her own

dear funny man come back again. Nobody but he made such exquisite jokes.

"How do I look?" he persisted idly, looking happily at Beatrice and Jane, who stood before him among the violets and sunshine.

"Well," said Jane, thinking deeply as she scrutinised his lined, blunt features in a conscientious endeavour to speak the truth: "Well, you look like my doll Doris when I left her out in the garden all night when it rained. But I expect your hair is fast on. Hers was not. It is most awkward when your hair drops off."

"I'm like doll Doris," said Stephen ruefully; "I'm getting a bit thin on the top, I believe."

Jane patted his knee.

"Never mind, Uncle Stephen," she said. "I know a shop in Flodmouth where they sell new hairs. I bought one for Doris. I'll—I'll save up all my pennies and buy one for you."

"Same old Jane," said Stephen, taking the little brown hand and kissing it lightly. "Oh, it's nice to come back!"

"I was sorry you couldn't have a wedding," said Jane politely, breaking the silence that followed. "I did try to get Auntie another, but he was cross about it and hid behind the cheese."

Instantly the pleasant calm was broken up. Both Stephen and Beatrice felt as if little Jane had suddenly pressed on a sore spot in their hearts.

"What do you mean?" said Stephen gravely.

"I didn't mean to be naughty," said sensitive

Jane, responding to his tone. "I only thought she was so disappointed about not having a wedding. So I tried to get her another person to marry. But it was no good." And she sighed. Then she brightened up. "Anyway your lady that you forgot about is a very funny lady," she said. "I heard her sing about a motor-car. You *will* have fun if she sings to you like that, Uncle Stephen."

Stephen glanced at Beatrice.

"Who has been talking to her?" he said.

"Nobody, I believe. She is so sharp. She hears things and puts two and two together."

"At seven!" said Stephen. "Impossible!"

Beatrice looked down at Jane and shook her head.

"Not at all impossible," she answered. "When Stephen, remember how you used to think at seven. People forget so, what they were like when they were little." She paused. "Oh, here is Nurse. Run along, Jane, and she will give you some biscuits with sugar on the top."

"Pink sugar?" said Jane.

"Yes," said the Nurse.

"You don't mind me asking, do you?" said Jane politely to the Nurse as she went out, "but I am so fond of pink sugar."

"Here is a note that has just come for you," said the Nurse, handing an envelope to Stephen.

"Well?" he said as the door closed, keeping the letter unopened in his hand. "What did she mean by saying she knew—her?"

Beatrice's heart began to thump with apprehension, but she made herself speak calmly.

"Your former wife has been staying in the village at the Blue Lion under her stage name of Miss Daisy Milton. I suppose Jane has chanced to speak to her. I did not know it, but you know what a sociable soul Jane is. It might easily happen."

"Staying in Marshfield?" he said. "How long?"

"Almost ever since you were taken ill. She has sent to inquire every day. We did not tell you, because we thought it might disturb you."

He frowned.

"I ought to have been told," he said irritably.

"Treating me like a child!" Then he saw the look on Beatrice's face and held out his hand. "Forgive me, dear," he said. "I'm a brute. After all you have had to suffer. But I was feeling so happy, and this seems to spoil it all."

"I told you," said Beatrice. "It always will."

"It ought not—if we loved enough," said Croft, getting excited in his weakness. "Look at the thousands who can be happy and forget. Why can't we? If we loved each other enough we could."

Beatrice looked at him with eyes that were brave and true, though her mouth trembled piteously.

"It is because we love so much that we can't bear a shadow on our love," she said. "It's—it's——" She struggled for words. "Oh, it's the

same with everything that is big enough; that's the pain of greatness—the nearer you get to greatness——” She put her hands before her face. “I know, but I can't say. I can't say. You know too.”

“I don't know,” he said stubbornly. “We shall be perfectly happy when we are once married, Beatrice.”

Then she opened his letter with fingers that were difficult to control, and read the note which Miss Daisy Milton had sent by the shock-headed boy from the Blue Lion.

He went white and then red as he looked at it, and little beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead.

“Look!” he said, giving the note to Beatrice.

There was silence while she also read it, then she said quietly enough:

“You must wait. You are not strong enough for an interview of that kind to-morrow.”

“What does she want?” he said. Then he added after a pause: “I shall see her. You must not try to prevent me, Beatrice. I cannot bear this uncertainty. I must hear what she has to propose.”

“Very well,” said Beatrice. “Perhaps worrying about it would do you more harm than the actual interview. You must do as you think best.”

Then the Nurse came back with Jane, but not this time to a sunny atmosphere of violets and happy love, for the winter afternoon was turning

grey, and the violets looked grey too in the dull light.

Nurse glanced at her patient.

"I think Mr. Croft ought to rest now," she said rather severely.

So Beatrice and Jane went away at once, and Croft watched the two little figures out of sight.

Then he turned to the Nurse:

"Life is a damned muddle," he said.

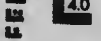
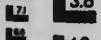
"Here is your medicine," said the Nurse calmly.

She regarded men as they were, and nothing surprised her.



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CHAPTER XVII

As Beatrice and Jane went along the village street they noticed that a great many pink bills had been placed in the shop windows, and fixed with drawing pins to front railings, and propped in some mysterious way between twinkling windows and white window curtains. Marshfield, indeed, the dank, late afternoon, with a mist coming down the river, seemed suddenly to have blossomed like the rose.

"Auntie," said Jane, "there were only three or four concert bills when we came. Look what a lot there are now."

"Bread, bacon, matches," said Beatrice absent-mindedly going into the grocer's shop to do a commission for Emmaline. "Yes, I expect they found the tickets were not selling."

But as they passed the next-door house on their way back they encountered Marion Russell, accompanied by her betrothed and looking very fresh and pretty and capable, and she said that the Committee knew nothing about the extra bills. She was, more or less, the Committee herself, her word was to be relied on. And her practical mind suggested the easy solution of walking up to the next house in which a bill was displayed

order to ask who had caused it to be placed there. The reply was that the landlady of the Blue Lion had sent her boy with it.

"I have no doubt she wishes to oblige me," said Marion, with pleasurable importance. "I have always found her a very decent woman in spite of a rather pushing manner at the Working Party. But I always know how to deal with that sort of person."

