

**CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)**

**ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)**



Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

© 1995

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

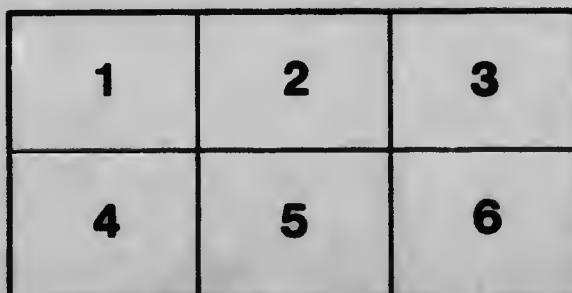
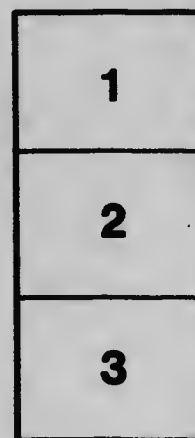
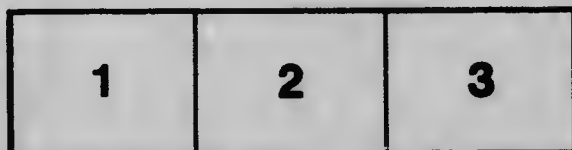
National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol \rightarrow (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ∇ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:



L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

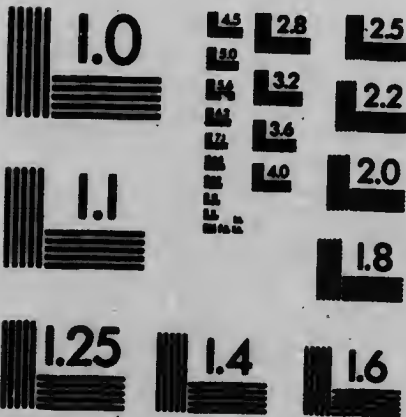
Les exemplaires originaux dont la couverture en papier est imprimée sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminant par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole \rightarrow signifie "A SUIVRE", le symbole ∇ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.

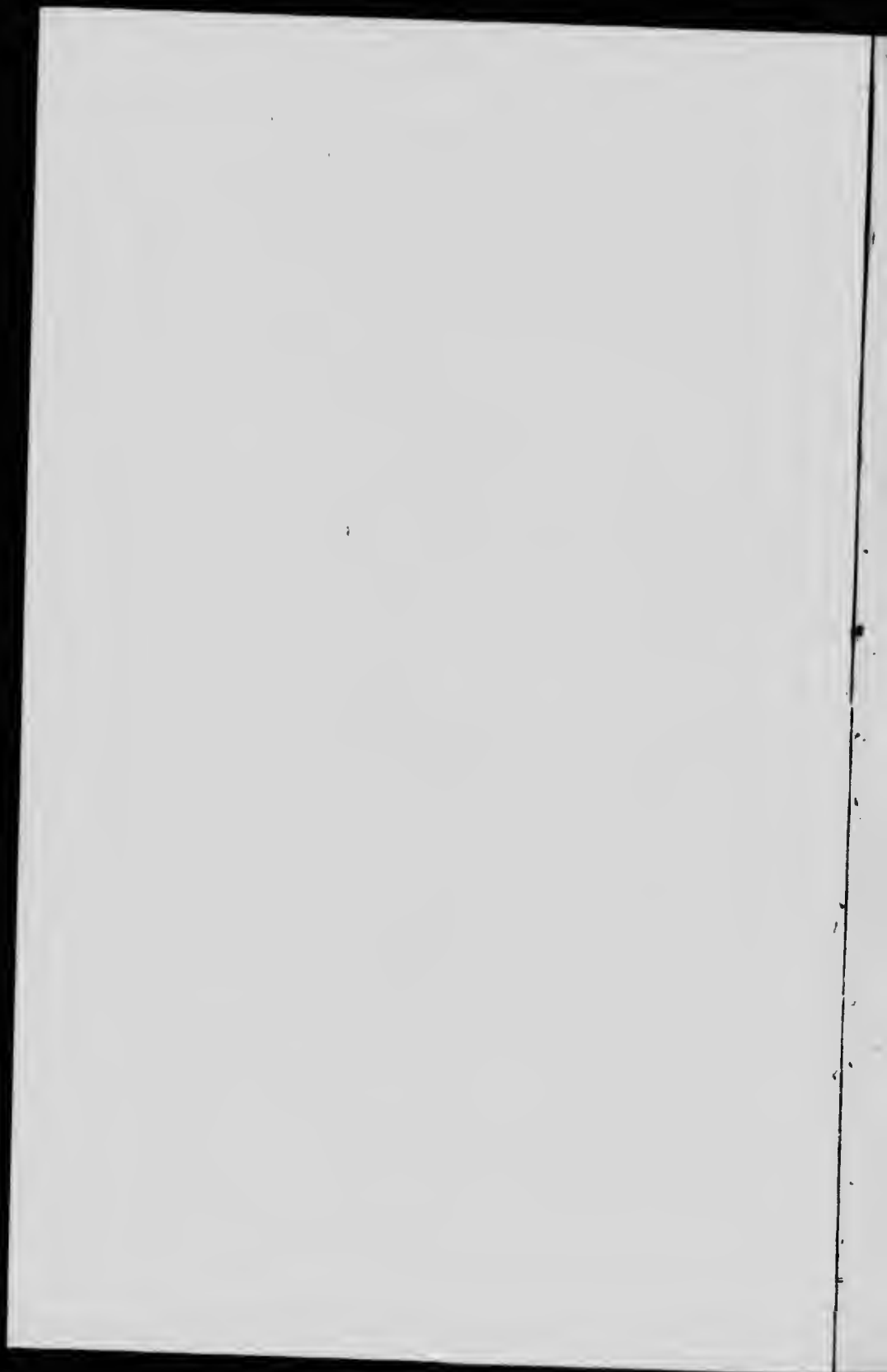
MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

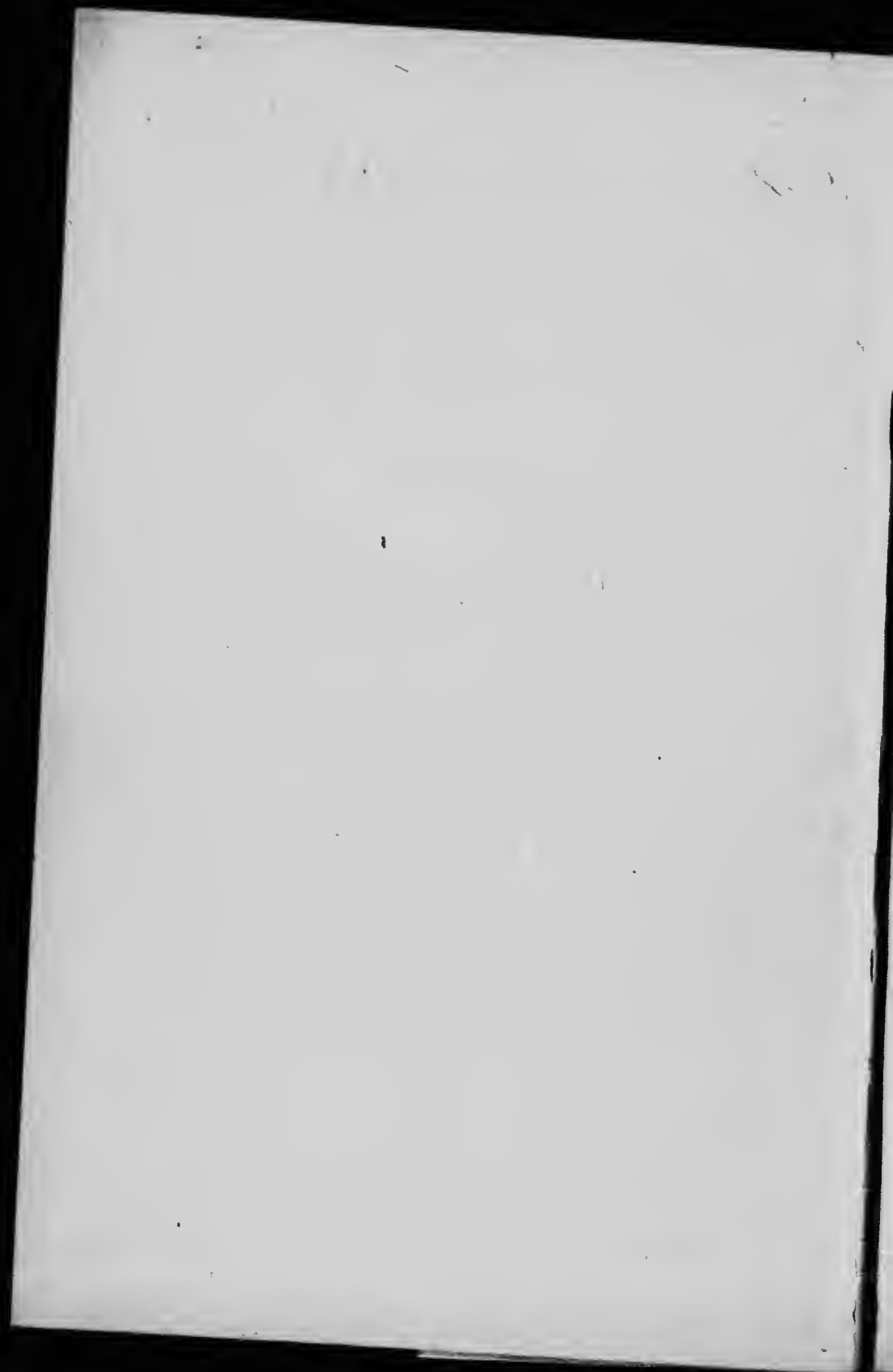


APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1853 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482-0300 - Phone
(716) 288-5989 - Fax



A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE



A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

BY

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

AUTHOR OF

"OUT OF THE NIGHT," "BROKEN OFF,"
"THE GIRL FROM NOWHERE," "THE NOTORIOUS MISS LISLE,"
ETC.

TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY
LIMITED

PS8485

E73

M3

First Printed in 1918

CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I	1
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	26
CHAPTER V	40
CHAPTER VI	52
CHAPTER VII	60
CHAPTER VIII	69
CHAPTER IX	79
CHAPTER X	96

	PAGE
CHAPTER XI	105
CHAPTER XII	118
CHAPTER XIII	130
CHAPTER XIV	142
CHAPTER XV	154
CHAPTER XVI	165
CHAPTER XVII	174
CHAPTER XVIII	186
CHAPTER XIX	200
CHAPTER XX	213
CHAPTER XXI	229
CHAPTER XXII	235
CHAPTER XXIII	248

CONTENTS

vii

	PAGE
CHAPTER XXIV	258
CHAPTER XXV	273
CHAPTER XXVI	289
CHAPTER XXVII	300

8

CHAPTER I

"To bear, to nurse, to rear,
To watch, and then to lose:
This have I done!"—JEAN INGELOW.

THAT Mrs. Brendon, being what she was, should be content to dwell in a suburb, is perhaps a sign of her greatness of mind.

We all know that the word 'suburban' in the mouth of the superior person, conveys a sort of reproach. It is used to suggest cheap culture of the pretentious kind. It serves as a label. The truth, that one suburb differs from another in almost every respect, is lost sight of by the superficial critic, who likes to group things.

Thackridge differs from almost every other suburb, not only in its social atmosphere, but actually in its geographical configuration.

The fact that it stands upon a hill, and that the various suburban lines have in consequence swerved away from it on either hand, has left it, as its inhabitants joyfully affirm, 'quite countrified.'

One wears tweed suits and Norfolk jackets and very thick boots in Thackridge. One finds real gardens, and delightful, unsuspected houses, with their backs, or sides, to the road—houses which do not even suggest a row of villas. They were not planned by a suburban architect: they are, for the most part, almost inconvenient enough to be truly picturesque.

The house in which Mrs. Brendon had lived, since

her husband's death, was one of these. She had, indeed, inserted a hot-water supply and electric light : but these things were alien to the plan of the long, low house, invisible from the road, whose date was so various that nobody presumed to dogmatise on the subject, but which boasted that its foundations were identical with those of the Abbot's house which had once occupied the site.

Mrs. Brendon was just fifty years old on the morning when Oliver's terrible letter broke into the even tenour of her way.

She was the widow of an Oxford Professor, who numbered among his friends most of the prominent men of his day. Her married life had been passed in Oxford, but she was born in the Abbot's House at Thackridge ; and, this happening to be in the market at the time of her widowhood, she bought it, and settled down in it to live again in her only son's future.

She was herself a writer and journalist of no mean ability : and her life was full of interests. Oliver and she were and always had been the best of friends, until Vivien Faulkner came into their lives.

The Faulkners were the great folks of Thackridge. Sir Charles Faulkner was a railway director of the Napoleonic kind. He had extricated the City and Local Line from serious financial difficulties, and had turned it into a gold mine. He had married an American heiress, and his sons and daughters were most of them handsome. The eldest son's wife was a Lady Somebody—the eldest daughter had married a young man who was not only a Member of Parliament, but also a member of a county family, which counted for far more in the eyes of her father. It was not considered likely, in Thackridge, that Vivien would have anything to say to Oliver Brendon, nor

that her father would sanction the engagement, even should she herself be weak enough to desire it.

Oliver was six feet high, and quite nice-looking, though not handsome. He had plenty of ability, but his intellect resembled that of his mother more than that of his father. Though not yet thirty, he was editing *The Penman*, a high-class weekly journal, which was doing well, and likely to do better.

He was, of course, more or less eligible—highly so in the eyes of most Thackridge mothers: but the Faulkners rose above the level of their immediate surroundings. Their week-end parties were quite smart.

Oliver, however, seemed unimpressed by any sense of inferiority. Vivien was astonishingly pretty—pretty enough to take even a level-headed London editor off his feet. He fell in love with unexpected severity; and the energy of his personality conquered the girl. She accepted him, the engagement was announced, and all Thackridge purred with delight. It was a kind of victory for the suburb. Oliver was felt to have conferred distinction upon the whole of local society by aiming so high and shooting his bolt so successfully.

Mrs. Brendon made the best of it. She saw her future daughter-in-law with the terrible clearness of maternal instinct, undisguised by the mists of passion. There was no backbone in Vivien. She would be always a weight for Oliver to carry, never a lever to raise him. She was sweetly caressing in her manner to him now, because the incense of his devotion was intoxicating her. Oliver's mother foresaw another manner, when novelty began to pall, and the bare bones of real life to show gaunt through the roses of illusion. Such a wife is a luxury which only a very rich man can afford.

Oliver's wife could never, in the ordinary course of events, be rich. Mrs. Brendon had a competence, and this she supplemented by her own work. Her son and she were very comfortable; but Vivien had been reared on a different scale. Sir Charles Faulkner, like many another rich man, though he had accustomed his daughters to every luxury, was not at all inclined to portion them handsomely. He had the notion which obtains very largely among fathers in England, that they will not have fortune-hunters after their daughters. The system of give and take, which is usual on the Continent, has no place in their minds. Any man must be fortunate who gets their daughter, and he ought to be prepared to pay handsomely for the privilege. The idea that a marriage between two young people should also be a union of resources—that each should contribute towards the formation of the home—is heresy in the mind of the English father.

From this point of view, Oliver was a most accommodating son-in-law. He disliked the consideration of ways and means. At school and at Oxford, his mother had seen that he was well supplied with necessary funds, and he had been too soundly brought up to desire unnecessary ones. Waste of money was a thing he did not understand. He was not extravagant, and he had always had enough for what he wanted. He assumed that what sufficed him would suffice the woman who shared his lot.

The engagement took place in the autumn. Oliver was anxious to be married at once; but Lady Faulkner objected. She pointed out, quite reasonably, that Vivien was barely nineteen, and ought not to be hurried; and in the second place, she, Lady Faulkner, was planning a winter in Cairo, and wished her daughter to accompany her. If the marriage came

off in the spring, this was the last chance for her to have Vivien with her. She demanded from the young couple this sacrifice to duty.

It was, of course, impossible to resist so natural a desire on the part of a mother. Vivien parted from her lover with tears and laments, and clinging embraces and kisses that tingled in the young man's blood when he thought of them, which was almost always. He grew grave and thin, consumed with the desire for the presence of the beloved object. He had not wasted his youth on aimless flirtation, any more than he had wasted his money on wine or fancy waistcoats. He was in deadly earnest now.

Mrs. Brendon sighed a little in private. It is always a severe discipline to the middle-aged to look on at the passions of youth—the wasted fervour, the misplaced devotion. Oliver's mother, however, had the sense to see that some such crisis as this was necessary to her son's development. All had hitherto gone very smoothly for him in his comfortable circumstances. The only woman he had ever known intimately was a woman who was eminently reasonable and sincerely desirous of his happiness. It was well for him to be for a time the slave to a young girl's caprice—to hang upon her letters, even to grow thin with the intense desire for her presence.

It had been the lover's intention to run out to Cairo at Christmas, for a glimpse of Vivien's lovely face. His plans were foiled by a kind of crisis in the affairs of his paper. An article which the proprietor, against the advice of his editor, had insisted upon inserting, bade fair to produce a libel action which would set all London buzzing. The storm gathered just at the time when Oliver might have snatched those few days. By the time the danger was safely over the Christmas vacation was also past.

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

It was very soon after this that the tone of Vivien's letters began to alter. He felt that the prolonged absence, the great distance, was drawing her out of his reach. His mother noted that his anxiety for the arrival of news grew more feverish; the relief which a letter brought, less noticeable. She stood aloof, all her heart sore for the son who had passed beyond reach of her consolation. She asked no questions, she received no confidence. She only guessed that things were getting worse.

It was in March that the blow fell. Vivien wrote, a short, broken, incoherent note, supplemented by a letter from her mother, to say that she had changed her mind. She had no apology to offer except the obvious one that she had been very young and inexperienced. She could but beg and beseech pardon. Mr. Railton had spent the winter at Shepherd's with them. He was American. Lady Faulkner had noticed from the first that he admired Vivien greatly, but had thought little of it, as Vivien was very generally admired. He had, however, been unremitting in his attentions. He had cancelled his whole programme of proceeding up the Nile, in order to remain in Cairo with them. As time went on she could not help feeling sure that the girl had mistaken her own heart. Her unhappiness was evident. At last things had come to a crisis. Mr. Railton confessed to her that he could stay no longer, as his feelings could not be commanded. Vivien, on hearing that he was departing, had dissolved in tempests of tears. The thing was done, and could not be undone. It only remained to throw themselves upon Mr. Brendon's mercy.

In view of the painful situation, Lady Faulkner proposed, instead of returning to England, to remain abroad rather longer than she had intended, and to

come back to Thackridge only just in time for the wedding, which must be in May, as Mr. Railton's affairs made it urgent for him to return to the States, and he wished to take his wife with him.

How Oliver first received this news his mother never knew ; for it chanced that she was away for the week-end with her sister at Hastings, when the fatal letter arrived. On her return to the Abbot's House, on Monday afternoon, she found an envelope, addressed by Oliver, enclosing the two letters, with no comment, beyond the message that he should not return home for the next few days.

She sat down alone with her son's sorrow, and hated herself for the feeling which, even in the first moment, would intrude, that she was glad from the bottom of her heart that Vivien had proved herself unworthy. She knew that the blow was a staggering one ; but her confidence in her son made her pretty certain of his rising from it a better man because of his suffering. She had no address, but wrote to him at the office of *The Penman* to assure him of her love and sympathy. She said no word against Vivien, commenting only upon the force of juxtaposition in the case of the very young. She guessed that Mr. Railton was wealthy enough to have dazzled the girl.

"How often," she wrote, "have I thanked God that I did not marry the man with whom I fell in love when I was seventeen ! I was saved only by the fact that he got entangled with the daughter of his landlady, and had to marry her. The day that I learnt that news I thought my life was over. As a matter of fact, I was rescued, by the skin of my teeth, from what must have been a lifelong mistake."

Having despatched her letter, she could only wait for news of her beloved with what patience she might. For the first few days she was fairly tranquil,

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

though her heart ached continually for him. Then she began to grow restless. Oliver was a sensible, capable fellow, true; but he had never been seriously in love before, and one never knows quite how such a man will take disappointment. As a child, his temper had been fiery and explosive. Moreover, the strain of his fiancée's absence had brought him to a highly strung condition of nerves, and unusual debility of body. It began to seem likely to her, during her solitary reflections, that he might be suffering more than she had anticipated. She wrote imploring him to give her an address—asking what he was doing.

His reply to this came by return of post. He was merely sleeping in London, at his Club. He could not face Thackridge yet—palpitating, as it must be, with the news of his rebuff. He begged his mother not to be anxious, and not to put pressure upon him to return. He must wrestle with his bitterness in solitude.

This should have reassured her, but did not. It was not the course of conduct she would have expected him to pursue.

She passed some miserable days.

Sir Charles called upon her, to apologise, frankly enough, but with an undercurrent of exultation which was quite perceptible, for his daughter's bad behaviour. "In an older girl one might call it unpardonable," he said, "but Vivien is young, and has always been capricious. I told your son at the time of the engagement that I was by no means sure of her knowing her own mind. He was confident, however, and there was, as I need hardly assure you, no disposition on my part to put any obstacle in the way of the alliance which I felt would be an honour to our family."

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

9

Mrs. Brendon was glad to be able to bear this and other exasperations in Oliver's stead.

She still wrote to him bravely and cheerfully, urging him to come back when he felt he could, offering to leave home for the whole summer, if he cared to do so. "We could easily let this house furnished, and go to some fresh place, farther afield, whence you could get up to town every day."

The sympathies of Thackridge were strongly on the side of the Brendons, if you trusted what they said. Nevertheless, there was a lurking hesitation—a kind of disappointment that their hero had proved not strong enough to keep what he had won.

"They will all be wild to see Mr. Railton, in a month's time," said the lady of the Abbot's House, with pardonable bitterness, to Mona Letts, the girl whom she would have chosen for her daughter-in-law, had such choice been given to mothers.