Mr. Wainwright, the fiancé, beamed with pride as he walked beside his lady-love, and asked Beatrice with a kindly, condescending air if she were going to the concert.

"Of course," interposed Marion.

"Oh yes," said Beatrice, and she restrained the further remark that she was going because Emmaline wished her to show Marshfield Society that she was, at any rate, not outwardly blackened by the experiences she had undergone.

"I wish," said Marion, glancing carelessly at the next-door house as they passed by, "that Mrs. Watson were not on the Committee. But you have to have a few of those rich people who can buy tickets." She turned to her fiancé. "Pork shops."

"Decent chap, Watson, though," said Mr. Wainwright. "Very straight at business."

"We don't know them socially, of course," said Marion. "It would be so awkward for Emmaline, living next door. But we meet on Committees."

"The veil of charity renders her visible," said

Beatrice. "Then, when it is removed, as railway station platforms, she becomes again invisible. It really is odd. The veil of charmed accounts for most miraculous appearances and disappearances in Marshfield."

"He-he!" said the young man politely, but he felt more convinced than ever that there was something very queer about Beatrice. He should not allow Marion to have much to do with her after they were married.

The fact remains, however, that Mrs. Watson next door had a strong objection to taking the part of a disappearing lady; and she made her dislike of it and Mrs. Martin Fawcett so public in Marshfield that the very errand boys knew of the feud which existed between the two houses. It was intended for the Fawcetts and sent to the Watsons by mistake would be retained until it had to be buried in the garden, unless the error were covered in time, and any stranger inquiring of Mrs. Fawcett at the front door was told that the address was not known.

But Emmaline smiled at these things and made precise little jokes about them at tea-parties, and said that one really had to be careful in a social place, though no doubt Mrs. Watson was quite a worthy woman in her way. And at such times the little gaiters ceased to be imprinted solely on Emmaline's heart, and seemed to float gently over the assemblage, waving a benediction on the nicotinic cut sandwiches. And those who were privileged

to nibble them, though the equals in every way of the hostess, felt that it was a pleasant thing to be the particular friend of any one so particular as Mrs. Martin Fawcett.

But there was no doubt that the next-door lady hated her. And it is not a good thing to be hated by a hot-tempered, vindictive woman, even if you are as immaculate as Emmaline. Mrs. Blake, from the little street where Emmaline once feared she would have to live, also hated her, but less violently, and the two ladies still sat in the drawing-room where Miss Daisy Milton had left them. She had gone out bearing with her the sheaf of pink bills which now adorned the village street, and she wore an air of excited triumph, as one who has got her own way against great odds.

Mrs. Watson was stout, and did not move easily, but she ran to her closely-draped window and looked over the short blinds of expensive lace with a queer, excited feeling, as if she were watching a play and yet in it. For Miss Milton had been so theatrical that at once the affluent drawing-room took on the appearance of a stage, and the effect had not yet had time to wear off.

"What will Mrs. Fawcett say?" whispered Mrs. Blake, peering over her hostess's shoulder and feeling that the very wind might carry her remark across the garden wall.

"Don't know! Don't care!" said Mrs. Watson. "A performer fails us at the last minute. I mention it to the landlady of the Blue Lion. Miss

Daisy Milton, a professional singer, most kindly offers to oblige instead. Am I"—she turned almost dramatically from the window and threw out her pudgy hand at the end of a very short arm—"I do not intend to refuse such valuable assistance because of the possible feelings of Mrs. Martin Fawcett?"

"No! No!" replied Mrs. Blake, with a sound in her voice as if she were saying: "Hear, hear!"

"My children are not good enough to play with that nasty little Jane. Very well!"

"Ridiculous!" said Mrs. Blake. "But I think perhaps"—she hesitated—"I do think it is perhaps almost too bad. It will be so very awkward for Miss Fawcett."

"Was that child allowed to make sand castles with your Ben and Molly when the Fawcetts were both staying at Cliffborough last August? Or was she shepherded away to the other side of the breakwater every time they came in sight, though they had some infectious disease? Anyway, you told me so at the time."

Mrs. Blake flushed crimson.

"I told you the truth," she said. "Well, it does no harm to have a little annoyance. I shall not interfere—but the other members of the Committee——"

"I am running the concert. They can say what they like—afterwards." She paused, sat down and took a piece of teacake. "You must quite understand," she said, "that I am not doing this in a vindictive spirit. I don't want that tiresome

to play with my children. Far from it. But only at the last nursing meeting Mrs. Fawcett said, in her smiling, precise way—when I went against something she suggested—‘I think, Mrs. Watson,’ she said, ‘that we ought always to try and put aside our own feelings for the good of the cause, don’t you?’” Here Mrs. Watson left off giving a faint imitation of Emmaline’s best Committee manner, and snorted: “Well, I am putting aside her feelings for the good of the cause. My concert would be a failure if Miss Milton had not come to the rescue. I did not know where to turn with that other woman getting influenza at the eleventh hour.”

“But she only had one song!” said foolish little Mrs. Blake, open-eyed. “That couldn’t have mattered much.”

Mrs. Watson glared at her guest, if one can glare with little round eyes like gooseberries.

“One song may be the most important item on the programme. You have never been about much, or you would know,” she said, restraining more pointed speech. “Here, have another bun.”

Mrs. Blake took a fat one with pink sugar on the top; they did not have many cakes in the little house in the little street, and she could not help seeing Mrs. Watson and all her deeds through a pretty veil of sugar icing.

“After all, I think you are right,” she said, with a small sigh of contented appreciation. “One must consider the good of the cause before the

feelings of individuals. And perhaps the Fawcett will not be there."

Then Miss Thornleigh was seen coming through the dusk for four more tickets which she had managed to sell.

"Not a word about the alteration in the programme," said Mrs. Watson hastily. "I promised Miss Milton. She said she would come in casual as it were, and oblige at the eleventh hour. I don't she did not wish it to be talked about—in this position."

"I must say that I am *astounded* she should come at all—considering——" said Mrs. Blake.

"That's not our——" Miss Thornleigh ushered in. "Oh, how do you do, Miss Thornleigh?"

Then the three ladies gathered round the table and talked about how the tickets had sold, and about various items, and who was expected to be there in the front seats.

"Excellent idea of Mrs. Fawcett, having a talk in the afternoon. It enables people to get home for dinner," said Miss Thornleigh.

There was a little breathless silence, then Mrs. Watson said with elaborate casualness:

"I suppose the Fawcetts are coming?"

"Oh yes. I have just seen them. Mrs. Fawcett always supports everything that goes on in the village," said Miss Thornleigh, adding simply: "She is such a good woman, and has such a strong sense of her duty to her neighbour."

"My husband says Mr. Fawcett is working himself to death to keep up with their expenditure," said Mrs. Blake, still dwelling on the whisking away of little Jane from the neighbourhood of Ben and Molly.

Miss Thornleigh flushed and put down her cup.

"I am sure his wife is not to be blamed," she said. "Mrs. Fawcett is most careful in all household duties. Quite a model housekeeper."

"What's the use of looking after the butter and eggs and keeping up a big establishment when they have only means for a small one?" said Mrs. Watson abruptly. "That is the most hopeless form of extravagance there is, because the woman who indulges in it can go on thinking she is careful all the time. I am sorry for Mr. Fawcett. He comes past at night looking done up."

Miss Thornleigh rose with gentle dignity.

"If you will kindly give me the tickets," she said.

"How is your aunt, Miss Thornleigh?" said Mrs. Blake pacifically. "I hope she is pretty well?"

"Do sit down and have another cup," said Mrs. Watson.

Miss Thornleigh sat down again.

"Well, just a minute," she said. "I am so pleased to be able to tell you that Aunt is wonderful. Wonderful! You will hardly believe it, but I gave her some new flannel petticoats for Christmas, and I was unable to get the kind she has always worn though it was as near like as possible: the same

colour: the same thickness. And yet she just took hold of them, said at once, *at once*, and y—
‘Where did you get that rubbish?’ and flung them on the floor. Wasn’t that a remarkable thing?

Mrs. Watson and Mrs. Blake glanced at each other and then again at Miss Thornleigh smiling over her teacup, and a very pleasant feeling warmed their hearts, brought there, as it almost always is, by the sight of real simplicity and goodness.

Then Mrs. Watson fetched a pretty little basket and put a coloured paper napkin in it and filled it with all the sugared cakes left on the tea-table. For that feeling produces a delicate kindness which people would before have seemed incapable of.

“I wonder,” she said, “if it would amuse your aunt to have these? They are not worth sending but perhaps if you took them as a surprise—I do not want the basket back. I have lots like that I got at a bazaar.”

“How good of you!” said Miss Thornleigh. Then she looked earnestly and yet gaily at the two women: “It is wonderful how good people are!”

But if you had told Miss Thornleigh as she went down the street that she had anything to do with the goodness of those she met, she would have thought you were making an unkind and rather impertinent joke.

“I wonder—after all——?” said Mrs. Blake uneasily, looking towards the just closed door.

"But Miss Milton is paying for that huge advertisement of the concert in the Flodmouth papers, though her name is not in it, and she cannot benefit in any way," said Mrs. Watson, replying to the tone rather than the words. "And we are to have reporters from each paper. She is arranging for that. I don't see how we can possibly——"

"N-no," said Mrs. Blake, "I suppose we must let it go on. But we might tell Mrs. Fawcett, then she and Miss Fawcett can go or not as they like."

Mrs. Watson walked to the fireplace and stared at the fire in the throes of indecision, then she glanced up at the mantelpiece aimlessly and her eye fell on a group of the little Watsons in their party frocks—four of them—and she remembered little Jane's parties to which her children saw carriage loads of favoured infants going while they stood with envious faces pressed to the window.

Mrs. Watson lifted her head and looked over her handsomely trimmed bust directly at Mrs. Blake.

"I must keep my promise," she said. "I promised Miss Milton I should say nothing, and I shall say nothing." She paused, and added, smoothing her bodice, "I believe in keeping one's word at any cost. That has always been a fixed principle in our family."

"Of course. In ours, too," said Mrs. Blake hastily.

Towards seven o'clock a very large gentleman with a very large fur-coat and very black hair arrived at the Blue Lion and asked for Miss Daisy Milton. It was dark, and blinds were drawn before most of the little twinkling windows in the village, but odd persons letting out dogs and taking messages were eye-witnesses of this new act in the drama, and a delicious smell of roasting meat crept out of the inn and down the street, mingling with the slight, fresh perfume of little gardens in the early spring, when growing violet leaves had a delicate scent, almost more exquisite than the flowers.

The window was open, as usual, and Miss Battersby going past, plainly heard the large gentleman speak; she would not linger and listen for she was a lady; but it was not her fault that her knee hurt her just at that moment, so that she was obliged to walk slowly.

"Well, Daisy!" said the large gentleman.
"Here I am!"

"You're so little I shouldn't have seen you if you hadn't told me," jested Miss Milton.

Miss Battersby thrilled and trembled with romance. What *would* happen next? Then she moved on a step because she was a lady.

But there was a sound. She thought—she feared—it was the sound of a kiss matching the size the coat of the large gentleman.

She made herself take another step: then

window went down with a bang and she stood clasping her hands in the dim, scented street and wondering what it was like to be kissed.

After that she went on again, saying to herself that single women had much the best of it, and that, anyway, Miss Milton's behaviour was scandalous. In her position she ought not to have received a gentleman of any description, most of all one with black hair and a fur coat.

Later on in the evening she took across a crocheted d'oyley for a gift to the landlady of the Blue Lion, who was now in the habit of receiving unearned gifts all day long, like a very bustling and bright-eyed heathen idol.

"A delicious odour," said Miss Battersby, seating herself.

"Duck," said the landlady.

"No one cooks a duck like you," said Miss Battersby effusively. "No one. I suppose Miss Milton has discovered that, which is why she ordered it to-night."

"Oh, well, only the legs came out," said the landlady, gratified.

"He would eat the breast and a wing," suggested Miss Battersby, with a careless air but an eager eye.

"Does himself well. You can see that," said the landlady admiringly. "*He* has his three good meat meals every day."

"Is he—— By the way here is a little crochet

d'oyley—you said you admired mine. Oh, nothing I'm sure. *Is* he Miss Milton's brother?" asked Miss Battersby.

"No," replied the landlady, her heart open by the gift. "Nor her cousin, nor her uncle. It's not for me to say. She behaves herself irreproachable here, but if she is Mrs. Stephen Croft, she oughtn't to have gentlemen called. And if she isn't, she oughtn't." The landlady paused and added with oracular solemnity: "She ought to consider her position and wait for a verdict. There's certain to be a verdict—a large damages."