Mona laughed, and sighed. She may have felt that Vivien's defection was her opportunity. But the defeated Oliver did not appear to claim the sympathy which was his due.

"It is a good thing," she said, searching for any consoling thing to say, "that Vivien is marrying an American. It will take her right away, out of his sight, won't it?"

"Yes, that's true. I hope and trust he will not want me to sell the Abbot's House. I had hoped to end my days here, I must own."

"I heard from Vivi yesterday," went on Mona, "such a ridiculous letter. She says she wishes she could marry two men, and then she would have Calvert, as she calls him, for one, and Oliver for the other—Calvert to take her motoring, and Oliver when she wants to go to picture galleries. You see, she is not serious: a mere child."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Brendon impatiently, "that half the sensible men in the world fall in love with irresponsible children."

"If one could unite the two," said Mona reflectively—"Why should not the serious-minded girl have a more fluffy exterior?"

Mrs. Brendon could not help smiling at the fluffy exterior. Vivien was fluffy, no doubt—her head was all over curls, bound with ribbon, and her clothes were modelled upon old pictures.

"Well, Mona," she could not resist saying, "why not cultivate the fluffy exterior?"

This conversation took place about a fortnight after the rupture of the engagement, and only a day before the blow fell!

CHAPTER II

Shall I speak like a poet, or run
Into weak woman's tears for relief?
Oh, children!—I never lost one,
Yet my arm's round my own little son,
And Love knows the secret of Grief.

E. B. BARRETT BROWNING.

It was a Saturday night. The weather, although it was April, was still cold and wintry. Mrs. Brendon had spent a tiring day over her bulbs, and, after dinner, had subsided into a comfortable chair before the drawing-room fire, and was deep in a new book.

She had never been beautiful, but had come rather near it in her youth, and was still quite pleasant to look upon. Her hair was abundant, and hardly at all grey. Her figure had thickened somewhat, but she was not stout, and kept herself active by riding a bicycle and taking long walks. The twenty years which divided herself and her tall son in age might well have been ten. They were often taken, in Switzerland, for brother and sister, to her innocent pride and delight.

Her mind was more than usually occupied with thoughts of Oliver that night. She was reading the last new work of an author for whom the editor of *The Penman* had predicted fame some years previously. The result justified her boy's opinion. As she relished the pithy sentences, the fascinating turn of the phrase, she wished with all her heart that he were there to share her pleasure.

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

The late post rapped at the door, and very soon Drew, her capable parlourmaid, brought in the letters. There was one from Oliver, as she noted with pleasure. Leaning forward, she stirred the already good fire into a more inspiriting blaze, as though to prepare herself for the treat of seeing his fine, sensitive handwriting—the script of a Greek scholar.

It was quite a short letter, dated from his club that morning.

“MY DEAR MOTHER,

“This is to let you know that I was married this morning, at St. Luke’s Church, to Miss Carey, who has from time to time done stenographic work for me.

“We are now starting for Brighton for the week-end. On Monday I propose to bring my wife to the Abbot’s House, until our plans for the future are more decided.

“I realise, of course, that the step I am taking, and the manner of it, must be a shock to you. I do not see my way to soften the blow by anything that I could write. Least said is perhaps best.

“But I assure you that I am still, in spite of appearances,

“Your loving son,

“OLIVER BRENDON.”

For some time Sybil sat with this letter upon her lap, quite unconscious of feeling anything at all. The first process of which her brain was aware was a contemptuous notion that this was a practical joke. The next—after a long interval—was a secret joy that Harold, her dead husband, was not there to have his heart lacerated in this shocking manner.

She leaned back in her chair, and her head fell limply against the cushions. The colour had forsaken even her lips. In her soft black evening dress, outlined upon the delicate-tinted chintz, she looked like a dead woman. She had not, however, fainted. She was fully conscious of her agony.

The clock ticked on. She looked up, after the lapse of what seemed to her a very few minutes. An hour had rolled by since she broke the seal and let loose upon herself this flood of trouble.

This was her son's wedding-night.

The terrible finality of the thing was like the falling of earth upon a coffin-lid, when they were filling a grave.

Oliver, her high-minded, well-balanced son, a typical Englishman of the better class, had allowed himself to be ruined for ever by the inconstancy of a half-grown child.

Everything that makes a man's life really worth living—the society of his equals, the respect of his friends, the happiness of home—he had sacrificed all to the satisfaction of a baulked desire, the terrible delusion of a vengeance which injured none but himself.

Of all the things which she had thought it possible might happen as the result of his disappointment, this had been farthest from her mind.

To many a mother comes a day when her own son seems a stranger. She began to let her mind wander over the members of her husband's family, in search of some trait which should account for this unaccountable lapse. Harold himself had transmitted nothing, she knew, that could result in this. What of his brothers? Well, certainly there was Herbert, who had married Lallie Prince.

Perhaps the most difficult relationship in life is that

between a woman and the wives of her husband's brothers. No fact is more certain than that two brothers will marry two women as far sundered as the poles. These two are brought into an intimacy which, but for the tie thus formed, would never, could never exist. Lallie Prince, the wife of Herbert Brendon, had been in the ballet. Had she been an Indian squaw, there could hardly have been less in common between her and Oliver's mother than there was. Yet, in their capacity as the wives of these two brothers, they had to address each other by their Christian names, and to sign themselves "Yours affectly."

. . . There was a pathetic irrelevance in such reflections at this moment. But for quite a long time Sybil's thoughts ran on these lines. There was something alien in the blood which her son inherited,—something she could not understand—but which had made him capable of this social shipwreck.

After a long while she was conscious that Drew, the parlourmaid, had entered, and was looking at her doubtfully.

"Beg pardon, ma'am—do you know that it is after twelve o'clock?"

She started. Then she rose, and felt all her limbs cramped and stiff as though she had occupied the same posture for many hours.

"Is it so late?" she said tonelessly. To speak seemed an effort.

"Do you feel ill, ma'am?" asked the maid with concern.

She pushed back her hair from her forehead, and suddenly all that she was feeling surged up to her throat, until she could hardly breathe. "I've—I've had bad news," she panted, and burst into a flood of tears.

"Mr. Brendon?" cried Drew, in tones of horror.
"Yes, yes!" For long the sobs came too thick for utterance, but she brought it out at last. "He is married! He was married this morning! Without telling me! Without asking me to his wedding! My boy, my only son! I think my heart is broken!"

The whole of Sunday the stricken mother lay in bed, trying to realise the misfortune which had befallen her. Its exact extent she could not yet know. There still remained the final bitterness—the actual meeting with the typewriter girl who had consented to a hole-and-corner marriage such as this.

Was it possible that she might be capable of being trained into something dimly resembling a gentlewoman? Oliver's letter seemed hardly to hold out such a hope. Had he felt able to say one word in her praise, would he not have said it? Had he foreseen any possibility of his mother's sympathy, would he not have invoked it?

She read and re-read his bitter, reckless words. In his unbearable misery he had taken his future with both hands and hurled it overboard.

It was so unusual for Mrs. Brendon to be absent from church both morning and evening that Mona Letts came round on her way home to know if she were ill. Drew went upstairs to her mistress to ask what she should say to the visitor.

Sybil reflected. To-morrow her new daughter-in-law would be actually in Thackridge. There would be no concealing the catastrophe. She might as well announce it to Mona, and then she would be sure of the whole village knowing it by slow yet sure degrees.

"Tell Miss Letts that I am suffering from the shock of sudden news. Tell her that I heard yesterday

that Mr. Brendon is married. I do not feel equal to seeing her. Thank her for her kindness in coming."

Standing in the low, square hall, thinking how much she admired its restraint and distinction, Mona heard the surprising intelligence. It was so amazing that she could not refrain from showing her consternation. She plied the parlourmaid with questions. Drew knew only that Mrs. Oliver's maiden name was Miss Carey and that they were coming home to-morrow. Mrs. Brendon had never seen her, she was pretty sure of that. It had been quite a surprise.

Miss Letts turned away sorrowful. She loved Mrs. Brendon, she dearly liked the Abbot's House. She could have loved Oliver with very little encouragement. Had he but known how ready she was to sympathise!

But these are things that well-bred girls hide. How can a young man know the eager kindness that may lie hid under their calm expression?

She did nothing but wonder what kind of girl this Miss Carey was. Had Oliver liked her before he fell a victim to the fluffiness of Vivien? And had he returned to his old love on being forsaken by the new?

It was matter of absorbing interest.

And they were coming here to-morrow!

CHAPTER III

Misery ! What shall I say, or do ?
I cannot advise, or, at least, persuade.
Most like, you are glad you deceived me—rue
No whit of the wrong.—R. BROWNING.

THE hours of Monday afternoon crept on.

Sybil paced her drawing-room with restless step. The place was gay with fresh flowers, the tea equipage stood awaiting the travellers. There was no wedding whiteness anywhere—that seemed too much of a mockery.

Every moment since the arrival of Oliver's letter her self-reproach had been growing keener. She ought to have interfered more in the privacy of his disappointment and misery.

From his earliest years, her plan had been to educate his judgment, then to stand aside and let him judge for himself. He was brought up in a home atmosphere lighted by sanity and warmed by affection. He was never unreasonably punished, nor unreasonably indulged. Until now, the mother had had every ground for believing in the success of her methods. Her son was sociable yet home-loving, wide-minded but not vague in his opinions, high-principled, and full of good feeling.

It had seemed to her that if such a man, struck down by his first great grief, desired to retire awhile even from her loving sympathy, and bear his trouble alone, it was her duty to respect his feeling.

Now she was faced by the conviction that she should have broken down every barrier, have gone to him and taken him in her arms, have treated him like the unreasonable child which every man remains, so it seems, to his dying day.

The thought that she had sat quietly here in the comforts of her home, reading new books, watching the blooming of her 'Sir Watkins' and enjoying life in her usual, comfortable routine, while he had been throwing to the winds, in the madness of his aching heart, every rule by which he had hitherto felt himself bound, well, it was a horror which came between herself and sleep, between herself and God.

He was not yet twenty-nine, and his life was over. He was done for.

The sound of wheels broke upon her musings. By a horrible coincidence, they were just then tolling the church bell for a defunct parishioner. The slow knell struck upon her ear in the gusts of the spring wind, mingled with the rumbling of the station fly which brought the visible doom of her son nearer and nearer—to her very door.

She trembled in every limb as she came out into that hall which Mona Letts admired so truly.

She wore a long, graceful gown, of subdued colour and rich, soft fabric. Her hair was well arranged. She was hardly the mother-in-law for whom Oliver's wife might feel prepared.

The cold drops of a sleet shower, and the wedding couple, came in together. She saw a thin, pale girl in a blue serge coat and skirt and a dark, plain hat. The image of something showy and pretentious, something a little in the inferior actress style, which had haunted her fancy, faded. But she barely remarked her dowdy daughter-in-law for the moment, so hungrily did her eyes fly to the face of her son as

after paying the driver, he turned and came slowly in, one hand in his breeches pocket.

It was like looking upon a stranger. Not one trait of her Oliver was visible, in the hard, lowering mask, upon which the smile which was half a sneer sat so oddly.

"Well, mother, this is my wife," he said harshly. He rubbed his hands together. "I hope you have a good fire, it's abominably cold."

Could she find a voice to answer him? Could she continue this scene, or should she break down there and then, and throw herself weeping into his arms?

Her reproachful pride came to her rescue. "There is a very good fire," she said evenly, "and I am sure you must both want a cup of tea."

She turned to the dumb girl, holding out her hand in encouragement; "Come," said she, "you look very cold."

Taking the limp fingers, which felt like ice inside the glove, she led her son's wife into the panelled room, fragrant with freesias and hyacinths, rosy with firelight, saturated with the atmosphere of home. Before the hearth, she turned and faced the new-comer, holding her at arm's length and gazing into her white face. The child looked scared to death. The fear, the shrinking in her wide eyes, were painful to witness. The tension of Mrs. Brendon's nerves displayed itself in a little laugh. "My dear, please don't be so terrified, I am not going to eat you," she cried rallying.

"What do you mean? I am not afraid of you," returned the stranger, in low, tense tones, charged with some emotion which she could not fathom.

"That is all right," she said, dropping with almost a shudder the cold stiff hands she held. "Sit

down, take off your coat, make yourself at home. Have you come up from Brighton to-day?"

The girl paused a moment before replying. "To-day? Was it to-day?" she said. "It must have been. It seems so long ago. . . ."

Sybil set down the cream-jug and stared at the strained features. It was not a common face. At present the predominant expression of scared unhappiness was so marked as to prevent one from knowing what kind of woman this would be, in her normal aspect. Mrs. Oliver Brendon looked half-starved. Her eyes were very dark, her hair, so far as appeared under her not very becoming hat, was a pale, dull brown.

At this moment Oliver entered the room; and as he came, his wife flinched, visibly, as though she dreaded a blow. This was preposterous. It made Sybil so indignant that she almost spoke. Colour flamed in her face. This slip of a typist, this little nobody, who had secured such a prize, to sit there looking as if her husband ill-treated her!

Oliver walked to the fireplace and stooped to warm his hands at the blaze. "By George, Brighton is a beastly place in the March winds," he remarked disparagingly.

"Well, why did you go there?" asked his mother tartly. "Don't talk as if I sent you. Anyway, here you are, back home again. Give your wife her tea, and tell me what I am to call her."

Oliver took the cup of tea and handed it to the girl, who had drawn off her gloves, revealing a pair of slender hands, almost purple with cold, and a plain gold ring upon the wedding finger. "What in the world is your name?" he asked carelessly, as he took a sandwich. "I've heard it, of course, but I've forgotten."

Two red spots appeared on the white cheeks; but she turned to her mother-in-law and answered the question to her. "My Christian name is Astrid," she said.

"Astrid! That's an unusual name. I think I shall find it easy to remember. Have you known my son long?"

"Three years," was the reply.

There was an awkward silence. Sybil was fighting valiantly, but how unexpectedly cruel of Oliver not to come to her rescue!

"I need not say," she observed, after a pause which the married pair evidently were not going to break, "I need not say how truly I wish you happiness. My son"—here she became aware that her voice was not to be trusted—"my son is all I have."

"Poor mother! You're badly off," said Oliver, still in his harsh, forced tones. "Well, what news in the village since I left? Who was the bell tolling for?"

"Old Mr. Knevett. He is gone at last. I feel thankful for his poor wife and children."

"Yes, poor old buffer, he has had a long and difficult exit," said Oliver. "And the Colonel? Has he been to see you often?"

"My dear Oliver, you know the Colonel is in Egypt."

"By Jove I had forgotten it. You must have been horribly lonely."

"Well, now I have you back," replied Sybil steadily, in her thrilling voice; "and my new daughter, to keep me company."

Again there was a silence which seemed full of unuttered things. Then Oliver felt in his pocket, pulled out a paper and tossed it on Sybil's lap.

"There's the new *Penman*," he said. "I think it's pretty good."

She looked down at the paper, up at him. "Since the paper was out, you might have taken a longer honeymoon," she said.

"Oh, not this beastly weather," he flung back carelessly.

"If Astrid has had enough tea, I had better take her upstairs," said Sybil, after a while.

The girl turned and cast a look at her husband, a curious look which his mother could not read. As the two ladies rose, he also rose, and taking his wife's gloves and little hand-bag, he gave them to her. She turned, without a word spoken, and followed her hostess upstairs.

The communicating rooms which Sybil had prepared were warm and bright with firelight. She chattered kindly for a few minutes, showing the silent girl the resources of drawers and wardrobes, and that the bath-room was just across the passage. She spoke of the difficulty they had had in arranging their hot-water supply in the old house, and added the information that she herself was born there.

Her daughter-in-law listened silently, but not altogether unresponsively. She seemed to be putting pressure upon herself to seem interested. Her one trunk lay upon the stand, unstrapped. She declined an offer of Drew's assistance in her unpacking.

"Well then, I will leave you to change. There is plenty of time, you need not hurry. Put your toes on the fender and rest after your journey. I dare say the last two days have seemed crowded with experiences," said Mrs. Brendon sympathetically. "I must hear all about it, presently, must I not? . . . And you will forgive me if I seem just a little unresponsive. An only son's marriage means a great

deal to a widowed mother, and . . . and this was abrupt. . . ."

She had to break off, biting her lip.

The girl, who had turned her back, and was standing with clenched hands, cried out suddenly—"I never knew Mr. Brendon had a mother!"

"No?" Sybil paused a moment. This girl had known her son three years. In all that time he had never mentioned his mother! It seemed conclusive proof of the slightness of their acquaintance. But at this moment she felt that she dare not touch the subject. It was too horribly new, the wound was bleeding—"You must tell me all about it, later on," she murmured, and escaped from the room.

In the drawing-room stood Oliver, before the fire, facing her, as he was wont to do. The awfulness of the wreck and ruin that were there, hidden under the happy guise of home comfort and wonted life, made her feel so ill that she hesitated to enter. His expression drew her. Her boy was in danger, she felt—almost could she have told herself that he was possessed by a devil. Her duty was to go to his rescue.

She crossed the room, carefully closing the door behind her, went up to him, and stood confronting him. It was a look that besought his confidence. There was no reproach in it.

"Well, Oliver?"

"Well," he replied doggedly. "I have consoled myself, you see."

She turned away. "The mother who had no place in your confidence before the thing was done is doubtless outside your counsels now."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well, a man had better be married," he said.

"No matter to whom?"

"With one exception, women are just the same to me."

"And you will punish this poor child for the fault of a heartless little flirt? Oliver, think what you have done. What are you going to do with your wife? What kind of future lies before you?"

"Future? None at all. No need to worry about that," he answered lightly. "My future is all over."

"Your future . . . but hers? What of hers?"

He made a scornful sound. "She must take her chance, as other women do."

She gazed upon him blankly for a few minutes.

"Is this my fault?" she muttered, under her breath.

"Well," said her son, breaking the silence, "I think I'll go and have a pipe before dinner."

"No," said Sybil firmly, "you will not. You will stay and tell me about your wife. You have brought her here, to your home, to your mother. Tell me whether she is such a woman as I can receive as my daughter-in-law."

He stood contemplating his well-kept nails, his eyes lowered. "She is quite a good girl, mother," he said quietly, "if that is what you mean."

"It is what I mean. If that is so, if she is a good girl, as you say, how came she to marry you in such a fashion—a fashion so disastrous to herself and to me?"

"Well, I don't know. She has no relations, practically, except one or two aunts in Ireland. There was no need to make a fuss."

"She tells me that she never even knew of my existence!"

"Oh!" he looked up. "She told you that! Well, apparently I did not mention it. Hang it all, mother," he added with sudden irritation, "if I had

let you know, you would have stopped it, would you not?"

"Yes. I should. It would have been my duty to stop you if I could on hearing that you contemplated any act of insanity, even a less tragic one than that you have chosen."

His look changed. "Nonsense about insanity," he said. "I married the girl to save myself from that. She's all right—quite good company when she comes out of this curious attitude which she has adopted almost ever since the ceremony. I want you to take her in hand, and get her some clothes and so on. She has possibilities. Only she must be taken the right way."

"Which you, so far, don't seem to have succeeded in doing," flashed Sybil.

"Oh, she'll be all right," he answered irritably.

"I shan't beat her."

"She looks as though that were what she expected."

"She expects the moon," was the curt response.

"When she finds she can't get it, she will settle down all right. You won't dislike her, I promise you, mother."

"I like her a great deal better than I like you, at the present moment," she cried, as she fled from the room for fear of a complete breakdown.

CHAPTER IV

My lord was pale with inward strife,
And Nell was pale with pride ;
My lord gazed long on pale Maud Clare
Or ever he kissed the bride.—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

Mrs. OLIVER BRENDON made her appearance for dinner, attired in a white silk blouse which had obviously been washed and ironed many times. It was quite clean, but the lace which trimmed it had grown limp and cottony, and it was far too loose for the uncomfortably slim form which it covered. With it the bride wore a black skirt, also of an elderly appearance. A string of blue beads completed her toilette.

Sybil felt ashamed of her own grey satin and lace and enamels. She knew her son had married a girl without money; but to be without money to the extent of not possessing an evening frock, "even of any kind," was an extreme she had not anticipated.

Fortunately, nobody was present to-night but herself; but she felt that the incongruous attire of his wife must impress her fastidious son unfavourably. To the woman's mind it showed one thing clearly enough. The girl was no money-grabber. Had she been she would have extorted some money to buy clothes; she would not have risked such a first appearance, before the critical eyes of a mother-in-law. Oliver had said he wished his mother to take her in hand and get her some clothes. Sybil wondered

whether so dowdy a girl would ever buy or wear the right thing.

She felt quite paralysed by misery as the three sat down, on three sides of the dining-table, to discuss their well-served little meal. Where could she begin? How try to break down the wall, or bridge the gulf, between herself and this gauche girl from the unknown?

"You have been typewriting professionally, my son tells me?" she asked presently. "How long have you been in London?"

"Six years," said Astrid unemotionally.

"And your home was——?"

"In Ireland."

Oliver raised his head. His mother caught his glance guiltily. No questions as to his wife's antecedents must be discussed before the servants. With obvious determination to change the subject, he began to talk to his mother about *Fire from the Cloud*, the book which was then making a sensation—that very book which she had been reading with such enjoyment when his letter was brought to her. The mere thought of it hurt her physically. Never again could she be or feel as she had been before the terrible moment. As she replied to Oliver's temperate but acute criticism, she felt like Andersen's mermaid, dancing on the swords. He addressed her as if his wife were not present. His manner towards the unlucky girl was that of cold, civil displeasure. Sybil resented it, and tried to include the girl in the conversation. "Have you read it?" she asked, alluding to the book with an encouraging little smile.

"No," replied Astrid. Apparently she had no wish to converse. She let the monosyllable stand quite alone, while her eyes were once more bent upon her plate. Sybil noticed that she ate very little.

"Do you not care for reading?" she asked, more

coldly than she had previously spoken. A girl so entirely without physical allurements should at least be intelligent.

"Oh, yes, I like it; but I have not much time for reading," was the slow reply.

"You will have more time in future," suggested the mother-in-law.

Astrid raised her eyes for the first time to her face. "Do you think so?" she said in a voice which implied, "I doubt it."

"Of course mother thinks so," broke in Oliver. "She has kept house for one man all her life, and she knows it is a pursuit which leaves a very fair margin for self-culture. You must get her to teach you the ropes."

To this his wife made no reply at all; and after an uncomfortable interval, he went on talking to Sybil of the things which interested them both—the new editor of this paper, and the change of proprietorship of the other.

At last the nightmare meal was over, and Mrs. Brendon rose from table and proceeded with her daughter-in-law, not into the morning-room, where they always passed the evenings when alone, but into the drawing-room, in honour of the bride.

"Do you smoke?" asked Sybil kindly. "If so you will like to go and smoke with Oliver when we have drunk our coffee."

"I don't smoke," replied Astrid.

Her lack of response was evidently intentional. There seemed no doubt that this could not be her normal attitude. Oliver was indeed half crazy with disappointment, but he could not, in any frame of mind, have chosen a companion so dull, so colourless, so almost surly, as the girl now appeared. She was in an abnormal frame of mind—either horribly shy,

or bitterly disappointed—or even bitterly resentful. The latter was the explanation which came most readily to Sybil's mind. Resentful—but of what?

They sat down, on either side of the fire, facing each other across the hearthrug. The post had just come in, and a little brass tray of letters stood upon the Moorish table at Sybil's elbow. She began, with a murmured apology, to open and skim through her correspondence. Silence fell.

There were one or two notes which demanded thought, and the hostess lost herself for some minutes in consideration of these. Meanwhile Oliver's wife sat staring into the fire. Her shoulders were bent, her hands fell limply over the edge of her lap, her thoughts were apparently both absorbing and depressing. After a furtive glance at her *vis-à-vis*, she raised her eyes to the room in which she found herself. Slowly she considered it. From the mezzotints of the eighteenth century, the secretaire, the bookcases, the grand piano, she travelled on to lighter things—tiny bow-legged tulip-wood bibelots of the empire, with frivolous vases, and bowls of blossoming bulbs—a few photos, some curios in silver, and finally an orange-coloured toy spaniel, curled up asleep upon the sweep of his mistress's grey gown.

From the dog, that searching gaze naturally advanced to the dog's mistress, smiling over a note held in daintily kept fingers.

The waved hair was only slightly grey, the face fresh and soft, almost unwrinkled; the eyes were still very pretty, with shadowy lashes. It was the face of a woman who knows her world and is assured of her place therein—a reposeful face, yet full of light and shade.

It was probably the probing of those questioning eyes which caused her to look up. "Well," she said,

"this is too bad of me! To be reading letters when it is my duty to make friends with you. Will you forgive it if I ask some questions? I want to know all about you."

Astrid made no reply. Her attitude seemed to imply that, having put herself in a position which made questions allowable, it was now too late to object. At least, that was what was suggested to Sybil's mind by the passive resistance of her daughter-in-law.

"You tell me you were born in Ireland. . . . Oh, I beg your pardon, let me give you a fire-screen—is that better? I am inconsiderate, for I love to stare into the coals, and forget that others have sensitive skins, or eyes—well, will you tell me something of your parents? I conclude that you are an orphan; in fact, I think Oliver said so."

"Yes. Father and mother both died at the same time. It was diphtheria. There was something wrong with our house."

"That is very sad. How long ago?"

"I was about twelve. Father was a clergyman; he had a parish in Ulster."

"Indeed! Then upon his death there was no home for you?"

"No. Mother had a sister, Miss Nolan, my aunt, who lives in Dublin. She is very badly off. Father left just enough money for me to be educated. I lived with Aunt Kathie. As soon as I was old enough I came to London to earn my living."

The information was given as one gives something that may not be withheld. "I have to say this, so I may as well get it said," was the idea conveyed.

"You are a brave girl," said Sybil kindly. "I am very sorry for you. But now you must try

and grow used to the idea that your loneliness is over, and that you have a home and a family."

A sort of shudder passed across the thin frame, and Astrid gave a short, mocking laugh, or rather scoff.

Sybil looked at her in ever-increasing perplexity. Something in her face suggested that it would be better to be quite straightforward with her. After a hesitation the mother went on :

"I must own that I was hurt and surprised that my only son should marry without informing me of the fact—that his wife should be an utter stranger. But now that you *are* his wife, you cannot be a stranger to me—at least, it is my earnest hope that we may be friends."

The girl peered at her from half-shut eyes. She seemed to suspect insincerity in this speech. Her lip curled, and she made a curious gesture with arms and shoulders as though retiring into her shell and shutting the door.

Sybil made a supreme effort. "Oliver chose you, and he has good taste," she said bravely. "I take you on trust."

The girl's manner changed. Quite suddenly, gripping the arms of her chair, she leaned forward towards the other woman, her eyes all ablaze.

"Tell me what made him do it," she said thickly. "What is the game? The thing behind? Why am I dragged here, to his home, where I am not wanted? What did he want with me? That is what I demand to know—what I am going to find out."

It is hard to analyse Sybil's emotions during this speech. She turned from red to white as she contemplated the excitement which was shaking the speaker from head to foot.

"I think," she said temperately, "that you are

more likely to be able to answer that question than I am. I never so much as heard your name, until Oliver wrote to me that he had married you. You say you have been acquainted for some years. You probably know more of him than his mother has ever done."

"I know nothing at all about him! He is a stranger to me, a complete stranger——"

"Then forgive me if I inquire," interposed Sybil, with dignity, "why, in that case, you became his wife? In my opinion, that is the question which needs an answer most urgently."

As she spoke the bell pealed through the house, and in a flash she realised what had happened. The Colonel had returned, and had dropped in as was his habit, to greet them and hear their news. He always came in after dinner. He had been away, and Sybil was ignorant of his return; otherwise she would have instructed Drew to say that she was not receiving. Now it was too late. She heard his voice in the hall, and the cheery bark of his Aberdeen terrier.

"We have a visitor," said she, rising in vexation. "I apologise, I had no idea he would come, or I would not have let him interrupt our first evening!"

Before Astrid could reply Drew opened the door, and Colonel Waring walked in.

"Hallo, Mrs. Brendon! How are you? I only got back this afternoon from Cairo, and thought I would run up."

Sybil had sprung from her seat and traversed half the room to meet him. The high back of the chair occupied by Mrs. Oliver concealed the slight figure altogether from view. He continued without pause.

"I was anxious to find out how Oliver was taking it—I saw the Faulkners, you know, at Shepherd's, on my way down——"

"O, did you really?" said Sybil, with a gasp and an unreal little laugh. "You must tell me all about that later. Let me now present to you my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Oliver—whose acquaintance I have only just made myself."

The Colonel stopped short. He was an erect, healthy man of fifty-seven or thereabouts—with white hair and moustache, but an air of fitness and energy which forbade one associating the idea of age with him. His honest grey eyes rested upon his old friend with a look of startled sympathy, merging into a profound compassion.

There was but the slightest pause before he said:

"I shall, of course, be delighted to meet your daughter-in-law."

"Astrid," said Sybil, applying her tongue to the syllables of the name with firmness, "here is a very old friend. I am glad he should be the first to wish you joy."

Mrs. Oliver rose slowly from her seat and faced them. Her mother-in-law, wincing from the anticipation of the effect her appearance must create, had a shock of surprise. For the first time it struck her that the girl possessed a queer, elvish beauty, of the Rossetti type. There was a spot of colour in either cheek, her eyes were still aflame as when she uttered her challenge to Sybil.

"Many congratulations," said the Colonel, taking her hand. "I may safely offer them. You are indeed a young woman to be congratulated, not only upon your husband, though I admit there is not much to complain of there, as young men go; but upon your relationship to this lady, than whom I

know none nobler—no, not in Britain.” He raised Sybil’s hand to his lips as he spoke.

Astrid made no reply. Her look expressed bewilderment. She sat down again upon her chair, while the Colonel also seated himself and Sybil stood with one slim foot resting upon the fender.

“Go, Astrid, to the smoking-room, and tell Oliver that the Colonel is here,” said she.

The young woman opened her mouth as though to object, but thought better of it, rose, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Between those two a deep silence fell. Walter Waring was powerless to break it. He knew she dare not speak, for fear of losing self-control. At last she hazarded a word, with quivering lip :

“Quick work, was it not ?”

“Amazing !” said the Colonel. “He took his jilting hard, I suppose.”

Her eyes swept him keenly. “So you understand ? You feel that is a sort of explanation ? You try to kill one pain by starting another ? There is a freemasonry among men which enables them to understand a thing like that. I cannot hope to do it. I am outside.” The vehemence of her anger caused her to forget her grief, and speak on passionately. “If it had been a ballet-girl—something with yellow hair, and white teeth, and artificial roses and lilies—I believe I could have understood it better. But that girl—why that girl ? With the world full of girls !”

“I doubt if Oliver’s world is full of girls,” said the Colonel thoughtfully. “All the better for him, for you, and for her. I suppose it was simply that he could have her for the asking, wasn’t it ?”

“I suppose it was ; but really you can hardly guess how little I know about it. When he got the

news of Vivien's change of mind he went away from me—I expect he had, deep down at the bottom of his heart, the knowledge that I never liked Vivien, nor thought her suitable. Had the girl he cared for died, he would have come to his mother for comfort—I know he would—but this was different.”

“Yes, yes. How well you understand him !”

“Walter, I don't understand him the least bit in the world ! It seemed to me that a man of his age, bred to habits of self-control, and with strong principles, would grapple with a trouble like his and get the better of it. I did not like being cast out, but I determined to bear it, and not worry him. I ought instead to have gone to London, taken possession of him, whether he repulsed me or not, and allowed him to pour out all that was in his heart ! He might have vented all his misery on me, I could have borne it, I am his mother . . . but I left him, as I have always done, to his own good feeling. I said, 'He is the result of my wonderful, highly specialised training—he will justify it.' And this is the end of it all !”

After a pause Colonel Waring asked, “What is she like ? Will she hold him ?”

“She has never had hold of him, even for a moment, as far as I can see. He seems quite unlike himself. All that I can be sure of at present is that she resents the way he is treating her.”

“Is he not kind to her ?”

“They do not seem to me to be at all on good terms. No wonder ! How he must despise a woman that could consent to such a marriage ! She told me almost directly she arrived that he had not mentioned my existence to her ; and when I asked him her Christian name he did not know it ! What is to be done ?”

He puckered his mouth in a silent whistle. "I suppose they really are married, all fair and square?"

"Oh, beyond doubt. He would never affront me by—ah, yes, he *has* put a serious affront upon me, but that would be unpardonable."

"When were they married?"

"On Saturday morning."

"And this is Monday! He brought her here to-day?"

"To-day."

"Well," remarked the Colonel, after another interval, "he's been and gone and done it, hasn't he?"

Sybil raised her handkerchief to her eyes, and after drying them, held it over her mouth, whose lines she could not control.

"They seem to be dallying in the smoking-room," remarked the Colonel presently. "Is that a hopeful sign?"

"I don't expect she went there," returned Mrs. Brendon. "I suppose her to have gone up to her room."

"Well, but this is very serious——"

"You may well say so."

"Shall I go into the smoking-room and make sure?"

"Yes, do. See what you make of him. He may say more to you than he will to me. I feel as if he were some relative whom I had met this afternoon for the first time."

"What makes it more pitiable is the fact that I don't think Vivien at all certain to marry this man Railton," said the Colonel slowly.

"Good heavens, Walter! Don't say a word of that to Oliver!"

"Not quite such a fool, my dear. But I will own

that I came in to-night with an idea of heartening the boy up. The thing was engineered by Lady Faulkner, and the silly little girl was caught by the man's flattery, and the presents he gave her. I believe the sight of Oliver in the flesh would have disillusioned her. Railton is plain and rather stumpy, but with a Yankee tongue. Told her a lot of stuff about the position of woman in America, and how she would be a goddess and a queen, and what a grand time she would have in Newport. "I don't believe for a moment that he is in the Newport set."

"Oh, Walter, how perfectly dreadful it all is! . . . When are the Faulkners expected home?"

"In another fortnight, I believe. Railton wants to get married at once. He is head-over-ears in love, and has the sense to see that he must secure the volatile creature at once if at all."

Sybil raised her two hands and let them drop, with a despairing gesture. "Well, he has rolled the stone upon his own grave. As for me, if I had to choose between Vivien and Astrid for my daughter-in-law, I believe I should choose Astrid. Her father was an Ulster Protestant. It is not a lovable type, but it has backbone; and the Faulkners have none."

"You are right, as usual," he said, rising with the intention of seeking Oliver. As he turned to leave the room the door opened, and the young man entered, with a bundle of proofs in his hand.

"Hallo, Colonel, you got back?" he said, with a slight start. "Been in—in Egypt, haven't you?"

"Yes. I am glad to be back again; the heat was beginning to be pretty bad—an early spring. I have just been presenting to your wife, and must offer my good wishes."

"Thanks. Where has she gone, mother?" said Oliver, coming to the hearth.

"I don't know, Oliver. I asked her to go to the smoking-room to tell you that the Colonel was here."

"That young woman does not know her wifely duties yet," said Oliver, with a smile which his mother did not like. "I shall have to try and be a bit of a Petruchio, till I have tamed her."

"I can't see you in that rôle, my boy," said Colonel Waring.

Oliver laughed. "My family seems to have settled upon what kind of rôle I am fit for, very early in my career," he remarked. "Perhaps I shall astonish you all before I have done."

"I think that is accomplished already, Oliver," said his mother softly. "Nothing that you could do would astonish me now." She was sorry for her bitterness immediately; but it escaped—there was no holding it.

Her son ignored her remark completely. With no further allusion to his marriage, he sat down, and began to turn over the galley-slips in his hand. "It's a happy chance, your being here, Colonel. Here is an article about Tetuan, and the man seems to me to have made a serious mistake. If he is right in that respect, I shall print the thing, for it is good. But I can't think that what he says about the French garrison will hold water. Give me your opinion."

With a glance at Sybil, the Colonel set himself to read and discuss the article in question.

After a while the mother slipped away, mindful of her guest, who seemed to have retired for the night.

She found the door of Astrid's room locked, and her voice spoke through the panels. "What is it?"

"May I come in? I am anxious that you should have all you want, and to tell you about breakfast, and so on."

"I have everything, thank you. I can't very well let you in just now."

"What time would you like to be called?"

"I do not want to be called, thanks. I wake early. What time is breakfast? If you tell me that, I will be punctual."

"But what time shall she bring your tea?"

"I would rather not have any, thank you."

"But Oliver always has it."

"Of course. He will be in the next room, and will tell you what time he wants to be called."

Sybil turned away, her face white. Astrid did indeed appear to require instruction in her wifely duties. But the mother-in-law did not feel by any means ready to impart such instruction.

Suddenly she felt old, and all alone in the world, as she turned from that locked door.

CHAPTER V

You shall see how the devil spends
A fire God gave for other ends !
I tell you, I stride up and down
This garret, crowned with love's best crown,
And feasted with love's perfect feast,
To think I kill for her at least,
Body and soul and peace and fame,
Alike youth's end, and manhood's aim.

R. BROWNING.

BEFORE she slept, there were words which Sybil Brendon must say to her son.

She must know whether he was going to town the following morning, leaving his wife and herself to each other's society ; and above all she must manage to convey to him the Colonel's disquieting information concerning the imminent return of the Faulkners.

Before their arrival Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Brendon must be safely bestowed in some home of their own, out of reach of Thackridge tongues.

She waited until she heard the Colonel departing, as he always did, upon the stroke of half-past ten. Then she went down into the drawing-room and resolutely took her accustomed place, with the plain intention of remaining there for the present. Oliver had just switched off the light of the little lamp which always stood beside her chair. He switched it on again, with the remark :

" Going to burn the midnight oil ? "

" No," said she, taking up her crochet, that she

might have occupied hands and eyes in the forthcoming interview, "I won't keep you up long, but there are one or two things I would like to know before you go upstairs. Are you intending to go to the office to-morrow?"

He stood upon the hearthrug, his hands thrust into his pockets, one foot pushing a coal to and fro upon the hearth of white tiles. "I must," he replied. "I always go on Tuesdays."

"And will you leave your wife with me?"

"Have you any objection?"

"I have made up my mind to receive her, Oliver, but we must come to some understanding. You have chosen to marry this girl, and you are responsible for her."

He did not answer for a time. At last, "Look here, mother," he said, in an odd, suppressed voice, "I am going to ask you a favour. You must guess that I am feeling pretty bad about the way I have treated you, and—and other things. Will you let it all rest for a few days—say a week or two—and give me time to try and collect the scattered fragments of my old self? I know it is asking a lot, and you have had much to bear already—but if you would just accept the situation for a week or two, and try to get on as well as you can with—with Mrs. Oliver—perhaps I shall be more able to look things in the face."

"I should be glad to postpone such talk as this for ever, Oliver," she replied, in a voice of pain which was more pitiful than much anger. "But as to what you suggest—that you and—and Mrs. Oliver—should remain here a fortnight—there is a serious objection to that. To begin with, it seems to me that you need a longer honeymoon—time to grow used to one another, before you are ready to face the keen

eyes and ears of this interested little suburb. The other objection is more weighty. The Colonel tells me that the Faulkners will be back in a fortnight; and you would certainly not wish to be here then."

He showed no discomposure. "I know they are coming back in a fortnight," he replied. "That is the very reason why I wish to be here, with my wife. What I would ask you to do, is to see that she has good clothes—very good ones—I would like her to have a really swell turn-out for the wedding. Have a taxi to-morrow and take her to town before anybody sees her. It was unlucky old Waring coming in this evening, but he is all right, he will not talk. Let her have good boots, and good hats, and her hair properly done. You are the person to persuade her."

Sybil was so astonished that it was long before she could answer. This was the reason, then, for his extraordinary marriage—he wanted to flaunt his wife in Vivien's face!—But in that case, why choose the typewriting Miss Carey? Why not somebody showy?

"I have not much faith in my power to persuade your wife to anything, Oliver," she replied at length. "She is not easy to know."

"No, by Jove, she's not," replied the young man, with a sudden wistful relapse into his own, almost boyish home manner, which brought a lump in his mother's throat. "Thought she was the kind of girl you could do anything with," he said. "Shows how much I know about it, doesn't it? However, the thing now is to try and pacify her as much as you can, until after the Faulkner wedding. After that, she may go to the devil, for all I care."

With these horrible words, he turned and walked to the door. Sybil bowed her head upon her hands.

She thought of the girl's sudden, vehement appeal. "Why did he marry me? What was his game?"

He, her son, her upright, gentle-natured Oliver, had sacrificed this poor girl to his own pique, his humiliation and sense of injury.

And it was foolish, fluffy Vivien who had twisted him out of his place and broken him; exposed his weakness, laid bare his defects of character.

As long as his life had pleased him, and flowed through easy channels, he had been so delightful and so good that his own mother had no idea of the elements of his nature.

"Well, mother," he said, coming back to the fire, "will you do what you can with her?"

"Oliver," she cried hotly, "you cheated that poor girl—you made her think you cared about her?"

"I did nothing of the sort," he answered, with equal heat. "I said, 'Will you marry me?' and she said, 'Yes, certainly.' I mean to be jolly kind to her if she behaves herself. But I can tell you she had better mind what she is about."

Sybil rose, making half blindly for the door. "Oh, Oliver, you make me shudder!"

"I am sorry. I told you I am not fit to discuss these things. I am not in my right mind—not normal yet, by a long way. Do as I beg you—let it all rest for the present, and help me to make the girl presentable."

"I think it quite unlikely that she will submit to the process."

"Mother, that's nonsense. She has jolly well got to do as I choose."

"You don't know what you are talking about. If you imagine that the modern husband can make sumptuary laws and have them obeyed, it merely shows how much you have to learn. I remember a friend of

ours once took a fancy to a girl who had many good points, but a floppy appearance. He said he could easily persuade her to wear corsets after marriage; and married her in that delusive hope! Poor fellow! His struggle did not last long! A determined girl will wear nothing that she does not fancy."

"Tut, tut, there are ways and means," said Oliver irritably. He turned away. "Then you won't try."

She wrestled with herself. Bad as things were they might be worse if she insisted upon the newly married couple leaving her at once.

"I will try, but I do not promise to succeed."

"'Tis not with mortals to command success,' as I know to my cost. Good night, mother. Can you make up your mind to kiss me?"

"Honestly, Oliver, I don't think I can. You seem to me too wholly odious."

"That is apparently my wife's opinion, as well as my mother's. I'm a lost soul! My fiancée jilts me, my wife won't let me come near her, and my mother won't kiss me. There remains only drink or suicide."

"Oliver, don't talk like that! Don't talk at all! As you wisely suggested at the first, let us put off all this discussion. I must kiss you, good or bad, because you are my son, and nothing can alter that!"

Next morning Astrid came down to breakfast punctually upon the sounding of the gong. She still wore her air of frigid composure. Sybil made spasmodic efforts to talk, but Astrid's ears were evidently on the alert for the sound of her husband's approach.

He entered, not more than five minutes late, and went to where his mother sat presiding over the

coffee, kissing her with an air of spontaneous affection. Then he turned, looked at his wife, and said drily, "Good morning."

She flushed uneasily as she replied "Good morning."

"I hope you slept well, but you don't look it," went on Oliver. "You have dark marks under your eyes."

"I drank coffee yesterday evening. It kept me awake," she answered, with an odd mixture of fear and defiance.

"When you get used to Thackridge air, you won't find that coffee has any effect," said Oliver lightly, with an air of wishing to soothe her. "If my mother has time, I want you and her to have a great day in the West End among the shops."