"Is there?" asked Miss Battersby, tremendously interested. "I didn't know."

The landlady did not know either, but she shook her head and looked very wise.

"Mark my words, there'll be a verdict—a large damages."

Then there was the loud voice of the large gentleman in the passage of the inn, demanding the ticket for the next train back to Flodmouth.

"There's one at half-past nine," said the landlady, while Miss Battersby, who though a lady was only human, applied her eye to the crack of the kitchen door.

The large gentleman rushed back into the room, put on his fur coat and departed at an extraordinarily quick, even pace down the street, as if he were propelled on castors.

The landlady stood at the door with Miss Battersby, watching him recede into the darkness

"Well!" said the landlady at last.

"Well!" said Miss Battersby.

"Excellent duck you gave us," said Miss Milton's rather strident voice behind them.

"Fine day—er—for the time of year," said the landlady.

"Looks like frost," said Miss Battersby, casting an eye at the dull and clouded heavens.

Miss Milton looked at their pursed-up faces, smiled; the smile broadened, she laughed aloud.

"You seem amused," said Miss Battersby, flushing very much.

"I am," said Miss Milton.

"We are privileged to be able to offer you some amusement," said Miss Battersby, who was a great reader. "Very privileged indeed." And she breathed hard.

"So glad the gentleman liked the duck," interposed the landlady, touching Miss Battersby's arm. "Come along," she whispered.

So they went back into the kitchen, and ate the legs of the duck, while Miss Milton remained at the door looking out into the quiet night.

But she was not laughing now, and her lips moved as if she were learning a new part.

In the billiard-room of the End House, Marion Russell was playing a hundred up with her fiancé,

while Beatrice, Emmaline, and Martin sat round the fire.

"Mother and I will call for you on the way to the concert to-morrow afternoon," called Marion in her clear voice from the end of the room, as she paused to chalk her cue. "Shall you be there, Martin?"

"No," said Martin, stirring the fire. "Not I."

"Charles is coming," said Marion, serene in her power of managing Charles already.

Then the lovers went on with their game, and Beatrice said in a low voice—

"Emmaline, as you have the others to go with, I think I shall stay at home."

"Nonsense," replied Emmaline in the same tone, glancing apprehensively at the distant Charles.

"Of course you must go. You don't want to appear as if you were hiding because you had something to be ashamed of. Does she, Martin?"

"Oh, I don't know. If she feels——" began Martin, turning his newspaper.

"Really, Martin," said his wife with some natural irritation, "one would think you knew nothing of the gossip there has been about Beatrice's affairs. She must show that she cares nothing for it. You must look as if you do not mind being talked about if you are talked about: it is the only way."

Martin sighed: he hated the whole business from the bottom of his soul.

"I suppose you are right," he said. "But the talk will start over and over again when Beatrice and Croft get mar——"

"Hush!" said Emmaline fiercely, glancing at the billiard players. "We are not mentioning that to *any one*. Why do men always let things out so? And they are supposed to be more safe than women."

"They are—in things that matter—because they are not always making secrets of things that don't," said Martin, whose naturally even temper had been upset by over-work and the occurrences of the past three weeks. "Beatrice has made up her mind to marry Croft. What's the use of being mysterious about it?"

"She is not married to him yet," said Emmaline. "One never knows what is going to happen in this world."

Beatrice jumped up.

"Look here," she said, "I simply can't go to that old concert to-morrow. It will be horrible. Every one staring and wondering. And what difference will it make in the end?"

"That is not the question," said Emmaline. "One ought, I think, to do the plain, right thing and leave the rest." She paused. "I ask you to go, Beatrice. I did what I could for you, and I ask you to do this for me. You don't see the importance of it now, but you will thank me one day."

Beatrice sat down again.

"Oh, well, if you put it like that," and glanced at Martin.

"I should go, old girl," he said. "Emmaline is a better judge of such matters than we are. You go, and show 'em you don't care."

Then Marion approached.

"I sent in to Mrs. Watson's for another ticket for the concert," she said, "but there was not one to be had. She seems to be working it up tremendously. There are bills in every shop-window and the Blue Lion is perfectly pink with them."

"Who is Mrs. Watson?" said Mr. Charles Wainwright with rather an air.

"Our rather terrible next-door neighbour," laughed Emmaline delicately. "She dislikes me very much because I will not allow Jane to play with her children. But that does not affect me at all."

And she smiled serenely above the love or hate of any Mrs. Watson. At least, she thought so, but one never knows.

"What's wrong with her?" said Martin. "She looks all right. And Watson is a very decent chap."

"Oh, everything!" laughed Marion.

"You must draw the line somewhere," said Charles approvingly. "My mother always says that you know a woman by her friends."

"There is a newer way than that," said Beatrice.

"You can know a woman now by the size of her friends' motor-cars."

"No, no," said Charles seriously. "Lots of bounders have big cars. I can't agree with you there."

Beatrice was worried and unhappy, but the blessed funniness of things still had power to drive bitterness from her heart, and her face was alight with inward laughter as she exclaimed in all sincerity—

"How splendid it is when two people get engaged who are sure to be happy together."

Charles and Marion smiled back and felt sorry for Beatrice, because happiness had made them kind. They thought she would never marry now, and determined to ask her to all their third-best parties.

For Emmaline had, with an almost super-human effort, kept the fact that Beatrice was going to marry Croft a secret even from the Russells. But she was anxious to cast no shadow upon her newly engaged sister's happiness, or upon her mother's satisfaction in the event. She was, in truth, ashamed of bringing even the ghost of a scandal into the immaculate neighbourhood of the little gaiters, and felt rather bitterly that Marion was doing much better than she had done. Not that she would have changed Martin for a Royal Duke—but she did think it hard that Providence had not bestowed upon her the man

of her choice and a large fortune as well. She felt she deserved it.

"You are coming to the concert to-morrow, Beatrice, dear, of course," said Marion with rather patronising kindness.

The light died out of Beatrice's face and she looked dull and listless.

"Oh, yes," she said.