Astrid looked surprised. His conciliatory attitude was unexpected. Her husband leaned across and put a cheque in her plate. "That is for your trousseau," he told her; "it is not your first quarter's allowance. You are to spend it all upon such things as you want."

The girl made a quick movement, pushing the slip of paper from her.

"I have some money of my own. I will buy what I want, thank you," she replied.

"What independence!" said Sybil playfully.

"I am on your side, Astrid! Don't let him be King Cophetua, or he will be unbearable! But if he means this for a wedding present, I suppose it would be ungracious to refuse it, would it not?"

The large, sombre eyes were turned questioningly upon the speaker. "Could I make a friend of you? Dare I trust you, in this terrible impasse wherein I am landed?" they seemed to be asking.

Sybil was still smiling.

"I expect he did not think to give you much of

a wedding present, did he? Men are like that, when they try to do things all alone!"

Astrid looked down upon her hand, where her wedding ring lay in solitude. "I don't want presents," she faltered.

"You take yourself and life too seriously, young woman. My father used to say—'Never refuse money when it is offered you.' I might add—'Especially if it is offered by your husband, who certainly ought to have provided it before!' Put that cheque in your pocket, and you and I will go to town and buy frocks together."

Astrid nerved herself to speak. "I must go to town to see about some work," she remarked.

"Work! What kind of work?"

"Another typewriting post."

Sybil looked grave. "What does Oliver say to that?"

Oliver answered quickly—"She knows I do not wish it."

"Suppose you were to take a month's holiday?" suggested her mother-in-law. "Oliver has acted inconsiderately, he has hurried you, and you look worn out. Let us see what a month's rest and quiet here, as my guest, will do for you. Will you think it over? Stay here a month with me, and at the end of that time, should you still wish to go to typewriting again, perhaps we might persuade Oliver to take a different view of the matter."

"I think that's an excellent idea, mother," said Oliver placably.

Astrid looked earnestly upon him.

Sybil saw with wonder the hostility, the deep distrust which her look embodied. From the son, the stranger girl's eyes wandered to his mother, surprising on her face the close questioning of a

thorough bewilderment. Astrid grew red, made an effort, and said under her breath:

"Very well, then, a month. That is, if you tell me that at the end of that month I shall be free to decide as I think proper."

"You shall," said Oliver, quite readily. "You shall go to the moon if you really want to, if you will just play up now, and do as mother asks you."

With the words, he rose from the table, gathered up his letters and left the room. Silence fell between the two women sitting there together in their utter incongruity.

"Well," said the mother-in-law, rising at length, "I must go and give orders. What time would you like to start? There is a good train in about an hour's time, and Oliver will send us up a fly from the station."

"Any time," said Astrid mechanically, "it is all the same to me. She too rose; and after hesitation, asked this question: "Shall we have time to go into the National Gallery, do you think?"

Sybil paused, in act to leave the room. "The National Gallery? I dare say. You want to go there?"

"I have never seen the new Van der Neer by daylight yet," said the girl timidly, but appealingly.

"You are fond of pictures?"

"Yes." The reply did not sound enthusiastic. "I suppose," she added slowly, "that Mr. Brendon will not mind my doing my weekly half-column for the *Art Companion*, will he?"

"I should think not, certainly."

"I should be sorry to lose that. It is half a guinea a week," said Astrid unemotionally; and turning aside, she opened a newspaper, and glanced at it.

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

"Then we will start at a quarter to ten, and lunch in town," said Sybil.

A little later, she made her way into Mrs. Oliver's room, in order to ascertain, if she could, what clothes, if any, the girl possessed. Astrid made no objection to showing her poverty of wardrobe.

"I had no time to make clothes," she said, "for I could not afford to lose my last fortnight's wages. I had just bought a whole series of British poets, and it made me very hard up."

"Well, we ought to be able to fit you out well, with this cheque of Oliver's."

"Just as you like," replied the girl, with a sigh.

She was perfectly tractable, if also perfectly passive. There was about her a stillness and restraint which Mrs. Brendon rather admired. Her features, though nothing remarkable, were by no means bad. Her hair had distinct possibilities. Though she seemed to take little interest in their shopping, what few remarks she made were intelligent, and to the point. Her real interest was no doubt centred upon the National Gallery, and the new Dutch pictures which had just been added. While they lunched together—Sybil took her to a restaurant, deciding not to face her Club friends until the young woman was suitably gowned—she explained her keenness by saying that when she was at work she hardly ever had a chance to see pictures by daylight. Her knowledge of what was being exhibited in London was, nevertheless, remarkable.

They had not completed all their purchases until past four, when, after having tea, they returned to one shop where Sybil had chosen a couple of frocks which needed only very slight alteration to be ready for wear. The alterations had been duly made and the bride, now wearing a becoming hat,

was attired in her street suit, the result of the change being more pleasing than Mrs. Brendon had foreseen. It was a comforting fact to her mother-in-law that her under-clothing was in all respects superior to her outer covering.

The second frock, for home evening wear, they carried with them down to Thackridge; and as soon as they arrived home, Sybil found a good deal of pleasure in seeing Astrid put it on.

Its drooping line set off the slimness of her build; and the somewhat bizarre tints of the coloured embroidery, which was a feature of the corsage, harmonised with the light brown hair and soft, deep eyes. Sybil added a Venetian necklace, and found herself quite astonished at the effect which becoming dress will produce. She told her maid to do Mrs. Oliver's hair, and Morris, the maid, was surprised at its abundance. The general effect of the bride was really pleasing. Sybil felt that, with one flash of joy, one charm of expression, she might be a very taking young person. The fashion of her countenance, however, did not change. The tragic look, as of a gambler who has thrown his last stake and lost it, was ever upon the sunless face. She had said nothing all day long in allusion to her marriage, and the elder woman felt that the time for confidences had by no means arrived. There was an uneasy conviction that, as the hour for Oliver's return drew nigh, the cloud grew deeper—that she and her daughter-in-law, or she and her son, might get on admirably; but that for the three of them, there was no such happy possibility.

They were both in the drawing-room together when he entered. A sudden storm of rain had brought him into the house so wet that he had run up to change before facing them. He entered, ready for

dinner, and his eye fell upon the two, one on either side of the hearth. Both were reading. His wife sat a little sideways, to catch the light upon her page. He saw her profile, the turn of her shoulder, the soft full mass of hair that shaded her face at the sides. The sight was cheering. Something no doubt had been accomplished, towards producing the effect he desired. He advanced, in a good mood.

"Well, mother!" he said, kissing her. Then he turned to Astrid: "Well, young woman, how have you been getting on? Come and give me a kiss!"

She raised her eyes, slowly and with an air of abstraction, from the book she held. "Good evening, Oliver," she said, without stirring. Sybil saw him flush, but he kept his composure. "Deep in your book—eh?" he said, sauntering up to where she sat. She was in a large arm-chair, which she only half filled. He sat down upon the arm of it. "What is it absorbs you so?" he asked, with an evident desire to be friendly.

She cast him a glance of contempt, rose, and moved to another chair at some distance. "I am reading the *Life of Whistler*," she told him.

Oliver let his eye rove about the room, glancing at everything except his mother's face. For a moment she thought he was going to resent the snub. He thought better of such a course, however. "There's a very able thing about Whistler's *Nocturnes* in this week's *Art Companion*," he said. "Would you like to see it?"

"Thanks, I don't care to. I wrote it," she answered.

He turned and looked steadily at her. "I did not know you wrote for the *Companion*," he said. His tone was mingled with incredulity. "The article is by some one who does one every week; jolly good they are too; somebody who calls himself Dogberry."

"Do let me look, Oliver. Astrid told me to-day that she wrote every week for the *Companion*," said his mother, coming to the rescue.

He went out of the room, fetched the paper and handed it to her.

"Astrid," said she, "you are just what I have been wanting—somebody who knows her way about among the moderns. She took me to the National Gallery to-day," she went on, addressing Oliver. "What she does not know about that collection, is not worth knowing, I assure you."

There was a ghost of a smile upon the girl's pale face. "But they are not modern," she said.

"We had better go to the Tate to-morrow," laughed Sybil.

"Are you really Dogberry?" asked the young man of his wife.

"Yes, I am," was her answer. She added no more. Beyond replying to direct questions, it seemed that she declined to converse with him. Sybil began to wonder whether she should have courage to probe into the girl's mind, and find out the cause for her inexplicable attitude. She had married the man; he himself, who was certainly truthful, had assured his mother that he had not deceived her with protestations of an affection he could not feel—yet she treated him as though he had done her some unpardonable injury.

Deeply as Sybil, on her son's account, resented this, yet she found herself surmising that the girl must have some reason, which seemed to her valid, for her conduct. Already she was sensible of feeling a certain amount of respect towards this nobody from nowhere. The idea of winning her confidence, though difficult, did not this evening, as it had yesterday, suggest itself as impossible.

CHAPTER VI

Loth to stay, yet to leave her alack,
He half turned away, then he quite turned back :
For courtesy's sake he could not lack
To redeem his own royal pledge ;
Ahead too, the windy heaven lowered black
With a fire-cloven edge.—CHRISTINA ROSSSETTI.

DURING the evening Oliver made no further advance to his wife. After dinner he read aloud to both ladies, Astrid meanwhile busying herself over winding wool for Sybil's crochet. When they went up to bed he made no effort to detain them, but retired to his study to smoke.

The situation was so odd that Sybil lay awake half the night thinking it over. Why had Astrid married Oliver ? Having married him, why did she repudiate him ? How could she acquiesce in the present arrangement of things ?

The next few days brought no clue to such remarkable behaviour. The two ladies continued their shopping, saw a great many pictures, ordered several gowns, to which the bride demurred as unjustifiable extravagance, and by the end of the week found themselves in the position of being fairly good companions, though certainly not friends.

Oliver had evidently made up his mind not to ruffle the surface of the pool. He was polite now to his wife, pointedly including her in the conversation. Upon subjects which interested her she would talk a little ; but she never volunteered a remark or

suggested a topic. With a skill which Sybil half admired she avoided being alone with her husband, and sheered away from any personal note in conversation.

For the first few days, until her clothes were ready and she had found her footing in the house, her mother-in-law invited no guests. But they were sociable people, and well liked, so that there was no doubt that Sunday afternoon would find the drawing-room well filled with acquaintances, come to look at Oliver's wife.

She was unremarkable enough, as most people said after seeing her in church at morning service. But as she sat that afternoon, in a rose-coloured gown, upon a grey couch, with a background of flowering trumpet daffodils, there seemed at least no reason why a young man should *not* have been attracted by her, even if there was no such positive charm as to make one feel that he could not have helped himself.

Colonel Waring was there, and Mona Letts, and the Selbys.

The Selby family comprised two brothers, one of whom, Martin, was on the stage, the other, Dan, a somewhat erratic author. They lived with a sister who suddenly, at the age of thirty-five, was going to be married; and the question of what they should do without her was debated by them as a perennial topic of talk.

Sybil, anxious to see how Astrid would comport herself among strangers, introduced her to Dan, who was big and burly, with fierce blue eyes and a short, fair beard. He was easy to get on with, she reflected, and she made the introduction with the side-note that her daughter-in-law was an art critic and journalist

"An art critic," said Dan, smiling down upon the grave girl. "I am glad to know that it is Art that gets the knocks; it can stand 'em. I could see you were born to criticize something, and I was afraid perhaps it was men."

There was something infectiously amusing about the way this was said. It actually drew a smile from Astrid. "I know nothing about men," she said. "I should not be able to criticize."

"Fudge! You know all about us. I see it in your uncompromising eye. I pity Brendon. He must feel like Feverel did, when the lady who adored his epigrams came to stay in the house and expected them from breakfast onwards."

"I hate epigrams," said Astrid.

"What do you like, now?" asked Dan confidentially, leaning forward and looking round at her.

"Pictures," she replied. He looked pleased. What kind? he wished to know. Soon they were talking with interest. He was hearing that she had never been abroad, nor seen any pictures but such as Dublin and London could furnish. He made several remarks, with a view to ascertaining whether she really knew what she was talking about, and came to the conclusion that she did. From pictures they rambled on to his books, and the comedy he was writing. "We are all writing comedies, you know," he said; "there is not a novelist in London who isn't. That's why there is not a play to be had for love or money. Novelists don't turn into playwrights, any more than single men in barracks turn into plaster saints; for the obvious reason that the novelist is free, but the playwright is limited by the stage. I may change my venue from Timbuctoo to Boston and back again, and describe a railway journey every mile of which is vital to the development of my story. But in a play

it won't do. It all has to take place in somebody's chambers, and all the women of the play have to be got there somehow, and the method mostly adopted is to take away their characters, because then you can put them where you like. It gets monotonous."

"Yet you are trying to write one?"

"Yes, of course. One is always trying to do what one had better not. What I am trying to do is to be original. I want to persuade the British public that there may be an interesting plot which turns on some other subject than the unfaithfulness of a husband or wife. But my actor brother tells me I am a Utopian idiot."

"The convention is very firmly fixed in the public mind, I am afraid," said Astrid. "You see, reviewers will not praise anything else. If you write a book about people whose sense of honour is stronger than their passions, they call it untrue to life."

"I wonder what the average reviewer knows about life!" cried Dan loudly. Oliver caught the remark.

"Hullo, Dan," he said smoothly, "go easy. I'm a reviewer."

"Just so," said Dan, "which proves the truth of what I say. You know nothing about life or anything else, except the stuff they crammed you with at Oxford."

"I shall have to turn Bohemian, Dan, and go out with you in that caravan of yours."

"Do," said Dan eagerly. "Let's have a tour this summer! Your wife, here, seems to me to know everything, but perhaps even she has never tried caravanning—and you and me and Tessa. It may be the last time that Tessa ever takes the road! I am sure Humphrey Spence won't allow it after marriage. Now, Mrs. Brendon, do tell your

husband that you must and will go caravanning with me !”

Tessa Selby struck in and saved Astrid from the necessity of reply. “All right, old man,” she said to her brother. “We will. We will spend the month of June in the van, and Humphrey can come down for week-ends.”

Astrid looked from the brother to the sister, amused. Tessa was a plain woman, with a slim, erect figure and a pleasant face. They seemed the kind of folks one might make friends with. A look of response, almost of eagerness, crept into the bride’s eyes. “I think caravanning must be very good fun,” she said. “It is, when you cook as I can,” replied Dan, with enormous complacency. “But Brendon will have to shed all his lar-di-da tricks if he comes on board. No superior persons allowed to travel with the Sarah Jane.”

Under the stimulus of the Selbys Mrs. Oliver’s colour rose, and those expressions flitted across her face which her mother-in-law had thought would improve her sad features. There was no doubt of her being, in a quiet way, attractive when she smiled. She would be more attractive when she filled out a little, and grew more sure of herself. Mona Letts watched her wistfully. Her opinion of the bride was not high, since she knew the shock which the news had been to her adored Mrs. Brendon. She had, however, come prepared to see some one impossible; and Astrid was certainly not that. Mona asked for an introduction presently, and sat down, prepared to be friendly and patronising; but she obtained only monosyllables. The light all died down and the expression became dull when Astrid talked to an unsympathetic person; and Dan Selby pretty soon elbowed his robust way back to the couch, and

ousted Miss Letts with total unconsciousness that he was so doing. His brother Martin now came up and pressed for an introduction. "I must have a word with you, Mrs. Oliver, just to tell you what an old ass my brother is," he explained. "Whatever you do, don't listen to the tosh he will reel you off about the drama. He is as frightened of a good strong situation as a teetotaller is of whisky. He wants to get the public to drink lemonade, and wonders the managers are not running after him in flocks, clamouring for his work. I am trying, just now, to put a little backbone into the play he is wrestling with—but he won't allow it."

"Yes—an adventuress, with red hair, tea-gown, and diamonds—all the dear old outfit," said Dan, with scorn. "I tell you they all know that adventuress from her cradle to her grave, every crime she has up her sleeve, and the very words with which she will taunt her victim! She only exists so that actresses who can't express any legitimate emotion may have what they call a strong part. I don't like strong parts, any more than I liked that strong haunch of venison we buried in the garden last week, Martin."

"Oh, go along; I can't think how you came to be born masculine; you were cast by nature for the part of the maiden aunt," said his brother.

Dan's blue eyes kindled. "Yes," he observed thoughtfully, "that is one of my pet ideas. Every truly great man has all the modesty, all the tenderness of the woman in him. The true man is man and woman too—if one could teach that, what becomes of the sex problem?"

"If you get rid of the sex problem, what becomes of novelists and playwrights?" mocked Martin playfully.

When they were all gone, Sybil felt as if she had undergone an operation. The worst was over, and had not been so bad as she had expected. Whatever else one might say or think of her, her daughter-in-law was not socially impossible. The Selbys, on departure, had expressed themselves warmly about her. Mona Letts's pitying little hand-pressure and glance did not worry her; for Mona was not likely to judge Astrid justly. Colonel Waring had said simply, "That is a woman with a good deal of character. I wouldn't go bail for the sweetness of her temper, though."

Sybil looked appealingly into the eyes of her constant friend.

"You don't find her outrageous, do you? She would pass muster?"

"Decidedly. She is all right; you needn't worry yourself to fiddle-strings. Why do you?"

"I don't. Why do you accuse me of such a thing?"

"The girl looks so tragic, I feel sure you have been worrying her, if not yourself."

"Indeed I have not. I get on well with her, much better than Oliver does—ah, I didn't mean to say that; it escaped. Good-bye. Come and dine next Thursday; we will have one or two to meet you."

When he had walked off, down the drive, she sighed and went back to the drawing-room. Astrid was there alone. Oliver had withdrawn.

"Well, you liked the Selbys, I think?" she asked cheerfully.

Astrid responded quite warmly. "Yes, I did. They are people I feel I could get on with."

"Why not carry out this idea of a caravan party? Should you enjoy it?"

Astrid was gazing into the fire, her hands round her knees.

"In a month's time I shall not be here," she said quietly.

Her mother-in-law did not reply for a moment. The desire to demand an explanation of this unnatural attitude of mind rose with force in her. She checked it, however. She was on the way to obtain the girl's confidence, she hoped; she had not, however, reached the point at which it seemed that she dared ask for it. She took another method. Laying her hand upon the hair, she turned back the pale face and smiled into the eyes. "Are you so sure of that?" she asked playfully.

The girl's mouth quivered. Her eyes looked into the sweet ones bent above her, with a sudden fire of longing to speak out; but a will stronger than her emotion held her back. "I have promised to stay a month," she said hurriedly, twisting her head away from the pressure of the too-compelling hand

CHAPTER VII

I do hold that the merest gentleman
Will not start rudely from the stalking-horse,
Dismiss it, with a "There, enough of you!"
Forget it, show his back unmannerly . . .

. . . She served not ill.

And, though I shall forget her in due time,
Her use being answered now . . .
Still, she has rights.—R. BROWNING.

MAY was cold and gusty, but with interludes of fickle brilliancy. One afternoon, a fortnight after her first arrival, Mrs. Oliver Brendon left the Abbot's House and walked along the Ridge, to call upon the Selbys.

The sun was shining vigorously as she started, as though eager, when the clouds gave him half a chance, to show what he could do. The tossing wind was full of exhilaration. It brought a tinge of colour to Astrid's cheeks, and loosened her hair becomingly. A fortnight of rest and country air and liberal diet had had their due effect. She was just a shade softer, rounder, and more girlish than she had been. She was very young, and the hope of happiness dies hard in the young. In spite of her uncompromising position, in spite of the nightmare memory which lay behind her, she was beginning to nurse a little secret fancy that she might have been mistaken; to believe that there was just a chance that her husband's attitude might have been the result of his knowing nothing of girls, their feelings nor their easily bruised emotions.

She had married him who was to her the one man the world held. She had anticipated that "the giving and receiving of a ring" would be the gate of the Elysian fields. She had found dust and ashes; and the unreasonableness, the apparent aimlessness of the suffering she had been called upon to endure had stunned her.

During this fortnight of waiting and healing she was learning, with all the speed of an agile mind. It had been borne in upon her that her ignorance of the world and of men was phenomenal, surprising. Everything was beginning to look so different, that the necessity of overhauling and examining all previous convictions came urgently to her. After six years of loneliness, after a fortnight's delirium of anticipation, during which she floated on clouds and lived in a dream, after the awfulness of being flung back upon herself in shivering desolation—the temptation to cast away all reserve and make a confidante of Oliver's mother was increasingly strong.

She was his mother, she might understand him; she might, as it were, translate him to his wife. Yet the way in which he had acted towards this ideal mother—the extraordinary manner of his marriage—made the puzzle all the deeper and more obscure.

Since their arrival at Thackridge he had acquiesced, without argument, in his wife's repudiation of him. Yet he was kind; as the days went by he seemed a shade kinder. He spoke to her with respect, he showed a deferential consideration. The undying hope would beat against the bars of the girl's will urging her to tender some kind of olive branch, to make an attempt to discover the soul of the man who was her husband.

But he had suggested a month's truce. A month's truce, then, they would have. At the end of that

time she would know, she would confront him, and say out boldly to him, "You married me, although you do not love me at all, although you have no spark of affection for me. Why did you do this?"

Meanwhile circumstances forced upon her a position which she resented because, had she felt justly entitled to it, it would have been so pleasant to her. She liked Mrs. Brendon, she liked the house and the pretty village; and she liked the Selbys. It was hard to resist the gentle urgency with which the pleasant details of life were knocking at her door. The wild wind of spring, the sunshine-gleams, the opening leaves and flower-buds, all conspired to call aloud in her girl's heart, to sing the praises of what is normal and healthy and fitting to youth and May.

The Selbys were by no means rich, and they lived in a small house, far along the Ridge, with a large, somewhat untidy, though remarkably productive garden. Gardening was among Dan's hobbies, and hitherto he had had the capable assistance of Tessa, who had been through the Swanley College course, and was extraordinarily successful with her herbaceous borders.

That afternoon, the wallflowers, particularly the new purple variety, made a velvet glow of colour all along under the sunny wall, flanked by forget-me-not and clumps of fragrant woodruff.