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CHAPTER XVIII

JANE was being attired for the concert, and she could not stand still to have her hair brushed because of her intense excitement. No older person can ever look forward to anything with that clear joyousness of little Jane, for grown-ups will only get that outlook back again when they are quite grown up and have ceased to feel the subconscious afterpain of disappointments.

"Nannie," said Jane, "do you think they will sing that funny song about a flying machine?"

"No, ir leed," said Nurse. "They don't have anything funny at a grand concert like that. I do believe, Jane, you would expect them to sing comic songs in heaven."

Jane looked up wistfully at Nurse:

"Won't there be *anything* funny there?" she asked.

"Of course not," said Nurse, very much shocked.

"What things you do say! Good thing you are going to school next term, and then you will learn to be more like other little girls."

"Am I diff'rent now?" said little Jane anxiously.

"You are," said Nurse. "Here now, your hair-ribbon!"

"But *how* diff'rent?" pursued Jane.

"Oh, I d' know. Queer things you think about

"But I can't help thinking," said Jane.

"Oh, you soon will when you go to school," said Nurse. "Now, there is your mother calling

Jane flung her arms round Bobby, who was butting at her with a ninepin.

"I do wish you were coming too, duckie," said.

"Dane noo hat!" gurgled the happy hummer swinging his ninepin across it with a joyous triumph and shouting with glee when he saw it on the floor.

"Bless him for a bonny boy," said the infatuated Nannie, as she restored Jane's hat to its proper place.

"Jane!" came in Emmaline's clear voice from below.

"Jane!" said Beatrice, opening the door.

"Oh, Auntie," said Jane, running to the stairs. "don't you feel as if there was something funny inside of you wanting to get out of the top of your head? I do."

Beatrice smiled down in the little happy face.

"No, I don't, Janey," she said. "I feel as if there was something very dull inside of me getting down into my boots."

Jane nodded.

"I know," she said. "Like when you've got something and Nurse says: 'Jane, Mother wants to speak to you at once.'" She took Beatrice's hand. "Auntie," she added confidentially, "have you been up to?"

"Nothing particular," said Beatrice.

Jane squeezed her hand.

"Never mind," she said. "Don't tell me if you don't like. I broke a teacup only a week ago."

"Come along," said Emmaline. "We shall be late as it is, though I particularly wished to be in good time."

And, as a matter of fact, the room was almost entirely filled when Emmaline walked with smiling graciousness up the centre, bowing right and left and holding little Jane by the hand.

There was a pleasant rustling and whispering as the little group went by, as if a breeze had suddenly got up in a popular wood, and silk-clad ladies waited until Beatrice was seated before saying anything more definite than: "Look! She is as cool as a cucumber." "No! Agitated under it all, I think." "She would have been better at home, considering the circumstances." "Very wise of her to come." Then all the scattered remarks joined every now and then in a sort of chorus: "A sweet woman, Mrs. Fawcett. So good of her to have Miss Fawcett to live with them. A good woman."

And Emmaline sat in a front row, and on the back of her neat blonde head rested a modest consciousness that she was sweet and good. She kept up a clear, unending ripple of conversation with Beatrice and Lady Walker, who was on her other side, and showed in every way that she was socially

equal to the most difficult occasion that could arise.

Mrs. Russell with Marion and her fiancé were just behind, and the pleasant sensation which comes from being one of a large audience made everybody in the room look cheerful.

"Quite a treat to me not to be singing," said Marion, leaning forward to speak to Beatrice.
"But I have helped at so many Marshfield concerts that I was determined that they should do without me this time."

"Three reporters," said Emmaline, feeling sure that mention would be made of her presence there.
"Sit up, Jane."

Then the large gentleman who had been at the Blue Lion the night before came in and sat down quite near to the Fawcetts. If by any possibility he ever could be said to be suffering from nervousness—only it did seem so impossible—he was suffering from that affliction at that moment.

He was a prominent figure in a gathering composed mainly of women no longer young, who were quite satisfied with the scarcity of the male whom they regarded with that faintly inimical interest which such women in such places feel for men who are not related to them.

Once the promoter of the concert appeared at the door leading to the waiting-room and looked across at the Fawcetts, flushed and round-eyed like a malicious boy who has thrown a stone and does not quite know what is going to happen next.

The performers reached the hall by a side door and waited in seclusion until their turn arrived; and after the inevitable opening duet between two red-handed young ladies the entertainment pursued a very usual and unexciting course. Emmaline listened with an air of intelligent graciousness, thinking how wise she had been to insist on Beatrice's coming, and Marion sat back in her chair, clapping indulgently after the manner of a great artist at a small show, while her fiancé made little jokes about the performers in a whisper.

Jane was enjoying herself immensely, because anything in the shape of "a party" seemed delightful to her, but she had a vague hankering for something more amusing, and she gave a gleeful jump in her seat when her friend from the Blue Lion walked composedly upon the stage.

"Now we shall have some fun!" she said.

Nobody else said that. Nobody else thought of saying it. But everybody felt it, and a wave of excitement and not unpleasant anticipation swept the room from end to end. A sudden rustle of whispers died down into a silence which could almost be felt, while every eye within possible range of the Fawcetts, glanced from them to the lady on the platform.

"That woman! How dared she?" hissed Lady Walker, pretending to read the programme.

"It is Mrs. Watson," whispered Emmaline, furiously also, looking at the programme. "Oh!

the vindictive creature! She has done this purpose to annoy me. But I will not look annoyed.

And indeed her face was a model to all good people in difficult places as she turned to Beatrice with a calm smile:

"What a splendid audience," and then under her breath, "Keep calm. Don't let them see your mind."

Beatrice looked straight ahead with a white face and very bright eyes, enduring an agony of self-consciousness, while every glance levelled at her, though she did not see it, seemed to be pricking some secret place in her soul.

She looked away from the stage and fixed her eyes on the large gentleman from the Blue Room, and she noticed vaguely that his neck had turned a pale colour, and that he shuffled uneasily on his feet. For the last and almost only time in his life he was obviously nervous, and he goggled upon the nonchalant figure of Miss Daisy Milton as if she were made of explosives and likely to go off at hand at any moment.

Mrs. Watson appeared uneasily in the doorway of the green room, leaning upon the arm of Mr. Blake, who tried to look as if she were not there. And there was a pause in which the accompanist glanced inquiringly at Miss Daisy Milton, and Miss Daisy Milton brought forward a chair to the front of the stage. The accompanist played a few bars, broke off in confusion as Miss Milton shook her head, and a dead silence settled upon the room.

in which Jane's ecstatic: "Oh, Auntie, what is she going to do?" was most plainly audible.

Then—awful, incredible occurrence—Miss Milton winked at little Jane. And Jane laughed aloud, so that the delighted ripple of her laughter reached every corner of the crowded room.

The audience held its breath, and allowed Jane to voice the feelings of its over-charged imagination. What was she going to do next?

Miss Milton sat down as ladies only can who have been trained to it, and an odour of the footlights filled the place to the very back benches.

"I promised to sing," she said, leaning forward with her elbow on her knee and her cheek on her hand, most theatrically at ease, "but I thought after all it would interest you more if I told you a story." She paused, and looked at the large gentleman, who exhibited further signs of uneasiness: "A story," she continued, "that was written for me by the man I am going to marry." She paused again and this time she looked at Beatrice.

"How can she? When she has got Uncle Stephen?" whispered Jane, tremendously excited by the feeling of tension in the air: but everybody sat absolutely motionless, afraid even to rustle a sleeve lest they should miss anything. Mrs. Watson stood transfixed with her mouth open and her eyes staring: the embodiment of agonised surprise.

"The story," continued Miss Milton, "is not

an unusual one. A very young man married a girl on the stage, and he took her home to his house and expected her to be satisfied. After while she began to be tired of it and he began to be tired of her, and they quarrelled." She glanced smiling, round the room. "*Quite* the usual thing so far, isn't it?"

"Shall we go out?" murmured Emmaline, scarcely moving her lips.

"No," murmured Beatrice.

"Well, then," continued Miss Milton, "now the complication starts. The young man flew off to foreign parts and the wife went home." Miss Milton rose from her chair and her voice changed, she remained theatrical only in so far as she could never be anything else—"home to people who loved her, and wanted her, and admired her, and to whom she had always given everything she had to give, poor girl. Then one day she went out with a skating party and had an accident and died. She and her baby with her. But the young man thought she had died of the shock of his leaving her like that, and of fretting after him. So the family let him go on thinking that. It served him right. And at the end of ten years"—she stopped and looked at the audience as if she were throwing down a gage before them—"ten years—the young man got engaged and was going to marry again."

The audience drew a long breath, after holding it so long that the sound seemed like one rushing through the room. Miss Milton stood erect,

head thrown back, like some fine creature at bay, defying them all.

"He was being buttered up by everybody and presentations made to him and his bride, and their portraits were in the newspapers. And all the time that other poor girl was dead and gone. And there he was, alive still, and having everything. It—it maddened the sister of the first wife. She happened to be playing in the Flodmouth pantomime——"

"Sister!" gasped Emmaline.

"Sister!" ran like a gathering whisper along the serried rows of women.

"This sister had never seen the man before because she was singing in a concert tour in Australia under her own name, during his short married life, but she knew him again from his photographs. She saw him sitting in a box with the woman he was going to marry. Such lords they all were—and the woman on the stage had to go on singing and dancing that they might enjoy themselves—the other poor thing cold in the grave. Forgotten! I——" She breathed hard now, as if she had been running. "Yes, it was me! I felt I couldn't bear it. I wanted to tear him out of his comfortable seat and make him remember. I didn't think about it. It came over me like a sort of madness."

"Shame! Shame!" began to run in a low muttering through the room.

"Shame!" shouted Miss Milton. "You wait

to cry shame until you feel enough to want to fling something at a man if you die for it next minute. She waited, bending forward a little, gazing at the upturned faces of the astonished women, until every least sound in the room had died away. "I heard of the grand luncheon, it seemed the right minute to take a rise out of him, and I went. I knew I was sufficiently like my sister to startle him for the moment, but I never dreamed he would find me out when the first surprise was over. A child could have told I was acting, only they were all so startled they did not seem able to use their wits."

A few people, urged by a strong sense of propriety, began to move towards the door, but they had no intention of getting beyond ear-shot.

"Stop where you are," commanded Miss Milton. "I have just done, but you've got to hear the finish." She sat down, composed herself once more into the story-telling attitude and began to breathe less tumultuously, but her cheeks were crimson, even through the paint, and her rather faded eyes were very bright. "I came back here when I heard Mr. Croft was dying because I thought the joke had gone too far and I sort of felt I had to be on the spot. I didn't say anything until he was out of danger because shocks don't seem to suit him. I didn't want to kill him outright and have murder on my hands. And—and—well, to be straight, I didn't relish the job, either. I saw I had gone too far, but I couldn't make up my mind to put things

straight. And if you want to know who made me decide at last upon this plan of—of dying pleasantly—well, it was because of Jane!”

“Jane!” gasped Emmaline.

“Bravo!” said Lady Walker, loud enough for every one to hear.

Beatrice sat staring at Miss Daisy Milton with her old look, as if the soul of her were shining through her face, and she smiled at the woman who had done the difficult, brave thing, and Miss Milton smiled back at her, and though they never met again they were friends for all their lives in their hearts; which is a queer but possible happening.

“Come!” said Emmaline, rising with dignity.

“No,” said Lady Walker, pulling at her sleeve.

“Sit down! Sit down! You must let the people get away. It would be so very awkward meeting them all.”

Then Miss Milton gave a peremptory sign to the paralysed accompanist and dashed off into the song about the flying machine with a verve and abandon never before attained.

“Isn't she a nice lady?” said little Jane at the end, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of enjoyment almost too deep for words. “Wasn't it kind of her to tell that funny tale all for me? But I like the singing best. The tale was a lovely tale, but I didn't quite understand it. I s'pose it was a grown-up one.” She gave a contented sigh. “Anyway,” she added, “the lady doesn't seem

to b'long to Uncle Stephen now, so you can have him."

"Hush, dear!" said Beatrice.

But Jane was too excited to keep quiet and she gave a little jump in her chair.

"Oh, look! Look!" she whispered. "The lady is going out with her own gentleman. Are they splendid?"

And, indeed, Miss Milton was rather fine as she swept down the room on the arm of the lady's gentleman with everybody making way before her and the promoter of the concert only gave expression to the deepest feeling of the audience when she rushed across the stage, turned the agitated paralysed accompanist off the stool, and thumped out wildly the strains of "God save the King."