Dan and Tessa were eagerly awaiting the arrival of "Mrs. Oliver," to whom the big man had taken a sudden and ardent liking. He was a sociable being, popular among all the girls in Thackridge, but had never been known to take a special fancy to anybody. As to Astrid, she seemed to say very little when they were together, leaving all the talking to him; but he had formed a high opinion of her intellect, and

Martin and Tessa had taken to teasing him mildly about his 'swan.'

He quite declined to see anything curious in young Brendon's sudden marriage.

"Take my word for it," he declared, "there is many a man's heart caught in the rebound, and held firmly too. Look at the immortal example—the Romeo and Juliet love affair. Romeo had been in love with the grave and lofty Rosaline. He turned to the little girlish Juliet and found his true mate there. Brendon has done the opposite and far more sensible thing. He turned from the fluffy little fool to the deep-souled creature who had sat under his nose unrecognised for two or three years in his office. For the first time he looked at her with eyes that had been opened to love—whether for her or another woman in the first instance does not particularly matter—and saw that she was good! There you have it. He is much to be envied."

"What a pity you did not meet her first, Dan," observed Tessa, pulling off her gardening gloves and surveying the long border with a loving eye.

"I," said Dan, with half a sigh, "am the man who chronicles love affairs, not the man who has 'em. You know what Norbert remarked :

'We live, and they experiment on life,
Those poets, painters, all who stand aloof
To overlook the farther. Let us be
The thing they look at!'

That's it, Tessa. I am the experimenter on life. I look on, and the lovers *are*."

"I suppose we are," said Tessa calmly, "or I should never have got engaged to Humphrey."

"Aptly urged! That you, nurtured by two such men as Martin and myself, should pledge your future

to a young person who superintends the manufacture of motor-cars, and thinks in petrol and carburettors! One who likes good solid meals, served upon his own mahogany, and sees no beauty in a crust beneath the hedge! Now I believe Mrs. Oliver would really and spontaneously enjoy the hedge-pot!"

"I believe she would! I mean to try and arrange that trip," replied Tessa. "I want to be off on the loose just for once more before Humphrey becomes my most important interest! Besides, I always think Oliver a bit of a prig—editors of high-class weeklies can hardly escape it—and nothing brings a man down so completely to his own level as a caravan."

"Nothing," chuckled Dan, wagging his big hands in the pockets of his unspeakable coat. "She would be a brilliant success and he would have to look up to her; and it would be enormously good for him! Ah, here she comes!" he went on, with satisfaction, as the girlish figure appeared, moving down the path with something of a youthful swing. "Hullo, Mrs. Oliver. Come and sniff this border! How's that for perfume, eh? Make the most of it, for the sun is going in permanently in about half an hour, and we are going to have a stormy night!"

Astrid's eyes lit up with pleasure at the friendly greeting.

"You are wonderful people," she said. "Mrs. Brendon's wallflowers are only in bud, and she has a very good gardener."

"Her garden's not so sunny as ours," returned Tessa, when she had warmly saluted the girl. "Dan, do let's have tea out of doors! If I run and shout for it, we can just do it before the sun goes in, and there is not a breath of wind in the Haven."

"O do!" echoed Astrid eagerly; and Tessa ran

off to give the order, leaving Dan strolling at Mrs. Oliver's side between the fragrant borders.

"I have brought back your book," said Astrid, "and I want to talk to you about it. I feel that it would be merely conventional to say I like it; I much more than like it. I feel towards it as I feel about you—as if I had made a new friend."

"I say," said Dan, "that's jolly good!"

"I should like," went on the girl quite calmly, "to be your secretary."

Dan laughed, with a wistful glance. "Ah," he said, "that is one of the things we say when we know there is no chance of being called upon to translate the wish into action."

"Well," said Astrid, "of course, I knew when I said it that there was no likelihood of your wanting me. But I meant it seriously from my own point of view. You know I am accustomed to work, and I don't like being idle. I could not well work now in Oliver's office, as I used to do; but I think I shall work somewhere."

"Why," said Dan, half disappointed, "you are a modern wife!"

"Am I? Why do you say so? Because I do not like to be idle?"

"When you have a house of your own, my dear, you will not find much margin of time to do other people's typewriting."

There was a pause. "Perhaps not," said she, after a while.

"I am making myself pretty miserable about my work," he went on, talking to her quite without any sense of shyness as they strolled the garden walks. "You see, I have accustomed myself to the use of a secretary, having Tessa. She is first-rate. But when she is married, I can't think what

will become of me, because I don't believe I could grow accustomed to any stranger. It will mean complete dislocation of my work for a time at least. But mind," he added hurriedly, "you must not say this to Tessa—not on any account."

She lifted her eyes to his with a smile of reassurance. "Of course not. She is so unselfish, and she must be feeling it enough as it is. I am quite anxious to see Mr. Spence. I do hope he will make her happy."

"There's very little doubt of it. He is marrying her in spite of himself. She is, in many respects, exactly what he previously thought he did not want, but he is so in love with her that nothing matters. Every week I like him better, and every week they grow nearer to each other. As far as she is concerned, Martin and I are both content. It is only our blamed selfishness——"

"O I don't wonder. She is just sweet. There is a kind of fragrance about her, of graciousness and naturalness, which one feels at once. The charm of sheer personality! I do feel sorry for you, and I quite understand how detestable the idea of anybody else to work for you must be, after having had her."

"Well—not the idea of *anybody* . . . I mean, not the idea you dangled before my eyes so brutally just now! I could work with you right enough! I don't mind betting that in a week I should feel as comfortable with you as if I had known you all my life!"

She laughed with sheer pleasure, and the colour came up vividly in her cheeks. "That is a compliment! Thank you, sir, very much, for my good compliment! But as you say, I might not have time——"

"Aha! Didn't I say so? When it comes to the point!"

"Who can say?" said Astrid hurriedly. "I don't know a bit what our plans are yet. Anyway, Miss Selby is not going to be married until August, is she?"

"No, thank Heaven! And our caravan tour comes first! Come and look at our two peripatetic homes!"

He guided her through devious ways, out into the field, where, covered carefully in tarpaulins, the two caravans stood. One was green and one was blue. The ladies' caravan was the larger and more commodious. Dan unlocked the door and let down the steps, and Astrid climbed up with him and examined the various contrivances, the neat way in which beds and tables let down from the walls, and seats had drawers and lockers underneath them. Bedding and all furniture was, of course, removed, and stowed in the house for the winter. They had taken their holiday in this manner every year for the past five years, and were not tired of it yet. This year they were going to make a variation, since they were beginning to tire of the first fifty miles out. They were planning to send a man with the vans to await them at a given starting-point, so as to find themselves, from the very first, in the heart of the country.

The notion was to the girl an absorbing one. They sat upon a locker, discussing the humours of the road in total forgetfulness of all else, their eyes upon the corner of the green meadow, and the sunlight flickering through the young foliage of the trees; until Tessa's voice in urgent summons caused them to jump up, hurriedly put things to rights, and return precipitately to the Haven, a sort of summer-house where tea was awaiting them.

After tea Dan's weather prophecy began to be fulfilled. They went indoors, to fulfil the true

purpose of Mrs. Oliver's visit—an inspection of a small but valuable collection of miniatures which was the most treasured possession of the Selbys.

It was Astrid's purpose to make her weekly column out of these miniatures, so the examination could not be hurried, though she and Dan had wasted time so culpably in the garden. She had to rush home in order to write and post her article before dinner, so there was small time for leave-taking; for the exquisite portraits were so fascinating that it was hard to tear oneself away. When at last she did, the rain had begun, and Dan accompanied her all the way home, talking to his heart's content, and more than ever impressed with the talent and charm of Brendon's wife.

CHAPTER VIII

Passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain ;
So, she was come through wind and rain.

R. BROWNING.

HAVING once begun, the rain continued, and the evening drew in chilly and wet, a typical English May. Astrid wrote her article at a great pace, hardly pausing to know whether it was good, but with an inner persuasion of its being 'all right,' and went out, sheathed in a cloak and protected by a big umbrella, to carry it to post, at a moment when she should have been dressing for dinner. As she turned away from the post office she met her husband face to face.

"O," cried she impulsively, "you have no umbrella!"

Oliver, who had been trudging along unrecognising, halted, and stared at her half blinded by the rain, which was coming down very fast. Humanity urged the girl to suggest that they should share the umbrella. He took it from her, and held it over the two of them while they proceeded the short distance which separates the Abbot's House from the post.

"You are out late," was his trite remark. His voice was not trite, however. It had a cadence of excitement which struck her.

"Yes," she replied, "I had to post my article. I

went down to the Selbys', to look at their miniatures, and we got talking and I stayed too late."

She tried hard to make her voice sound natural, but she was all kindled by a sudden hope. Was there not something unusual, some feeling suppressed, behind his slightly confused manner?

"They've got some nice things."

"O yes, delightful. The Isabeys in particular. I had never seen really good examples of him before. The lady in the brocade——"

"Mind the puddle," said Oliver, drawing her a little to one side. "Yes—you were saying—ah, yes, Isabey. They must be worth a good deal, that little collection."

He was talking because he must say something. He wanted to be friendly and conversational. All his mind meanwhile was filled with the consciousness of one thing only—the fact that when he alighted at the station that evening one of the Park grooms was busily piling foreign registered luggage upon the cart. Lady Faulkner and Vivien had returned. They were at that moment in Thackridge. The idea was suffocating him.

The girl whose hand rested on his arm knew full well that some absorbing thought was filling him to the exclusion of everything else. She dared not seem to be aware of it, however. She had no claim upon his confidence, but she was aching to receive it.

He let her in with his latch-key, and she ran upstairs, filled with a sense of the unbearable nature of the present situation, and a wild desire that the strain might soon be over.

He stood in the hall, slowly removing his overcoat, his eyes fixed unseeing upon nowhere, his whole being engaged in conjecturing as to where

Vivien was at the moment, and what she was doing.

His blank stare was fixed upon the drawing-room door, and as he gazed it half opened, slowly and cautiously. He stood like a man frozen to the ground. In the aperture appeared a golden, fluffy head, and a white gown, of the unusual make affected by the girl he loved and by nobody else.

They stood confronting each other for two long seconds—at the first shock, he thought her an illusion, conjured up by his intensity of longing. In another moment, the reality of her broke upon him. She was there—there—in person! . . . It was the beginning of his revenge.

Calm and cool as ever in his life—so he told himself—he hung up his coat, took out his handkerchief, and with an easy—

“Why, Miss Faulkner!”—walked into the drawing-room, and closed the door.

She was alone. Her hat and long coat lay upon a chair, as in the sweet old days she used to fling them, careless of where they fell.

“O, you horrid!” she said, pouting. “You simply detestable! Miss Faulkner indeed! . . . and the tips of your fingers! . . . Ollie, are you really, truly, not pleased to see me?”

“Astonishment deprives me of the power of expressing any other emotion, just for the moment,” he said with frigid courtesy. “It is putting it mildly to say that I did not expect you.”

She laughed joyously. She was standing beside the hearth, the slimness of her outline against the rosy, glowing light—standing there as if the intermediate nightmare months had never been, and she had come back to him as she went. “Of course you did not expect me. I reckoned on that! I

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

thought to myself, 'I will run away the moment I get home, and take him by surprise, before he has time to remember that he is angry with me!' But you *do* seem to remember it, without difficulty."

She turned away her face, and hunched one shoulder a little. He could see the distracting arrangement of the ribbon that was twisted in her hair.

"Permit me to tell you how much you are mistaken, Miss Faulkner. What right have I to be angry with you? I could not so presume."

He had now approached as near as he dared come. He was so tossed to and fro by the agitation of his thoughts that he hardly knew what he said or did; only the dominant note, of his polite indifference, rehearsed so often—whenever he thought of his meeting with her—stood him in good stead, and was reproduced almost mechanically. He had pictured many fashions of their first encounter: he had never pictured this. That she should come straight over to the Abbot's House, on the very evening of her return home—

"O, you *are* in a rage! Worse than I expected! I believe that I am frightened of you!" said Vivien defiantly. "However, you can't prevent my staying to dinner, can you? I know Mrs. Brendon will let me! She is lying down, and I told Drew not to disturb her, so she does not know that I am here! How surprised she will be!—And we will dine together—and by the end of dinner, let us hope you will be kinder to me—"

He broke in, because this was more than he could stand.

"I trust Mr. Railton is well?"

She turned fully towards him, her clasped hands held loosely before her. "Ollie," said she seriously,

"you have no idea at all of lots of things! First, you know nothing about girls, nor how many layers there are in their souls——"

"How many *what?*"

"*Layers!* Layers of feeling, and of impulse! So often, if you are a girl, you think that the thing which is at the top is the thing you really most want to do; and the thing which is right underneath is the one you are tired of, and want to put away. And then—then—nine times out of ten—you find that the undermost thing is the one that is strongest of all, and you can't tear it out—and——" her voice faltered into silence.

Oliver stood in a dreadful stillness. He fancied he could feel his hair lift. A thought too awful for contemplation was presenting itself to his terrified consciousness. He had acted *too soon*——

Beads of moisture broke out upon his forehead. Every vein in his body seemed over-full. "How dare you!" he said under his breath. "What right have you to come here talking to me like this? Go home! You are shameless! Go back to Railton, the man who has a right to your confidence——"

She shrank away as if in fear. "Ollie!" She wavered. "Ollie, don't you see that I am trying to tell you . . . trying to beg your pardon? Ollie, you don't know how different life seems, when you are away, separated, in a place so unlike England! You can't think how all the dear old friends come rushing to your heart when you are back again, in the midst of the real home things, the things that are your life! I know I have behaved disgracefully, and I am ready to eat plates full of humble pie! But if you say the word"—with her hands joined she came timidly a step nearer to the man who had never repulsed her in his life: "if you say the word,

I will break it off to-morrow! I want to! I don't love Mr. Railton one little bit! You know, you know I don't. You must know how it is, and who it is. . . ."

"Stop! I know nothing of the kind!" He could hardly articulate, but at any cost he must cut her short there. In all his succeeding life, the agony of that moment stood out supreme. It was almost a relief, since the worst must come, and could not be averted, to hear the opening door and to see his wife enter.

She had dressed in haste, for she knew herself late, and imagined that Mrs. Brendon was awaiting her. Mrs. Brendon, as a matter of fact, having fallen asleep after an afternoon of headache, was not likely to be down yet. Astrid stood looking from her husband to Vivien and back again; conscious of something tense, something wild, in the atmosphere.

There was but one course possible for Oliver.

"Miss Faulkner," he said, in tones which he vainly strove to render natural, "let me introduce my wife."

He had succeeded, then, in one of his objects. He had married Miss Carey in order to be revenged upon Vivien Faulkner, and he *was* revenged upon her. The child looked as if shot through the heart. Without a word she sank down upon the chair near which she stood; and Astrid thought she was going to faint. She did not. All three of them preserved silence, while she wrestled with the blow. Oliver was so absorbed in the sufferings of Vivien that it never occurred to him to wonder if Astrid thought the scene peculiar. Astrid, in whose hand the key to the whole puzzle had just been placed, was too immersed in her own thoughts to wonder at anything.

In a minute or two Vivien got slowly to her feet.

"I think you said *your wife?*" she asked, lifting a blanched face to him.

"My wife. I have been married a fortnight," he said clearly. For the sake of this moment he had wrecked his life. Was his triumph to be spoilt for him because of a faithless little flirt's white cheeks?

"I hope," said Vivien faintly, "I hope you will be very happy."

She crossed the room to where Astrid was standing, and lifted her eyes, dark with pain, to see what manner of woman this was.

"I dare say," she faltered, "that you have heard about my being engaged to Oliver—and jilting him. He has found somebody—more faithful. I am glad of that; at least, I shall be. I am going to be married in a fortnight—and go away to America."

Oliver had collected himself. He went to where her things were lying upon the chair and lifted them.

"I can't tell you how kind we think it of you, coming so soon to see us—even before we knew you had returned," he said smoothly. "I expect the next fortnight will be such a rush that you will have no more time to give us!"

She let him put on her coat as though hardly conscious of her surroundings. She took her large hat and its pins, and went back to the mirror to adjust them.

The rain beat upon the windows in streams.

"I will take you home," said Oliver, as she turned from the glass and approached the door.

Astrid, who had not spoken a word, moved forward then, and held out her hand. "Good-bye," she said, very low.

"Good-bye," said Vivien, stumbling over a sob. She did not take the offered hand. She passed out

into the hall, where Oliver was putting on his coat and selecting a large umbrella.

"Tell my mother," said he to his wife, "that I am dining in town to-night. Nobody to sit up for me."

Astrid stood upon the threshold and watched him depart, with Vivien. She made no reply. Her eyes were fixed upon the twilight into which the two figures disappeared.

It is only quite a little way from the Abbot's House to the Park. Past the church, and one or two old houses. Every step of the way, to Oliver, was full of memories, memories of the most poignant kind. To and fro, along this road, he had passed, in the moments when life was golden, glorified by the kiss of a girl's lips. To and fro had he paced, when the shrine was empty and the girl far from his longing arms. Again, he had walked there when he knew her untrue—picturing the face he knew, offered to the kisses of another man.

And now—what?

She had come back to him. She had only been weak and faltering, not base. The moment she was home she had flown to what she had felt certain would prove a safe refuge. She had come to ask to be forgiven. . . . It was incredible! . . . But for his own madness, she would be in his arms that minute.

They were out together, in darkness and rain. He had opened and closed the drive gate. The wind buffeted them. He found himself speaking, in a harsh voice he hardly knew. "Let us get under the shelter of the big trees."

Silently she went where he guided her. They stood together, screened from wind and rain, in a haven of dark silence. It was in his heart to seize her, to inflict some chastisement for what he was suffering—to cry out to her—"You have destroyed me!"

There was also present with him the desire to say to her—"Let us escape! We are together, we love each other, let me take you away, where nothing can come between us."

He believed that, should he say this, she would go with him. For a few dizzy moments his mind played with the idea. But he was bound. Even in this moment, when nothing else seemed to count, there was a something which restrained him. Sub-consciously he was aware that things were not yet so black that they might not be worse. Something—was it training, or was it innate in himself?—held him back. He could do nothing. They stood together with an ocean rolling between.

The hateful part of it was that he could not speak, for fear of breaking quite down. Tongue-tied he stood there, until a little sound in the silence broke pitifully upon his ear. Vivien was sobbing.

Holding the big umbrella in his left hand, he put his right arm about her. His sudden pity gave him voice. "Vivien, you must think of me as though I were dead," he gasped. "I *am* dead. Your treachery killed all there was of good in me. I am spun. I have nothing left—no future. But you have. You must have thought you loved this—this gilded ruffian. Try and be happy with him—your own choice."

She burst out into wild sobs.

"And you go and be happy with yours!"

He groaned. That uncouth sound of suffering scared her. She had never heard a man groan, and she shrank away.

In the midst of what he was bearing, the thought of the wretched girl whom he had sacrificed to his vanity came to cover him with shame.

"Come," he said, "this is too awful, we must not

loiter here. We must say good-bye, and there an end."

She had utterly lost control by now, and was weeping wildly, and gasping out reproaches. "Why had he let her go, why had he not seen that he must fly to her and protect her? Why had he left her to bear the brunt of all?"

The very nature of her complaints showed him the gulf that lay between his conception of what love meant, and hers. Yet she was Vivien! She was the sweet, fresh, feminine thing which had kindled the manhood in Oliver Brendon. They were sheltered from the rain in the spot where they stood, and the darkness had fallen. He shut the umbrella, and took her wet face between his hands.

"Good-bye," he said, "think of me as though I were dead. It is the only way. When you are half-way across the Atlantic, you will have forgotten me. But for the sake of the past, give me a last good-bye."

"Ollie, can't we do anything? Is it really true—you are actually married to that grave, pale woman?"

"I am married."

He but just managed to articulate. The touch of her lips was breaking down his resolution. The flash of carriage lamps upon the gloom ended the pitiful scene. Fearful of being seen and recognised, he picked up and spread the umbrella, and piloted her with determination along the remaining short bit of road, in at the Park Gates.

"I had better not come to the door," he said gruffly. "Good night."

A moment later he was tramping down the wet road to the station. What should he do, where could he go, to obtain a temporary oblivion?

CHAPTER IX

Go, with thy chosen mate !
The fashion of thy going nearly cured
The sorrow of it. I am yet so weak
That half my thoughts go after thee ; but not
So weak that I desire to have it so.—*JUAN INKELOW.*

TEN minutes after he left the house Sybil came downstairs, full of apologies. She had dropped asleep, and Morris would not wake her. Her headache was quite gone, and she was ashamed of her behaviour.

She found only her daughter-in-law awaiting her.

"Is not Oliver in ? I thought I heard him come," she cried.

"He came in for a minute, to say he was dining out, and nobody was to sit up for him," replied Astrid.

"Indeed ? Oh, it is with Colonel Hayes, I expect. They are discussing the new Football Club," said Sybil, without much anxiety.

The two ladies went into the dining-room and talked together much as usual. Astrid described the miniatures which she had seen that afternoon at the Selbys, and what a rush she had had to complete her 'copy' in time for the post. Beyond a slight absence of mind, she betrayed no emotion.

She sat down quietly in the drawing-room until coffee had been served and removed. Then Sybil, looking up from the book she was just cutting, saw

the intense eyes fixed upon her with such meaning that she dropped her paper-cutter, crying :

"My dear, what is it ?"

Astrid spoke quietly enough. She made no movement with her hands to describe what she meant. It was difficult to say what produced the notion which was conveyed to Sybil, of a very fury of feeling controlled.

"I have found it out," she said. "I mean, I have found out why your son married me."

Sybil did not interrupt, except by an "Indeed!" which showed she expected her to continue.

"He married me because he wanted to be revenged, somehow, I hardly understand how, upon the woman he loves. She has been here this evening——"

"What!"