For nobody wanted any more. It was time to go home.

"My dear," whispered Lady Walker, taking Beatrice's two hands in hers and holding them tightly, "what am I to say? There is nothing to say."

"Oh, Beatrice, I am so glad," murmured Emmaline, gradually beginning to realise all that it meant.

"Croft ought to prosecute that woman," said Marion's fiancé, who began to think they might like to be very friendly with Mrs. Stephen Croft.

"Of course he will take steps," said Marion with her usual decision.

"No!" said Beatrice, struggling out of the

whirl of thoughts that seemed to race round and round in her mind and would neither allow her to feel nor think. "No. He won't attempt to do anything of that kind." She put her hand to her forehead. "I—I always felt there was something—about her. If Stephen had loved her, he would not have left her."

So with a tribute of kind thoughts, like flowers, Beatrice laid a bitter memory to rest.

The huge motor-car owned by the large gentleman rushed across Bank Island with a sound of loud trumpets played at every corner, and within ten minutes of singing the song of the flying machine, Miss Daisy Milton was walking up the stairs of Bank House.

As she entered the room, Stephen rose from his chair and made his way unsteadily towards her.

"Please be seated," he said, struggling with a desperate faintness that threatened to overpower him.

She glanced at his worn face and the shaking, invalidish hands, and sat down. It was going to be a more difficult interview than she had expected as she had come along triumphantly in the huge car, submitting to the blandishments of the huge gentleman. She turned to the window, with the light full on her face, seeking for a beginning which should not startle the invalid too much.

But after awhile the odd silence in the room attracted her wandering attention, and she turned

to Stephen. He sat, grasping tight the arm of the chair, his face bent towards her, his eyes staring. The silence grew tense, intolerable.

"I came——" she began.

"Stop!" He jumped up with a strange sob, half shout, half scream. "Stop! It is a mistake. You are not my wife!"

Miss Milton laughed; she was so immensely relieved to have the thing done for her.

"Why didn't you find that out before, you silly?" she said.

Then there was a heavy sound of falling, and Stephen lay unconscious upon the floor.

The night was very clear, with a bright moonlight that gave to the river the sheen of old silver, a most exquisite, delicate radiance that was neither white nor golden. And the tide being high, the ships moved up and down above the level of the Island like ships in a dream.

Stephen was recovered from his fainting fit, and he sat back in his chair looking out at all this with a deep peace in his heart such as he had never known before. He seemed to have come out from the far end of the stormy days of youth, and to find the calm, strong years of maturity all plain and straight before him.

His hand was thin and shaking still as he clasped that of Beatrice, but the moonlight made everything like day, and something of what Stephen Croft was about to become already showed in

expression as he sat there, holding the hand of his future wife, and watching the great ships go up and down in the moonlight.

After a long silence he spoke.

"Beatrice!" he said. "I've been a Dickens of a time growing up. Some men seem to leave youth behind directly they leave school. But I have gone on acting like a young fool when I was almost beginning to be an old one. I don't know why."

Beatrice smiled at him.

"I know," she said. "Youth had such a strong hold on you it wouldn't let you go. It never will."

"But surely to goodness you don't think I shall go on being the same all my life?" said Stephen, aghast.

Beatrice pressed his thin hands, laughing for very happiness.

"I think so. I hope so," she said.

"Don't you feel afraid, then?" he said.

She rose and stood before him in the moonlight, her little figure erect as a flame, her deep eyes full of fire.

"No," she murmured, "I love you."

He rose too, and put his arms about her, and they stood so, pressed closely together.

"I believe that's what I have been looking for," he whispered. "I was so restless because I wanted love. And I couldn't find love until I found you, Beatrice."

"And if we had never met?" she whispered.

"I should never, really, have found love."

Then Martin and Emmaline came up into room, and the moonlight was shut out and it time for Beatrice to go home.

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CHAPTER XIX

It was just the darkest hour of a summer night, at the turn when the dawn is coming, and the people of Marshfield lay asleep above their little flower beds as if in an enchanted garden. The dew fell through the dark upon the upturned faces of the flowers, and they gave thanks for the benediction in little breaths of perfume which were so exquisitely fresh and pure that they seemed holy—like a prayer.

A little light crept into the far sky; it spread; it strengthened. There was a waking of sound in the world: tiny things running through the grass; birds astir in hedgerows; a cock crowing.

Then the apricot-coloured horse opened one eye; saw the dawn aglint upon the distant river, opened the other, and saw the backs of the houses still asleep; glanced with scornful amusement at the frayed rope which pretended to tether him, kicked, jerked and shambled towards the village street.

Clop! Clop! went his hoofs down the pavement, and Marshfield was soon awake. But at the end of the street he stood, meditating. The fun of rubbing at front gates and scaring careful gardeners was growing stale. There was a stir in the air that morning which made him long for

something new. He snorted, stamped, lifted his old fiddle head, and made for Bank Island.

Miss Thornleigh was also aware of the thrill in the air, and excitement had awakened at dawn, so that she was at her window when the Marshfield malefactor shambled by.

She wore curling-pins and grey flannel, but looked full of sentiment none the less as she clasped her hands, and said to herself, gazing after the apricot-coloured horse:

"The dear thing! He knows!"

Then came the rush of the early train with its banner of white smoke and its shrill whistle, the official herald of the day.

Men came out of the train, bearing the scaffolding of archways, and soon one was put up over the bridge leading to Bank Island, and one over the entrance to the garden of Bank House.

Sailors began to appear in the long streets. Flags were hung out of the little twinkling windows. The day brightened to a noon of cloudless heaven and splendour.

The Marshfield malefactor had returned to his moorings and stood waving his stump of a tail, greatly troubled by flies.

Miss Thornleigh went out, carrying a news-paper, and encountered Jane with Bobby and Nurse.

"Well, Jane?" said Miss Thornleigh.

"She has been naughty. On this day and the next days!" said Nurse, dragging Jane onward. "because she can't be allowed to go and meet

aunt in her bridesmaid's dress. Says she wants everybody to see how nice she looks in it. Fie for shame ! ”

“ There was nobody at the wedding. This is the *real* wedding. I want to wear my bridesmaid's dress,” said Jane doggedly.

“ I want ! I want ! I want ! ” shouted the happy hunter, hammering the pram sides with his maltreated doll.