"Yes. Miss Faulkner has been here this evening. Mr. Brendon found her here when he came in. I do not know what passed between them, for they had been some time together when I, not knowing that anybody was here, came downstairs. She told me that she had been engaged to him, and had jilted him. I think she came to ask him to forgive her and to renew the engagement between them."

"Oh, Astrid, impossible!"

"No. That is how it is. I saw her, young and golden-haired, and sweet and kissable, like the girl in a story-book. The sordidness of life has never brushed her curls. He loves her. He has gone away because, after seeing her, he could not bear the sight of me. That is how things stand. I have found out, as I said I would. I determined to wait until I knew, and now I know."

What was there for Oliver's mother to say? She tried, two or three times, to open her lips. But she was not equal to the cruelty of 'What did you

expect ? ' and with this exception she had nothing to reply.

Astrid sat immovable. Her eyes were shining, her lips feverishly red. But she was in full command of herself.

"Now that you know, Astrid, what is your opinion of the situation ?" faltered Sybil at last. "You see that Oliver is to blame. Does it occur to you that any blame rests upon yourself as well ?"

Astrid knit her brows. Then a bitter little smile showed her teeth for an instant.

"You mean, for being such a fool as to think that any young man could desire to marry me for myself ?"

"God knows I do not wish to be hard upon a motherless girl," said Mrs. Brendon. "But you must have been aware that your marriage was a most peculiar one. Any young woman, however inexperienced, however without friends or advisers, must have known that young men have families, and that they do not keep their marriage secret without some reason."

Astrid hesitated, as if weighing her reply. Then she said simply, "I have known him for what seems a long time now. I knew he trusted me. I trusted him. That may have been foolish, but I don't think it was wrong."

Mrs. Brendon flung away her book. "Could you be frank with me ?" she implored. "You say you have known Oliver—tell me how well you knew him. What did your friendship amount to ?"

"By the time I married him it amounted to all the world to me, and was the only thing I lived for," replied the girl quietly.

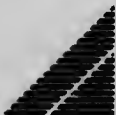
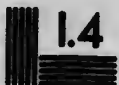
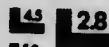
"How did it begin ?"

"They sent me, from the office where I was trained, to do various bits of work for the *Penman*. At first



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1853 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

I never came in contact with him at all, I only saw him from time to time, when he came into the outer office. Then he asked to have me sent to do a bit of translation which was rather difficult, and my work pleased him. After that I did more for him, and then his secretary, a young man called Grant, got a good appointment in Canada, and left, and Mr. Brendon asked me if I thought I could take it on. I was very pleased. Proud too. It was splendid pay, and he said he would raise me."

"Splendid pay?"

"Two pounds a week. You try living on thirty shillings, and see what your rise means!"

"Yes? Well, what then?"

"It meant a great deal of interesting work, looking up authorities in the British Museum and so on. We got into the habit of talking about things, and were friends. One day, long ago now, more than a year ago, he was feeling bored and tired, and he asked me to go out and dine with him and do a theatre. It was a play that all the papers were discussing, and he thought of doing a long article himself about it for the paper, and said he would like my opinion. Well, I refused."

"Refused?"

"Yes. I said he was not to think me silly, nor that I was imagining things. But I had to live alone, and I have seen a good deal in my time. I know that, even with the nicest men, girls have to be so careful. In fact, in spite of what they put in books, I think it is the nicest men that you have to beware of. I hate the other kind, myself, and I believe most girls do. Besides, of course the other kind would never look at me, or want me," she added, with a little laugh. "I was never in danger from them, never followed about, nor noticed in the streets, as some

are. But there it was! His friendship was growing to mean so much to me, and I determined not to spoil it."

"What did he say?" asked Sybil, with interest.

"He was a good deal put out, and inclined to be cross with me. I thought I had been a fool, and that perhaps after that he would be afraid to talk to me naturally. I had a good try to make it clear that I trusted him all right, but that I had a rule and wouldn't break it. Still, I went back to work next day feeling very uncomfortable. However, he was nicer than ever. He had always been nice, but after that he really treated me as an equal. I was very happy, not a wild, excited kind of happiness, but a pleasant, everyday content; until there came a time when he left off addressing a word to me that was not business. I had grown, as I thought, to know him so well by then that I soon made up my mind that it was not I who had done anything wrong, but he who was tremendously preoccupied. Looking back, I can see the meaning of it all. That must have been when he fell in love."

"Last autumn," murmured Sybil.

"Yes, last autumn. He grew moody and much more difficult to please than of old. I had my own idea about it, and I thought he was having difficulties with the proprietor. I just did everything I could to spare him, and took extra pains that no slips were made, and called his attention to every trifling detail: a word to be changed, or a phrase omitted. After Christmas, when all the fuss was over, and the paper was running beautifully, and the circulation going up, I expected to see him recover. But though he was just like his old self now and then, he was still moody, and sometimes very depressed. At last came a time when he was so evidently suffering

that I was in a dreadful state about him. He never touched food all day, and when I went in he would be sitting staring straight before him, looking quite rigid. He said he could not dictate, and he did no work, though the next day was press day. I was alarmed. Remember, I always thought of him as a man who lived alone. He had never spoken a word to me on his personal affairs, nor I to him. I thought he was feeling physically ill, and was afraid he had some symptom which was frightening him. Anyway, I was fool enough to wait until all the clerks had gone, and then to march into the office and ask him if I could do anything to help him. That was wrong, wasn't it ? ”

“ My dear girl, how can I censure you, just for showing womanly sympathy ? ”

“ That was the bandage I used to blind my own eyes,” said Astrid fiercely. “ I called it womanly sympathy. It was not. I was in love. . . . Do you know,” she went on, with a sudden cry, “ that a lonely girl must live for something, or go mad ? O, yes, I said my prayers, and went to church, and I did—yes, I *did*—trust in God ! But God has only given the nun's vocation to very few women, at least in England ! I wanted some kind of a life in this world, where He had put me ! I didn't know I was in love with Mr. Brendon, but when you wake in the morning with nothing to look forward to but the sound of one man's voice and the little things he may say and do, and nothing to look back upon when you go to bed but the memory of them—what does it mean ? It means that one man has come to fill your whole life, and that, unless some other image comes to supplant his, you are in love with him. . . . I could laugh now, thinking over my folly ! Of course, I never said to myself then any of the wise

things I am saying to you now! I was just living on from day to day, for the pleasure of serving him and being with him. . . . And I hardly knew him. I was in love with my own idea of him! I thought of him as absolutely good and upright and as knowing everything and understanding everything——”

“He did not know—could not have known—that you felt like this?” cried Sybil, almost appealingly. The tears were standing in her eyes.

“Know? Of course he didn’t. How should he? When I went in, that afternoon—I ought to tell you that I had borne it for three days, this was the last and worst of the three—he took it for what you said—womanly sympathy.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“First of all he asserted peevishly that he was not ill. I said it was no use his denying it, he *was* ill, and he would be worse if he could not eat. We argued on for some time about it, I trying to be patient with him, but not giving way, and he by degrees growing a little softer, as if he really was glad of somebody’s sympathy, even though it was only mine. After a good while, he said, ‘Well, I would go out and have some dinner if you would come too. I am not good company for myself. But you are so pious and proper, you would not be seen sitting with me in a restaurant on any consideration, would you?’ I said, ‘That is only an excuse, and you know it. But if you are so anxious for my company, shall I go and order some dinner to be sent up here, and I will stay until you have eaten it. I have a good many things to tidy up and put away.’ He burst out—‘Then you would not eat with me?’ I said, ‘You give me a good salary, and I pay for my own food; I don’t want to sponge on you.’ He sat quiet a little while, and then said, ‘I wonder why I can’t get on with girls—why

they won't do things like this for me? Why, I know dozens of men, pretty average fools, some of 'em, and they only have to hold up their finger to get girls to go about with them, to suppers and theatres and what not.' I could not help answering that, and I did so quickly, hardly thinking what I said—'O,' I cried, 'the mistake you make is in coming to the wrong girl! There are heaps and heaps of the others, if you want them.' He sat so still that I thought I had offended him deeply, and I got scarlet. I went and stood close beside him by the table, and as he still sat there, staring at the floor, I mumbled something about being sorry if I had hurt him. He raised his eyes to my face then, and said, very slowly, 'But I don't agree. I think I *have* come to the right girl. I didn't know it, but I have. Will you marry me, my dear?'"

Her voice died away. The look in her eyes showed how she was visualising this—the one scene of her life. Sybil gasped, and shivered. "Go on." There was no response. "O," she sobbed out, "try and tell me the rest!"

"Think of me," said Astrid in a whisper, "standing there in my office frock . . . and think of the picture he had in his mind's eye! *Miss Faulkner!* . . . Well, I gulped out, 'Of all the things in the world that I did not expect you to say!' And he answered, 'Quite so. I have said it because I was so sure you did not expect it. You have nothing of the flirt in you.' I could answer truly, 'I have never flirted, with you or anybody else.' He asked me if I thought I could get on with him. 'We know each other pretty well,' he said. 'You know I am not demonstrative.' I said I liked him just as he was." The speaker broke off, and turned to Sybil, laying her hand earnestly upon her gown.

"I trusted him as if he had been God," she said. "In my ignorance, I thought there could be but one reason for his asking me to be his wife. I have no money, I have not much in the way of looks—I could not see any reason for his request, other than the one mighty, overpowering one, that he loved me. I did not hold back much. I hardly knew where I was, or what I was doing, I was caught up into heaven, as it were, and all I knew was that if he wanted me, he must have me. He told me that he hated fuss and publicity, and asked me to marry him quite quietly and at once. He wrote to my aunt in Dublin, Miss Nolan, and asked her consent, stating his position. His lawyers and bankers wrote to her also, I believe, and he said he would settle something on me, I forget what. I see now how idiotic I was not to make inquiries about his family and so on. But what little sense was left me was all expended upon behaving rationally as long as I was in his employment. He told me that he had been feeling very unwell, but that he should be better before long, and that after we were married he would take a holiday. I thought he had made arrangements to do that, and it seemed to me that, when we passed the threshold of the church together, and I knew he was my own, I could make him well whatever ailed him, with the force of my devotion and my will to serve him."

"Had you no friends of your own at all in London?"

"Only two or three girls, and he asked me to say nothing of it to them. I only told my landlady, who is very nice, but just a working-woman, not a person likely to be acquainted with any one through whom the secret might come out. She went to church with me."

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

"Astrid, tell me candidly, how did Oliver behave during your fortnight's engagement? Did he give you any cause to suppose that he was in love with you?"

The girl reflected. "Perhaps not, to any girl less besotted than I was. But I thought that his coldness was my own fault. The day he asked me to marry him, he took me in his arms, and kissed me many times, with—it would almost be true to say, violently. He could not know, of course, the effect it would have upon me. I almost fainted. I was afraid of my own feelings, and I told him he must not do it again. It made me feel like a housemaid, somehow, being kissed in the office, when the other clerks were gone. He said he had many things to arrange, and so had I, so we did not spend our evenings together. Now that I look back upon it, I see how each day of that awful fortnight he must have repented his madness more and more. I am sure that he was increasingly cold. But I, poor fool, took it all for granted. I had the memory of those kisses, and I lived upon it. Every look he bestowed was to me only an earnest of what was held back—of the tenderness he had to expend upon me, when there was no chance of his being misunderstood. O, if I had but known *you* then! O, if I could recall it all! . . . The self-contempt! . . . I could kill myself!"

Her head drooped forward upon her clenched hands. As she sat so, elbows supported on her knees, the long curves of her thin body bent together in her humiliation, the pity in Sybil's heart was ready to melt into a warmer emotion. Certainly her daughter-in-law was capable of feeling, to a degree not bestowed upon every daughter of Eve.

Mrs. Brendon, at fifty, was rarely moved by impulse; but under the goad of this one she rose from

her seat, crossed the hearth, moved a chair close, sat down and put her arm round the bowed figure, while with her other hand she drew the abased head to lean against her breast.

"Do you think you can go on?" she whispered. "Try to tell me the rest . . . what you can of the rest."

Astrid, with a shivering sob, made a momentary resistance to the constraint of the compassionate arms. It was but momentary. The thrill of that embrace—the consciousness of being understood and pitied, not cast out, by the woman who had suffered through her so deeply,—was overpowering.

With a little moan she turned, put up her arms, and clung to the human shelter; clung closer and closer, feeling upon her forehead the touch of womanly lips, like balm to the aching heart.

"The rest is too dreadful," she said at last. "I can't tell it, you know. The morning we—we were married I felt just like Jane Eyre did on the morning of her wedding-day: that it simply couldn't be true. I should wake, and find I was still Astrid Carey, the typewriting clerk trudging off to her daily task. Then I got up, and put on my poor little white frock, and I had a weak, timid hope that he might have sent me some flowers. He had not. I told myself he was not that kind of man. He had not given me anything, and I was most proud of the fact. I told myself he knew I was above that kind of nonsense. O, was I not a fool, a fool, a girl who deserved to be humiliated, for being such a simpleton?"

Sybil could not answer. All her being was in an outcry. "That *my* son should have betrayed a heart like this!" She had no words, but she clasped the slender body closer.

"He loo'ed so strange when we got to church, that I was on the point of asking him if he felt too ill to go through it. However, he seemed in a great hurry, and gave me no time to say anything at all. Then a horrible thing happened. He had bought a wedding ring so much too large that nothing would make it stay on my finger; and directly after the service we had to drive to the shop and change it. I knew by that time that something was desperately wrong. Either he was very ill, or—an alarming thought—he must be going mad. I was humble enough—content that he should be abstracted, should have his mind fixed, as it seemed to be, upon the proof sheets of the *Penman*. But I could not bear that he should be miserable as well. As we were going down to Brighton, I made a brave attempt to reach him—to show him that I was there if he wanted me, ready to help, to do or be anything he wanted. . . ."

"He did not repulse you, surely, surely!"—

"O, he was quite polite," said Astrid simply.

There was a pulsing silence. Sybil's hand was passing softly over her daughter-in-law's hair. The coals sank together in the grate, and the spaniel gave a contented sigh. The warm perfumed room seemed as though it also suspired in a sympathy too deep for words.

"When we got to the hotel, he actually went out by himself, with the excuse of ringing somebody up on the telephone, and stayed away two hours. During those two hours, as I sat alone there, wondering where he was, and why he had left me, a curious thing happened. I felt as if I were *alone with myself* for the first time since my engagement. You know that story in the *Arabian Nights*, where they bandage a woman's eyes, and lead her through mysterious

places, and then at last the bandage is taken off, and she finds herself alone, in a strange house, with no idea how she could ever get back to the life she knew?"

She paused, lost in the painful memory, and her listener murmured an anxious, sympathetic adjuration that she should go on.

"The bandage was off," continued the speaker, "and I was most horribly afraid. The moment I began to think sensibly, I could see that something was wrong—that everything was wrong. Why should my husband be so miserable? why should he go away and leave me, just at the time when a girl has risked everything, and is more in need of his help and comfort than at any other time, before or after—or so it seems to me? It was borne in upon me that he had proposed in an unguarded moment, that he had not meant it to be taken seriously—that he had married me because he had said he would, and that now he was aghast at what he had done. I can't describe to you how I felt when I got as far as that. I looked back across the past fortnight, and I could not recall one little circumstance that could give me a gleam of hope. Why he had ever supposed that he wished to marry me, of course I could not divine. I only knew, with a cold, settled knowledge, that he did not love me. . . . He came back from his walk in a different mood."

"A better mood?"

"I did not think so. He was friendly and brisk, and said his business was now off his mind, and I had been very patient, and we would have dinner and get warm and enjoy ourselves. I felt like a stone, unable to respond or to hide my blank despair. He had ordered a very good dinner, and a bottle of champagne. He wanted me to have some,

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

but I do not like wine and I am not used to it. I would not touch it, but he drank it all. Then, you see . . . after that, he wanted me to sit beside him and let him caress me. But it seemed as if I had seen too clearly to be deceived again. I knew that he was not sincere. I knew he was forcing himself to—to behave as a lover might have done. I can't tell you how it horrified me. . . . I am very ignorant, as I have told you. I know nothing at all, but I believe there is an instinct God puts into a girl's heart. The moment Oliver started that hollow pretence at love-making, I knew that all I feared was true. I was in danger, and must fight for my self-respect, for everything I held most precious."

She was lying partly against Sybil's shoulder, and partly on the cushions of the large chair, so that her face was turned up to that of the elder woman, and their eyes looked straight at each other.

"He was not the least bit tipsy—O, no!" said Astrid, answering an unspoken fear; "don't think that. He was a little excited, that was all. He understood what I said. I admitted that I had sworn to be his wife, but I declared that I would not fulfil my promise until he had told me, openly and plainly, why he had married me. I said I knew it was not for love, but I could conceive of no other motive. I demanded to know it."

"What did he say?"

"O, he protested and blustered a bit. My poor little starving heart was listening, listening all the time, to seize upon any crumb of sincerity, any little trace of true feeling for me—hoping against hope that it would turn out that I was making some odious mistake, and that this really was at heart

the knight without fear and without reproach whom I had thought I married. . . . O, you can believe I was not hard upon him. A word, a look, I would have been in his arms—what do I say? I would have been at his feet! But he could not say it. He could not convince me, *he could not even convince himself!* That was the dreadful part! To see him ashamed, him whom I had thought so high!”

“Yes? And then?”

“Then he tried the proprietor’s attitude. He took hold of me, and told me angrily that he was my husband. His touch, which had turned me faint once before, only stiffened my resolution then. When he found I was merely contemptuous, he soon gave up that! Ah well, I easily had the best of it. His heart was not in it, he did not want me, even in that lowest way! O, the degradation of it!” Her face was turned towards Sybil, and hidden in her breast. “I was fighting,” she sobbed, “for all that a woman has to defend. He had no right to me, and he—he knew it. He knew he did not want me—I did not attract him, not in any sense. He is too much a gentleman not to see how disgracefully he was behaving. He gave it up. Next day he treated me as though he were deeply offended. It was a ghastly day; I pray I may never spend such another. I insisted that he must explain himself fully before I could alter my manner to him. He said there was nothing to explain, that I must be cracked, that I was behaving intolerably, but that he did not wish to be brutal, and would give me a day or two in which to come to my senses. I think he fancied that, if he brought me here, I should not dare to carry on the feud. He thought I should be afraid of you, and accept the situation because there was clearly nothing else to do.”

"He doesn't seem to have been a very good judge of character," said Sybil softly.

"O, it was simply that he had never thought about my character, one way or the other. Now that I have seen *her*—now that I know what he was going through, I can make allowance for him, though he has brought me to this pass. The thing is . . . what is to be done?"

Sybil, in her heart, echoed the question drearily enough; and for a minute silence fell.

"I often think," presently went on Oliver's wife, "that people don't make enough allowance for the ignorance of girls. I was brought up by people who knew nothing about life. They prided themselves on that. I lived my six lonely years in London filled with the idea that I must be very careful not to find out anything. I have learned more during the weeks I have been with you than in all my previous existence. I can see now how odd my conduct must appear in your eyes, or in anybody else's. But I cannot feel that I was altogether to blame for it, unless ignorance is a crime. Don't think of me more hardly than you must. If it was wrong—what I did—I am paying for it. Ah! Truly I am paying."

Sybil wanted to break in upon those words; but when she strove for a voice, it broke in her throat. She had to compress her lips and hold her breath for fear of an outburst of weeping; and in the pause the pathetic voice went on.

"And don't think too hardly of him, either. How could he know how far-reaching is the folly of ignorance?" A note of bitterness crept in. "I believe he thought me rather sharp, and clever, a girl who knew better than to make herself too cheap—who held back in order that the magic word 'marriage'

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

95

might be uttered, and now takes her position as his wife, and gives nothing in return. Yes, that is how he thinks of me, when he thinks of me at all! . . . And we are back at the same question. Can anything be done? Is there a chance of saving him or me?"

CHAPTER X

Nothing would be a lesson to us if it did not come too late.

GEORGE ELIOT.

It was long past midnight when Oliver Brendon let himself in with his latch-key and secured the hall-door. The night was cold and sharp, with a vivid light of stars, as intense in the rain-cleared air as the sunshine had seemed that afternoon in the Selbys' garden.

He came in quite listlessly, like a man who has passed through all keen feeling, and reached the point of mental numbness. There were no lights downstairs. The whole household had retired for the night. He went to his smoking-room and mixed himself a drink from the tray put ready for him; but there was no fire, and he did not linger downstairs.

He went up softly, and, in accordance with an old custom, knocked at his mother's door. He had always, from his teens, possessed a latch-key; but long ago he had accidentally found out that his mother, though she did not sit up, lay awake when he was out late until she heard his return. He therefore acquired the habit of looking in, to let her know he was safe, and at times to give her news of his evening's entertainment.

When he knocked to-night, he thought he heard her customary low 'Come in'; and pushing open

the door, found the room dark and empty. He was so surprised at this that he stood a long time staring at the vacant bed. Had she gone away without warning, leaving himself and Astrid alone together in the house? The thought was so distasteful as to pull him together, with a slight shock.

Her evening gown lay across a sofa, her trinkets strewed the dressing-table. She must be somewhere in the house. As he turned away tiptoeing along the passage he saw a slit of light glimmering along the edge of the door of his wife's room. Pausing as he reached it, he could hear the murmur of voices. They were together.

How much did Astrid know or surmise, from what she had seen that night? She had heard Vivien confess to having jilted him. Her acute intelligence would put two and two together. She had declared that she would know the reason why he married her. Well! Now she knew.

Shrugging his shoulders, he went into his own room and shut himself in with something of a bang to announce his presence. There was a communicating door between this room and his wife's, through which sound came with some distinctness, and he had no desire to be an eavesdropper. Nevertheless, after audibly striding to and fro, pulling off his boots, and throwing them down outside in the passage, he remained motionless, with ears alert.