“ See how you are leading your poor little brother wrong. Precious pet ! ” said Nurse.

“ I wonder, Nurse,” said Miss Thornleigh tentatively, “ as you are going that way, if you would very much mind just tying this whisp of newspaper to the horse's tail ? Poor fellow, he has been deprived of his natural protection against flies, and I do so want there to be no cloud on any one's happiness to-day.”

“ No, Miss Thornleigh,” said Nurse, turning very red. “ I am always ready to oblige ; no one more so. But I am engaged. And I have a duty to myself. If my young gentleman heard of me doing such a thing he would be justified in thinking me cracked. He would indeed.”

“ Please do not trouble,” replied Miss Thornleigh with some dignity. “ I am happy to say that I have no male opinion to consider.”

And she walked on.

“ Does she mean,” said Jane, “ that she is glad no one has married her ? ”

“ Yes,” said Nurse shortly.

Jane gazed thoughtfully after Miss Thorn's spare figure.

"What makes people want to marry any of these people?" she pursued.

"It's love," said Nurse.

"But what's love?" said Jane.

"Oh, I d' know. It's just love," said Nurse.

Jane walked on, staring at the ground; and when she lifted her head.

"Does nobody know?" she asked.

"Nobody on earth," said Nurse.

Jane thought, a little more.

"Nobody on earth," she said. "Oh, well, I concluded cheerfully, "I s'pose it's another one of God's secrets then."

"Really, Jane," said Nurse, "you shouldn't talk about God like that!"

"Is it rude, Nannie?" asked little Jane.

"Yes, except when you are in church and talking like that," said Nurse.

Then, after a while, they came to the grey door and Jane stood still.

"I want to go in there," she said. "May I, Nannie?"

"Whatever for?" said Nurse.

"I want to ask"—Jane nodded her head significantly—"you know Who, to find out the way for me to take Old Ted to meet Aunt Mammy said I mustn't, but Mr. Wylie said in church last Sunday that you got things done and prayed for them hard enough." She

Nannie's gown and looked up beseechingly: "I wonder, Nannie, if you *would* be so kind as to come and help, because He might take more notice of you. You see, you are never naughty."

The pathetic attitude of poor humanity clutching at the robes of the priesthood all over the world was embodied just then in little Jane, and for once Nannie was touched.

"All right," she said. "You leave it to me and you shall have your Old Ted, somehow. But we have no time to go into church now."

Jane jumped up and down, her face alight with rapture.

"Oh, Nannie!" she said. "I do think you are the nicest Nannie in the world. No wonder so many gentlemen want to marry you."

And in the late afternoon the imposing group upon the railway platform felt far too important to trouble about little Jane one way or another; so she stood by Nurse and the pram in the undisputed possession of Old Ted.

Emmaline in grey, with the composed graciousness of a royal princess; Mrs. Russell in a brocade which had—*r-o*, it could not really have been so—but which seemed to have a handsome pattern of little gaiters upon it; Marion, sweet and stately, with the proud consciousness that she was to be a bride herself the next week; Martin, with that unfortunate lock of hair which would obtrude in moments of excitement, and an air of joyous expectation; Lady Walker, resplendent in white,

and fatter than ever; Miss Thornleigh in a hat of a crude shade of blue, and a red because pleasurable suspense had given her in-tention; the little bride in a long, fluffy cloak with soft eyes tearfully ashine—quite ob- a little bride no longer.

Then the stationmaster came out in his coat and walked importantly up and down platform beds ablaze with flowers and his posts grown round with roses, so that he seemed no ordinary stationmaster, but a blue-and-clad guardian of an enchanted Flowery Town.

The signal went down and the gaily-dressed women stirred on the platform like flowers in a breeze.

“Marshfield! Marshfield!”

“My dear girl,” said Emmaline, majestically embracing Beatrice.

“Well, Stephen?” said Martin, grasping the hand of the one man in the world whom he was most glad to call brother.

“Auntie! Auntie!” shrieked Jane, halting with excitement, and held back by Nurse according to instructions.

“Jane! My little Jane!” called Beatrice, pushing the heads of the people, and she ran in and out between them until she had the child in her arms and felt upon her face the hairy muzzle of Old

“He’s been longing so to see you,” apologized Jane. “I had to let him kiss you first.”

“I don’t let her kiss any gentleman now

married to me. Not even Old Ted," said Stephen just behind.

Jane looked up at him seriously, then her eyes began to twinkle and she laughed aloud.

"Oh!" she said. "I am so glad you have gone on being funny, even now you've got married. Did he tell you lots of jokes, Auntie?"

"Heaps," replied Stephen for her. "We used to take it in turns."

"How lovely!" said little Jane. "That is what I shall do when I get married. But you always *were* two funny ones."

Then the bride and bridegroom went to their carriage and Jane was accommodated on the front seat with Old Ted. It was a big landau which had not been used for a long time, and a group of sailors from the ships belonging to Stephen Croft ran up to it and unharnessed the horses, and set off with a gay shout down the long street between the twinkling windows and the little gardens full of flowers.

It was a splendid omen to be taken home by brave, cheery sailor-men through fields of golden flowers. For the island was one sheet of yellow mustard bloom against the clear blue of the sky, and the glorious colour of it was like a sudden flare of trumpets.

"Oh!" said Jane, hugging Old Ted in a transport of delight, "isn't this glorious? Better than a proper wedding. Why—you're crying, Auntie!"

"It's all—too splendid," said Beatrice.

Stephen took his wife's hand and laughed little Jane.

"Nothing is too splendid—now," he said.

"That's just what I think," agreed Jane. "I am so glad you and Auntie got married. Now we shall soon have some funny little boys and girls to play with." She glanced at the orchard which lay to the right of the drive, and then nodded encouragingly at Stephen and Beatrice. "I'm all right," she said. "There are plenty of apple trees."

"What does she mean?" said Stephen.

"Don't ask her now," said Beatrice.

"You know then?" said Stephen.

"Oh yes, I know," said Beatrice, laughing radiant as little Jane.

"*Hasn't* it been fun?" said Jane.

"It has," said Stephen.

"Dear little Jane!" said Beatrice.

Then they all laughed together, and the happy sound floated out across the fields of gold flowers towards the ships that were going silent up and down, like ships in a dream.

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