The voices had ceased altogether. He heard successively two small sounds which might be a sob and a kiss; then the soft closing of the door and the rustle of his mother's gown in the corridor. He listened after that more acutely than ever. During the first nights of their stay at the Abbot's House, he had caught such minor sounds as testified to Astrid's sleeplessness—feet restlessly pacing, a window

raised or lowered, the spurt of a kindled match, the pouring of water into a tumbler.

To-night all was quiet. After hearkening awhile he flung off his coat, went to the mirror and stared at himself. He remembered that he had always privately thought himself rather a good-looking fellow, with his well-modelled chin, olivart tints of colouring, and dark hair growing so well upon the forehead, in a good curve with a ripple where it rose above the brow.

It was a face of which strangers would ask, catching sight of him in a row of guests at a public dinner—"Who's the distinguished young man with the profile?"

Well, he was the young man who had wrecked three lives because he was unable to bear his first disappointment.

To-morrow, he supposed his wife would wish to come to some understanding. Well and good. Everything was all the same to him. He no longer flinched from the idea of a scene. What did it all matter, since he was no longer free to marry Vivien?—Vivien, who had been kissed and caressed by Railton, whose attachment to himself had not stood the strain of a few months' absence.

He felt, in a confused way, that his quarrel with Vivien was not so much for acting as she had done, as for being what she was. He was shamed through all his nature, to have loved so slight a thing.

Yet he wanted her—hungered for her. In imagination he still saw and felt her. She, who was in a fortnight to marry another man, had that evening given her old lover kiss for kiss. Never had she been so wholly submissive—eagerly submissive—to his tenderness. He knew that she loved him better in his indignation and scorn than she had done when he was at her feet.

The storm of feeling had passed by and left him passive. He contemplated his own case as though it were another man's.

In spite of all that he had experienced that evening, did he really desire to be free to marry this butterfly? Eutuffy he might call her, yet she had made shipwreck of him. He was on the rocks. Must he sink, and be counted a total loss?

He had a revolver, in a corner cupboard under lock and key.

Why not?

He stood there, the well-fashioned product of a matured civilisation, the child of a love-match, the cherished son of a mother who had never in his memory done an unworthy action. Every safeguard which science and morals have devised for the discipline of raw passion had been present, not merely from his birth, but even in the pre-natal causes which produced him. If ever a young man should have exhibited an hereditary bias towards higher things, that young man was himself.

Yet he had simply crumpled up at the first touch of fire; as though the envelope of civilisation were a mere paper contrivance, covering the sleeping brute within, easily consumed, destroyed in a moment.

He saw himself a waster—one of life's failures—without the excuse such derelicts can usually urge, of adverse circumstances, a faulty training, a bad strain in the blood.

The means of final exit from that stage whereon he had cut so poor a figure was in the corner cupboard.

But there was his mother. Even as the thought of her crossed his mind, he knew that he could not add the final disgrace of his suicide to the disappointment he had already caused her.

His train of thought proceeded listlessly. If he could not commit suicide, there was nothing for it but to go on. Only the man who knows exactly what he wants, is in a position to fight fate. Oliver had come to the conclusion that he did not know what he wanted. Vivien was no longer the Vivien he had wooed and won last autumn. He still desired to have her, but his new perception of her lightness broke in even upon his longing, and sullied it. Of Astrid he thought with impatience and distaste. He had supposed her filled with a dog-like, indiscriminating affection, ready to come to heel if he should happen to want her, but to efface herself when he did not. She had adopted an attitude which he thought inexcusable, and rather shocking. He hoped his mother had been reasoning with her for her good. However, she too, like Vivien, had blundered hopelessly by destroying his preconceived idea of her. Nothing mattered. Everything was wrong. If Astrid had been talked over by his mother, her submission had come too late. Vivien's kiss, wet with Vivien's tears, still tingled on his cheek. The other girl was a weariness, a blank, a cypher.

Well, he had Byron's authority for supposing that 'love is of man's life a thing apart.' He had only to forget.

The attitude adopted by Astrid was perhaps after all the best. She made no demands upon him. That left him free to lead his own life. He had plenty of brains, why had he suddenly supposed a woman to be necessary to him? He needed the world of men, where such vain toys do not count.

With such thoughts he flung himself down upon his bed, and in less than five minutes was soundly and heavily sleeping.

The breakfast table next morning looked as inviting as usual. When Oliver entered, his wife was on her knees in the sunny bay window, collecting the puppies and setting them to consume their dish of bread-and-milk. Sybil, having made tea and coffee, was half hidden behind the columns of the *Morning Post*.

"Good morning, old man," she said, lifting her face to his salutation with the utmost composure. "What a nice morning after the storm! Astrid says the lilac is out."

Astrid rose from the floor, shook out her skirt, and held out her hand with a smile. "Yes, both the purple and the white," she announced with triumph.

Oliver sat down puzzled. The two were so serene, so comfortable together, they might have been the most harmonious of home parties, and had it not been for the murmured voices which he had surprised at so late an hour over-night, he would have felt sure that Astrid had altogether failed to realise the significance of Vivien and her arrival. As it was, he doubted. His gaze travelled from one to the other of the ladies of his family with a look of inquiry which would have been laughable had there been any person present with a mind sufficiently detached for laughter.

"Ready for your tea, Oliver?" said his mother, putting aside the paper and turning to her duties. "How I do hate pouring out! Astrid, I shall have to turn over this business to you, I think. Why should not old age have its liberties? I am sure we want some compensation."

"I'll pour out for you, with all the pleasure in life," said Astrid blithely. "But I don't know if I can make such coffee as you do."

There was a new note in the voice—a note of youth and affection. A curious feeling that the two women had conspired and were in league against him, ruffled his mind. Childishly he found himself thinking that two against one would not be fair.

“What do you think has just come, Oliver?” went on Sybil, with admirable lightness. “An invitation from the Park! It appears the Faulkners are back, and they want us to go and dine.”

“*What!*” cried Oliver, startled out of his indifference.

His mother looked up innocently. “Did you not know they were back?” she asked.

His glance flashed upon Astrid, helping herself to bacon with complete calm. Then his mother really did not know of Vivien’s attack upon the fortress?

“O yes, as a matter of fact, I knew they were back,” he said as naturally as he could. “I saw the luggage going up the village. But this seems very rapid.”

His mother lifted the note at her side and read aloud:

“I have just learned, with equal surprise and pleasure, of your son’s marriage. Mr. Selby came in last night after dinner to smoke with my husband, and he says your daughter-in-law is charming. The days before Viv’s wedding are so few, there is no time for ceremony. Will you and Mr. and Mrs. Oliver give us the pleasure of your company on Thursday to dinner, to meet Mr. Railton, our future son-in-law?”

The reader made a moment’s pause and went on easily. “Very kind! and very flattering to Astrid. The Park patronage will make you quite the fashion,

young woman! But I fear Thursday is a bad day for you, Oll, isn't it? I think there is a meeting of Directors, or something."

She ceased; as one who has opened the gate of retreat steps aside to let the fugitive slip past. Oliver did not rush through, as she expected. He said nothing for a minute or two.

It was a trying minute to Sybil, but she carried it off easily. The cat had leaped upon Astrid's shoulders, and the disentanglement of it kept her conveniently occupied.

"I think," observed the master of the house at last, "that I had better chuck the meeting, and take you both to the Park. As I believe Astrid knows, I was once engaged to Miss Faulkner for some weeks, and if I refuse this, they will probably suppose that I am sulking. What do you think, Mums?"

It was Sybil's turn to be taken aback, but she rallied in fine form. "I think you are perfectly right, if the meeting can be chucked, as you so elegantly put it. Then shall I accept, for all three of us? I will own that I am dying to behold Mr. Railton."

If this was a game of bluff, the editor would show that he could play it too. "Perhaps," he suggested, "it will be dangerous to let Astrid see the man who has already supplanted me with one lady?"

The daring of this took away his mother's breath. Astrid was ready, however.

"What I think of him won't matter much, as he is sure to think nothing of me," she remarked with a twinkle.

"Indeed! And may I ask why?" cried Sybil, feeling all the value of an alliance.

"Is it necessary to ask?" said Astrid, still with the same provoking little half smile. "Have another rissole, Oliver?"

He held out his plate. In spite of yesterday, he had slept well and was eating his breakfast with some appetite. He could not explain himself to himself. As to his love tragedy, he felt that a reaction must come, a moment when his present numbness would pass, and he would feel all the pain. But meanwhile he was conscious of a resentful and vexed curiosity as to the state of things between his wife and his mother

Was their innocence simulated or real ?

Once more there floated across his mind the memory of the conversation he had interrupted over-night. But whatever line his mother might have taken he felt sure she had not reproached Astrid with her behaviour to himself ; for his wife's aspect was by no means chastened, neither was it apologetic. She seemed happier and more at ease than he had seen her since their engagement.

He went to town so much intrigued that he had little leisure for the contemplation of his own woe

CHAPTER XI

I thank you that you taught me the stern truth
None other could have told, and I believed ;
That vain had been my life, and I deceived,
And wasted all the purpose of my youth !

A. A. PROCTER.

CALVERT RAILTON stood on the long verandah which runs round the south and west sides of Thackridge Park. It was a mild evening, and, with his hands in his pockets, he stood smoking the cigarette which invariably preceded dinner in his day's routine.

His eyes were fixed upon the darkening landscape which lay under his gaze, beyond the grounds. His expression was preoccupied, and not very content.

Through the long window, with a rustling of Parisian skirts, came his mother-in-law to be. Lady Faulkner was of those women who remain to their lives' end, hopelessly 'parvenu.' It has been said that a woman may conquer society from the slums, but never from a suburb. Do what you would with her ladyship—dress her by Paquin, hire the best of maids for her coiffure—she suggested back parlours and high tea.

"Come now, Calvert," said she briskly. "Haven't you got over your sulk yet?" There was a melting of the voice over the pronunciation of the word 'now.' It was not broadly 'naow,' but it suggested that fatal and unfailing sign of origin.

Railton tossed away his cigarette into a bed of tulips. "What's the matter with me, anyway?"

he asked, putting his hands into his pockets and facing her.

She was a little taken aback. "Sir Charles told me you were angry because I have asked the Brendons to dinner."

"I think it was an almighty silly thing to do, if I may say so."

"Calvert, I think I know better than you in this matter! There *was* an engagement, and, though I took her away out of his reach as soon as I possibly could, still there is no doubt the engagement was known all over Thackridge. You would think that Brendon's horrid conduct—his having married so soon—ought to have disillusioned Vivi quite completely. Yet you know that ever since we came home she has been unsettled, unsatisfactory. You and I have discussed it. Very well, then! To-night she sees his wife, actually there, actually married to him. They meet in a room full of people—the first awkwardness is over. She must realise that the thing is final, and she will settle down. It's her conscience that has been troubling her. She's young, she's afraid she behaved badly. Well, let Thackridge see that even if she did, young Brendon has behaved worse! The man can't have been worth caring about. Let her meet him once, face to face, and his wife beside him—she must be convinced that the thing is final."

Railton see-sawed on his feet as he considered this. "It sounds all right," he said at last, in his deliberate drawl. "But if I'd been asked that young man's place in the scheme of things just now, I'd have guessed the background, right away. He has a most uncanny influence over my little girl; and badly as I want her, I'd like to have her make up her mind first."

"You're right about the uncanny influence," returned the lady eagerly. "It was always just that. She never was in love with him—how could she be? They have not an idea in common. It was heart-breaking to see him taking her to look at the works of Old Masters and the poor child trying to pretend they interested her! Vivi has plenty of wits, but her brains would go into my thimble! She is suited to you exactly, but not to that solemn prig of a Brendon."

"It's me she's going to marry, anyway," rejoined the man shortly, untroubled to all appearance by this somewhat back-handed compliment.

He was a thick-set, bull-necked fellow, with sandy hair and a brick-red complexion; but there was something pleasant in his appearance. His grey eyes were small, but very clear and steady. There was power about him.

"I don't altogether understand Vivi, I own," went on Lady Faulkner meditatively. "All the voyage home, I made sure she was fretting. I thought her father most unwise to insist upon her coming home to be married. I quite expected there would be some sort of a scene with her. But, you see, she has never even tried to see him, or mentioned his name. The only time she has ever spoken of it, was the night that Dan Selby came in and blurted out about the marriage. Vivi never turned a hair; and when I said, 'Well, this is surprising,' she said to me, 'I don't see that it's any more surprising than what I have done.' You would have expected her to be a bit taken aback. I am sure I was. I think Sir Charles was, too. But not a bit of it! She didn't seem to care."

"She did care, though. She has been so contrary this week, it has taken every bit of what I feel for her to tide me through it, so I tell you. The sooner

she is married and out of it all, the better for us both." There was a ring of stern resolve in his voice which made her ladyship quail. She had always quailed before him, from the very first. She had been his tool. Now, the thought of having made a mistake, of having incurred his displeasure, was beyond measure disturbing.

"Calvert, you will see I have done the wisest thing. It is partly for the sake of the neighbourhood, partly for your sake, partly for the sake of poor Mrs. Brendon. I hear all kinds of rumours about this girl he has married in such a hurry. The mother is countenancing her, however, and if I do, everybody in Thackridge will follow suit. They must. That is doing a kindness, and at the same time showing there is no ill-feeling between us and the Abbot's House. If we not only do all this, but set the child's mind at rest for ever, you will admit that we have accomplished something."

He looked weary. "Anyway, it's too late to get discussing the thing, ten minutes before the arrival of our guests," he replied with a sigh. "Yesterday I hoped Vivi was going to solve the difficulty by being too ill to appear. She told me she thought she would likely be in for one of her worst headaches. But to-day she seems to have changed her mind, so I suppose the only way is to see this thing through."

As he spoke, Vivien herself suddenly ran out upon the terrace from the window of the further drawing-room.

Her white chiffon dress, and the wisps of turquoise gauze twisted in her hair and about her waist, gave her more of an old-picture aspect than ever. She was smiling, her eyes were large and starry, and red spots burned in her thin cheeks. She looked like a

fragile child—or even like a dream. There was something unsubstantial about her.

"Calvert," she cried, "Chauncey has come round to know what time we want the motor to-morrow! Why, what are you and mamma conspiring about? You both look so guilty! Were you talking about me?"

She approached, and halted just beyond hands' reach, like a butterfly about to take wing.

"What should we be talking about, except you, Vivi?" said her lover with a smile. He spoke with an air of calm proprietorship, carefully assumed to cover the fact of his knowledge of the insecurity of his tenure.

"Tell me what you were saying," she demanded, with a stamp of her foot.

"Calvert was saying that you felt unwell yesterday, darling, but that you seemed better to-day," said her mother fondly. "Indeed you look lovely, but don't come out here in those thin clothes, it isn't prudent. Make her go in, Calvert."

Calvert moved forward. He had only to do so to ensure her backing, swiftly, tantalisingly, and always smiling, in through the windows of the room.

"Well, I'm the picture of health," declared Vivien.

"But for goodness sake, Calvert, do go and tell Chauncey what time you are starting."

"That all depends upon what time *you* are starting," he replied steadily. She stood hesitating, swinging a little bag which she held by a long blue ribbon. He was absorbed in noticing the violet hollows under her large, lustrous eyes.

"We'd better say eleven. Then you can have your breakfast in bed," he said quietly, turning away and leaving the room.

"What does Calvert mean? Why should you breakfast in bed?" asked her mother, surprised.

"Oh, Calvert thinks I'm made of barley sugar," was the petulant reply.

"But you are really well, my darling?" asked her ladyship, with solicitude.

"Never better in my life," said Vivien defiantly.

Ten minutes later, most people had arrived. It was a party composed of the more intimate friends of the Park, and included the Selbys. The family from the Abbot's House arrived, as it chanced, last.

Sybil had passed some agitating days, since Oliver's bravado had led to the acceptance of this invitation. She wished herself anywhere else on the face of the earth than where she was; but since she was there she would carry things with a high hand.

Colonel Waring thought she had never looked more distinguished, more herself, more in control of the situation than she did when she entered, and shook the hand of the woman to whom she owed the wreck of her son's life.

Lady Faulkner was not sensitive to *nuances*, but even she perceived a part of the scorn which underlay the gentle manner. The hostess looked with a queer eagerness at Oliver as he followed his mother. There was usually but little likeness between the mother and son in face. To-night, however, it seemed marked. He came forward with a naturalness which the flustered lady could not hope to imitate, and presented her to a girl in white silk, with pale cloudy hair and deep eyes. She had time to note that the bride was wearing her mother-in-law's famous necklace of carved white cornelian gems, in setting of Eastern gold. She felt that her greeting was not natural. It was unnecessarily cordial, it struck the wrong note.

It almost seemed to say, "I am so much obliged to you for making an unsuitable match once for all impossible."

Mrs. Oliver Brendon's answering smile had an aloofness which to her overstrained nerves seemed almost like contempt. By the time she had finished all the greetings, Lady Faulkner had decided that Calvert was quite right. The dinner was a mistake.

Calvert's eyes, meanwhile, never left Vivien. She was acutely, hatefully conscious of it. But she knew that everybody else in the whole room was likewise watching, as Oliver slowly made his way to her, and stood at last before her.

"How do you do?" he said, as though they had met yesterday. "Won't you introduce me to the lucky man?"

Every one might mark the girl's cruel confusion. The colour flowed in waves over her tell-tale face as she turned to her fiancé, and summoned him by a glance that seemed to implore protection. He came at once in swift response, and she managed to say—"Mr. Railton, Mr. Brendon."

Oliver had been rehearsing for that moment in a way which would have been incredible to the other man. He was ready with exactly the right thing, said in precisely the best way. He alluded to Mr. Railton's newspaper business as making him no stranger to any English editor. He asked some trenchant questions about newspaper owning in America—questions which showed his knowledge and intelligence. Then, with a swift recalling of the necessary forms, he turned again with a cordial smile to Vivien, whose complexion had quieted down, and said:

"And now you must let me present my wife."

So bewildered was Vivien that she had almost

said aloud in her desperation, "But I have met your wife already." As the words hovered on her lips she recollected that all knowledge of her disastrous appearance at the Abbot's House must be suppressed. The attack, her barely averted slip, the memories of that awful moment, rushed upon her together and almost broke her down. The whole company might see her distress, her tear-filled eyes, her changing colour, as she awkwardly and with confusion greeted Astrid.

Her emotion was in no sense shared by Oliver's wife. To him, the composure of the shy, inexperienced girl he had married was like a miracle. He had not said one word to her as to her conduct on this occasion. He had not once alluded to the scene upon which she had intruded last week. Yet, had she comprehended every detail of the circumstances, she could not have played her part more perfectly.

Her calm was the calm of cordiality, of natural, somewhat reserved courtesy. Her manner was exactly right, her appearance far beyond anything he had dared to hope for.

She was presented to Mr. Railton also, and she greeted him with a smile which had some humour in it.

"To meet you is interesting," said she, with the pretty condescension of a young matron, "since I have suffered something at your unconscious hands."

"That so? Explain, do please," said Calvert, conscious of sudden interest.

"For my sins I had to make a précis, for publication, of your exposition of the new International Copyright laws," she replied, with a low laugh. "My respect for your intellect amounts to positive awe."

He smiled with real gratification. This was his hobby. "Well, I admit to being a bit wrapped up in

the International Copyright question," he owned. "And you made a précis of my Berne speech? I wish I had seen it."

"I expect you did. It appeared in the *Penman*." He looked earnestly at her. "Was that yours?" he said thoughtfully.

"But the person you really ought to talk to is Mr. Selby," went on Astrid easily. "Here he comes—Mr. Selby the novelist, you know. I heard him saying some astonishingly unkind things about American newspaper owners the other day, and I think you ought to set him right. Mr. Selby," as Dan approached—"Have you realised that this is the Mr. Railton of the great Berne speech on Copyright?"

Oliver had dropped his pretence of conversing with Vivien, in order to listen. Completely though his wife had baffled him hitherto, at least she was doing his will that evening. At least he was reaping to its last ear the harvest of the peculiar kind of vengeance he had determined to take upon Vivien. He was sensible of a curious uplifting, a sense of having achieved something rather wonderful. Afterwards—after this evening—he would have demonstrated to Vivien his independence of her, his strength, his sovereignty, and then . . . then he would have time and to spare in which to gather misery's aftermath. Just now, he was controlling the situation, and exultation shut out other feeling.

He looked at Vivien's face, he marked the violet hollows beneath her eyes. He knew she suffered, and he had an insane desire to laugh aloud and snap his fingers in Railton's face. The signs of weakness in Vivien appealed to the innermost fibres of him, just as the self-reliant strength of his wife repelled him at the moment.

She stood now between Selby and Railton, and they both talked to her. With one adroit stroke she had brought together two men with a kindred interest, and had handed them their pet subject to play with.

Their keenness in their topic was joined to their pleasure in her society. Each of the two was lamenting inwardly that the exigencies of custom would oblige their host to take in the bride to dinner.

The table, needless to say, was so arranged that Oliver and Vivien were widely separated. Each seemed to be in unusually good spirits. It was a vivacious dinner, which, at the Park, was rather a wonder. Sir Charles was pompous and her ladyship uncertain, so that, as a rule, the social atmosphere was not inspiring. To-night, however, both Railton and Oliver were sparkling; and Dan Selby, who sat after all, to his joy, on the bride's other side, was in his happiest vein. Vivien too was full of talk, feverishly merry. Oliver hardly took his eyes off her during dinner.

Colonel Waring was Sybil's neighbour at table. So loud was the general conversation and so frequent the laughter, that presently under cover of it he ventured upon intimate affairs.

"Well, how goes it?" he asked, in a dropped voice.

She looked at him as a woman looks at a man whom she trusts with very private matters. "I would tell you if I could, but I am completely in the dark. He is more and more a sealed book to me. He seems to have fallen so far and so fast, that I catch myself thinking that, come what may, he never could be worthy of the girl he has married."

"I always thought you a remarkable woman," he replied, "but now I am convinced you are unique."

This is your only son, dear lady—you say such a thing of your only son ? ”

“ Yes, of the son of the man I always thought one of the best in the world,” she murmured. “ As to Astrid, I am completely in her confidence. We consulted together the other day, and decided upon a plan of action. It was a very difficult one, but so far she is carrying it out with a nerve, a brilliance, which is truly wonderful. The disappointing thing is that it is not succeeding. There is no sign at all of any awakening tenderness for her in his manner.”

He reflected awhile. “ You think that she is really desirous of winning him over ? ”

Sybil hesitated. “ What can one do ? They are married. Is it not best to try and find a *modus vivendi* ? ”

“ I have been thinking that perhaps the fact of your being there is against the *rapprochement* you desire,” said the Colonel presently, having waited for the shelter of a burst of laughter.

“ You mean that I ought to turn them out ? I don’t think the moment has arrived. If I see that he is attracted, that his view-point is changed, or changing—then I shall announce that I am going to fill the house with visitors, and they must go.”

“ And what will you do when they are both gone ? ” he persisted, looking directly at her.

It is, however, easy to avoid meeting a look when you are eating your dinner. Sybil showed no signs of perceiving the drift of this conversation. “ I never have suffered from ennui,” she replied, “ so why should I now ? ”

“ They might have my house,” observed the Colonel thoughtfully.

She smiled the least bit in the world. “ Are you going to leave ? ”

"I expect I shall have to, if you won't," he rejoined sturdily. "I don't anticipate persuading you into quitting the beloved Abbot's House."

"You told me I was unique just now. Permit me to return the compliment. This is the first proposal I have ever received at the dinner-table."

"At least you can't put an end to my importunities by getting up and going away. You must sit still long enough to look at the thing coolly."

"Coolly indeed! The coolness belongs to you, I think."

"Don't talk as if it was the first time the thing has happened, dear woman."

"It's the first time for ever so long," returned Sybil defiantly.

"Exactly, because I realised that so long as Oliver, the idol, was on his pedestal, I had very little chance. My time had not come. Now—now may I be forgiven if I say that I think it has?"

She leaned back, absently crumbling her toast, and noting that the preoccupation of everybody with the two young couples, left the elderly pair quite unobserved. "If I could be satisfied that it was my duty," she slowly murmured, "but I'm not; and," with a swift smile, "it is certainly not my pleasure."

"Thanks," said the Colonel grimly. "I am pretty well aware of the fact, after all these years. But let us leave it like this. You may possibly want me as a weapon in dealing with these extraordinary young people. If you do want me—use me without scruple. At any moment that you may want to say—'You must be out of the house in a month, for I am going to marry old Waring, and he won't stand a joint ménage'—why, say it, and I shall have enormous pleasure in backing you up."

"Well, Walter, I don't think it's likely," she slowly responded, "but I won't say it is wholly impossible."

"Good."

"Only I do not intend to desert the poor child. Oliver picked her up for his own base purpose, and now he must not drop her again. My idea was, to forge a chain about him which, when it came to the point, he would find he did not want to break. But I fear now that it is of no use. He is, definitely, not at all attracted. Even to-day, when she is playing so gloriously into his hands—when she is straining every nerve to look and be all that she knows he wants—I detect a hateful, selfish satisfaction in him—not one gleam of pity! Not one spark of kindness!"

CHAPTER XII

On entry I set down
The lamp, and turning saw whose rustled gown
Had told me my wife followed, pace for pace.
Each of us looked the other in the face.
She spoke.—R. BROWNING.

THE Park was so near the Abbot's House that, the night being fine, the Brendons made the short transit on foot, the Colonel accompanying them as far as their gate.

They walked all abreast, and the Colonel chatted cheerfully. Oliver did not open his lips.

When his mother and Astrid had gone upstairs, he went into his study and switched on the light.

Closing the door, he walked with bent head to the table, poured a dose of whisky into a tumbler, and held it to the syphon.

Setting it down, he turned to the mantelpiece, found his pipe, filled it absently, struck a match and lit it.

Then approaching the table, he let himself drop into his chair, and pushed about the letters which lay on his blotter, not opening any.

Vivien's face came between him and any sense of outward objects:—her pallor; her nervousness; the appeal in her eyes when he had bid her farewell.

In his headlong rage, he had spoiled not one woman's life, but two. If he had waited!—if he had waited. . . .

His mind would picture it, would force upon him

the idea, the dream of what might have been, but for his own folly. Had he taken the blow manfully, had he held on upon his solitary road, leaning upon his mother's affection—what would have happened upon a certain gusty, wet spring evening, when he had seen that vision, through the half-open drawing-room door?

“Look in my face! My name is Might-have-been!
I am also called No more! Too Late! Farewell!”

His self-esteem was so deeply wounded that he did not recognise himself. In taking up Astrid, as a weapon wherewith to wound Vivien, he had indeed grasped a sword, but he had grasped it by the blade, and it had cut him to the bone.

He could not forgive Astrid for having seen through him. He could not forgive himself for his failure to convince her. The memory of the terrible evening at Brighton, when he had realised the folly of pretence, the inutility of it, rankled in his memory. He felt that his wife despised him. The result was, so far, only to set him against her. There was a smarting sense of grievance. He had been fond of Miss Carey. He had honestly hoped that she might make him feel less humiliated. The day when he asked her to marry him, and felt her in his arms—he had told himself that here at least was devotion—here was something to fall back upon, a refuge from his torment of loss and mortification. But he had never recaptured the moment. If he had thought of it now, he would perhaps have felt glad that so it had been—that he and Astrid were naught to each other, and never could be. But to-night, there was no thought of Astrid. She was not above his horizon. All of him was centred in the awful thought of Vivien's unhappiness.

When he heard a light tap upon his study door, he did not even speculate as to who it might be. He said "Who's there?" without detaching his mind at all from what was absorbing it wholly; and when in reply to the question, the door opened and he saw Astrid, he frowned, not because it was she, but because it was something, anything, which broke in upon his misery.

There was something in her expression, however, which gave him a moment's anxiety. The repelling indifference of her usual manner was gone. She looked deprecating, not sure of herself.

All his instincts sprang up then in self-defence. Was she about to make some kind of appeal to him? If so, she had indeed chosen the wrong moment!

"May I speak to you for a few minutes?" she asked timidly.

"Er—of course," He was not aware of the unfriendliness his voice conveyed.

Painfully affected by that hostile note, the girl wavered a moment; then, closing the door, as if deciding that having come, she might as well go through with the rest, she seated herself at the table, facing him.

"I'm sorry if I disturb you. I would not speak to-night, but I have to make a decision. Work has been offered me, and I must either accept or decline it."

"Indeed!" he replied, almost mechanically. His alarm had been groundless. This was something quite trivial, nothing to disgust or to freeze him. Unconsciously, his released interest flew back upon its own concerns. What was it that Vivien had been going to say, there in the hall, when they were taking leave—when she had made a step forward, and paused upon finding Railton close at hand?

But he must collect his thoughts, Astrid was once more speaking.

"I promised, you remember, to wait a month. Now the month is up."

The words stiffened him. Was this an appeal, after all? His mouth hardened.

"Mr. Selby would like me to become his secretary. His sister has hitherto worked for him, but she, as you know, is to be married. They want me to begin at once, so that Miss Selby will be there to show me her ways, and also that she may be set free to give more time to her own preparations. I should like to try, if you have no objection."

Was this all? He could only feel that his indifference was complete. "You really think you would like it?" he inquired, but not as though his attention was fully fixed.

"I think I should. It—it would be something to occupy my mind. But there is a difficulty. They are planning to start, in a few days, upon a caravan tour; and as Mr. Selby always works when on these tours, I should be wanted to go with them."

She paused, embarrassed. She did not like to add, "You might not wish that," or "Would it have an odd appearance for me to go away without you?"

Evidently the point did not strike him.

"Well," he said dully, "why not?"

For the first time she lifted her eyes directly to his, and gave him one look. He was unaware. Though his head was raised, and he faced her, he did not see her. The effort which, urged by his mother, she had so laboriously made, had failed to this humiliating extent.

"Then I have your leave to say 'yes'?" she asked, trying to keep the indignation from her voice, as she rose from her seat.

"*My leave?*" he repeated, with a curled lip.

Here was a touch of feeling—a suggestion of her having broken through the wall of his indifference. Her tongue trembled with the things she might say. She choked them back. She dare not let loose any flood-gates. The distance between them must be preserved, all must be cold and formal.

"I am sorry to have troubled you with anything so trifling," she said, in a suppressed voice.

But Oliver was bringing his mind—just the surface of his mind—to bear upon the question now. He began to see that his wife was suggesting a plan which would afford him a certain measure of relief. Only that portion of his attention was disengaged which could bear upon himself, his own clamorous concerns. The feeling uppermost at the moment was a wish that he might never see this girl again as long as he lived. Naturally he could not say so; but much may be expressed by the eye, and he was probably unaware of the eloquence of his.

"I think it's quite a good scheme," he pronounced, with an attempt at hearty concurrence.

This then was the end. What turned Astrid's rebuff into an outrage was the fact that he had no idea at all of being either unfeeling or insulting. Simply, he could not take her into his consideration.

She saw how he caught at the beginning of a solution. A separation—at first partial and temporary—but becoming permanent by degrees, and a recognised thing.

The blow fell, and it was worse than she had expected. Feeling had been blunted, so she had believed. Yet now a rush of feeling threatened to undermine her control. This house! How home-like it had grown in one short month! Her husband's

mother! How dear the intimate companionship. How much she had learned, how incredibly sweet it had seemed to receive womanly kisses, to be unfolded in motherly arms, after so long and empty an orphanhood.

It was over. She suggested separation and he caught gratefully at the idea. It needed a wrestle with herself to enable her to command a quiet voice. Surprise had begun to succeed the relief in his face, when she said :

"I am glad you see no objections to my plan. Good night. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"Oh, that's all right. Settle things as you like, and come to me for funds, you know, of course."

He rose, and crossing the room, opened the door for her. She had been in act to go, so it was a piece of mere courtesy. Its effect, however, was that of a peremptory dismissal.

It was so awful to Astrid that only his own complete absorption saved her from exposure. Her whole body was shaking with the feeling she could hardly curb, as she slipped past him and made her escape. The moment she heard the door close she took to her heels and ran, her handkerchief to her mouth to muffle the gasping sobs; stumbling blindly up the stairs, pausing midway while she fought back a paroxysm, and then up again, crawling like a creature mortally hurt to the covert of her own room. She had meant to go to Sybil, but that was for the time impossible.

She had received worse than curses, worse than blows. She had had to face complete callousness. For a time the violence of her own despair frightened her.

Her disappearance left Oliver puzzled. He had done as she asked, given her liberty to act as she

chose. Yet she had not seemed pleased. Her manner, however quiet and self-contained, was nevertheless quite equal to the expression of pleasure or displeasure. There had even been something hurried, something that suggested suppressed feeling in her departure.

It appeared to him that she had suggested the one thing that might bring alleviation of the strain of the present position. To have her away during the next week—the week in which Vivien would be married to Railton—might possibly lessen what he would suffer.

He thought over what she had said: "The only difficulty is that they want me to go away with them." Well, it had seemed the best thing she could possibly do. Why was it a difficulty? Now that he set his mind to the subject, he perceived that it is, to say the least of it, not customary for the newly married to separate within a month of marriage. That was what she had in mind. She did not want to put him in an unpleasant position with regard to public opinion. He felt a little uncomfortable as he realised that this had never struck him.

He knew that his mind had been only half fixed upon Astrid and her affairs. She had come upon him at an unfortunate moment. With every desire that she should not suffer unnecessarily, he had yet, in his absence of any real feeling for her, hurt her unintentionally. He had shown her that he was not seriously considering the case she put before him. He felt sorry for this, sorry and ashamed. He wished he could call her back. He wanted to explain to her that he had been stupid. Yet he did not know what to say, nor how to say it.

In his perplexity there crossed his mind the memory of his mother. She was an able woman, a

broad-minded woman. He had often felt the benefit of her advice. Though he had arrogantly shut her out from his counsels, flouted her, ignored her, in the selfishness of his agony, yet he knew he had not alienated her.

He knew altogether, with the insight of real love, that when he sought her she would be there. She disapproved of his whole conduct, she was utterly disappointed in him—he conceded all that! But she was his mother; and well he knew that, if he had admitted her to the inner chamber where he and his sorrow sat, she might have spared him the ruin he had brought upon himself.

He admitted that he did not understand Astrid. His mother, oddly enough, did. Why had he not thought before of begging her to consider with him the whole matter of his devastated life?

He rose, put out the lamps, and went upstairs to Sybil's room.

There was a light, and he knocked without hesitation; but when he entered he felt sure that it was Astrid whom she had expected to see, and not himself.

She was seated, in a becoming silk wrapper, in an arm-chair, reading, and to the flash of surprise in her eyes succeeded a deep concern. "Why, my boy," she said, in tones of welcome.

He closed the door and approached her with bent head. He was yearning towards her; he would have liked to be kissed and consoled, as in the days of his boyhood, but too much lay between them, and he could not be natural with her. There was a while of silence. Sybil knew better than to forestall a confidence. She knew not what had prompted her prodigal's unexpected return, nor what he had come to say.

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

He sat down, drawing up a chair near hers. His head was drooped, his hands hung limply between his knees. "God help me, what a fool, what a scoundrel I've been!"

The words stirred in her a gleam of hope. "You need not despair on that account," she told him quickly.

He raised his heavy eyes a moment, and made an impatient movement as if he were at his wits' end.

"But there is nothing to be done," he said. "Don't you feel that? There is simply nothing to be done."

She hesitated, and then replied, "You have that to do which lies before us all—to shoulder the consequences of your own mistakes."

"If there were nobody but me to suffer," he said, and faltered; then, recovering, he hurried on, "I ought not to have gone there to-night. It was a rotten bit of bravado. I am punished for it. Did you ever see anything like the woe in Vivien's face? It makes—well, there are some things you can't trust yourself to say."

"I think, too, that you were unwise to go," replied his mother pityingly.

He held a groping hand towards her. "Mother, I've behaved vilely to you. I have insulted and ignored you. In spite of that, I come to you for rescue from the intolerable mess I have made of things. Will you help me?"

She took the hand and held it lovingly. "I have been doing my best, Ollie, all this last month," she said very gently.

"I know, I know. But it is no good. The whole thing has grown too awful. My one desire at this moment is to be quit of it all. I feel ready to make a bolt for it, to drop my name, sink my identity, begin

over again, in some country where nobody knows who I am or what I have done ! ”

“ I can understand that,” said Sybil tenderly. “ But, you see, a man cannot repudiate his responsibilities.”

He pondered a little in silence. “ Astrid has just been in to speak to me,” he then said slowly. “ You are in her confidence. I expect you know what she came to say ? ”

“ To ask you to allow her to be Dan Selby’s secretary ? ”

“ Yes. I behaved like a brute, as usual. My mind was all astray. I am afraid I hurt her feelings.”

Sybil sighed. “ I am sorry.”

“ She said they wanted her to go away with them for a time. It seemed to me like a reprieve. I can’t help thinking it would be the best thing possible. I didn’t consider appearances for the moment, and I told her she could do just as she liked. But I want to know what you think. Would all the world gossip if we were to separate for a bit ? ”

Sybil turned the question over in her mind. She saw that the present position was strained almost to snapping point, and it seemed to her that she despaired a way to lessen the tension for a time.

“ Ollie,” she said, “ I have a suggestion to make. I think it well that you should not be in Thackridge next week during the time of the wedding. How would this do ? Let Astrid go with the Selbys, as they suggest, but say that you too would like to be of the party now and again when you can get a day off. Go to town, live at your club, so that it may seem to the people hereabouts that you are with your wife ; and take a day off now and then to save appearances. You could go down for a week-end and stop at an inn, as they probably wouldn’t have

accommodation for you in the caravans. The fact of the Selbys being there would make the strain less. You might find such a week-end quite agreeable. Should it, on the other hand, try you more than you feel you can bear, there is always the plea of press of work to be urged. The Selbys are most unconventional people, who will not trouble themselves too much about your concerns. Tessa Selby has developed quite a warm friendship for Astrid. I wonder if it strikes you what a tribute I am paying to your wife's unusually fine character when I say that I have not the least fear that she would, by any hint or indiscretion, 'give away' the distressing state of affairs between you? You have given me a daughter-in-law whom I can trust completely, Ollie. That is no light praise."

He made no reply. All mention of his wife left him cold. A picture was stamped upon his mind: the turned-down corners of a child's sweet mouth, the lonely terror which had seemed to leap out and show itself to him in the poignant moment of his good-bye to Vivien. He was half beside himself; but he gathered that his mother thought the caravan trip might be arranged. That was a kind of respite . . . as she said, the plea of work could be urged. . . .

"Well?" said Sybil softly.

"Yes. It is better than nothing. It will be a relief: a few days to myself. . . . Oh! what made me go there to-night, courting torture in that way?"

Sybil found herself choking back words with difficulty. It was not the occasion, she saw, in which to urge Astrid's claims. His wife appeared to him at the moment merely in the light of an insuperable obstacle: an obstacle of his own creation which every impulse of generosity, of remorse, of shame, of bare justice, impelled him to treat with considera-

tion. She rose, went behind his chair, and ruffled his hair in the old way which lately she had quite given up.

"Ollie, the reason why the thought of Astrid is such a thorn to you to-night is that you are telling yourself that had you not been married, Vivien would have broken her engagement to marry you. I want you to understand that that idea is delusion—pure delusion! I have seen Mr. Railton, and I am glad I have, for I am quite certain that he would never let her go. He intends to marry her, and what a man like that intends, he does. But I have more to say. He is the right husband for Vivien."

"No!" cried Oliver fiercely.

"He is. He loves her open-eyed. He sees she is weak, inconstant, and vain. Those defects don't matter to him. They would have broken your heart. He is of coarse enough fibre to understand her without despising her; or perhaps I should say to go on being fond of her although understanding her. He will rule her with a rod of iron, give her all she wants, never trust her for a moment. That is the treatment such women as she require. You could never have done that. You would have gone on all your life expecting from her the fine feeling in which she is wholly lacking, and having a fresh heart-break every time she proved herself so much less than you expected. My son, my darling! Listen to me! . . . If there were no question of Astrid, if you were free, unmarried, if all were undone that is done, I would never lift a finger to help on your marriage with Vivien Faulkner!"

CHAPTER XIII

To grasp the thing we long for, and with sorrow
sick and dreary,
Then to find how it can fail us is the saddest
pain of all.—A. A. PROCTOR.

“I’ve got that,” said Astrid, in a business-like tone. “In tune with his surroundings.—Fresh paragraph?” Dan drew in a long breath. “M’yes, fresh par. H’m! Go on.” His voice changed to a curious reciting note, and he spoke as though he were reading the words from a page before him.

“There was no east. That is to say, the huge bulk of the Hippodrome cut it off. On the north, there were the dismal rows of windows in the jam factory, and a smell of vinegar upon the air told that they were making pickles. Beneath the bridge southward there flowed no river, but a sooty wilderness of railway lines, flanked by a great, gaunt engine shed, which cut away the sky, almost to the zenith. The west alone lay open to his gaze. In that direction only could his thought travel or his soul take wing. The long, wet railway lines seemed floating towards a horizon made fair by opalescent vapour, and mysterious by a dim suggestion of trees far away. So level was the land that the metals lay like a pathway running from where he stood straight to the smouldering furnace wherein lay the sinking sun, could one but have seen him.”

He stopped, but his secretary made no sound nor

sign. She sat with pen poised, her back against a haystack, her feet in the meadow grasses, and her face turned towards a prospect of delicate beauty. The scents of early summer were in the air she breathed. The light was the sunlight of such a May as England had not known for years. Dan lay on his back. His hat was off, his simple attire consisted of a flannel shirt and trousers and a crimson cummerbund.

"Scratch out that awful ending," he said, after a moment's thought. "Scratch out 'could one but have seen him.' Let it read like this—'the smouldering furnace wherein, veiled from curious eyes by tender films of coloured mist, the sun lay a-dying.'"

For a minute the soft scrape of the pen, and then Astrid's serious voice. "Lay a-dying," she murmured abstractedly.

"That's all," said Dan suddenly, after a lengthy pause.

"Not all the chapter?"

"All for this morning. Hang it, I've had two hours!"

"You had better give me a bit more," she remonstrated quietly. "It is a pity to leave off there. I know the Professor is going to find Philip on the bridge. Do bring him along, if you can."

Dan, who had sat up, threw himself pettishly down again. "What a tyrant you are! Tessa never domineered like that."

"I'm not Tessa"—briefly.

"No, by the powers, nor anybody but yourself. Bother it all, where was I? Read me down the last page."

She complied. He changed a word here and there as her voice flowed on. Then, putting his heart into the thing, he brought the Professor upon the bridge

that looked west, and showed him some of the magic of a London sunset.

In half an hour it was done, and he laughed his jolly laugh as he sat up. "Indeed, and I'm thankful you kept me to it," he told her. "That's a far better place to stop. But why did you make me go on?"

"I knew you had it ready and wanted to give it me, but you thought I was getting tired and that we ought to go back to lunch. Come," she added, hastily collecting her things into a bag, "we must walk back briskly, or Tessa's stew will be spoilt. It seems a shame to let her do all the cooking, but I think your publisher will bless me."

Dan took the bag, slung it over his shoulder, and they left the field by way of a winding lane that went between verdant banks, blue with dog violet and crowned with hawthorn.

"What weather! This is the fifth day!" he cried gaily. "To-morrow is Saturday, and our solitude is to be invaded by Tessa's engineer, that rhinoceros Martin, and the very fine gentleman your husband. It is a grand idea of Humphrey's to have his car so made that it can be slept in, or how should we have accommodated all the crowd? However, I don't know that it would have mattered. You and Tessa will be comfortable, and we men can always rough it."

"No more dictation until Monday," said Astrid, with something like a sigh. "However, it is a good thing, for I shall have to help Tessa cook for such a big party. Fortunately she says Mr. Martin Selby is a fine hand at washing up."

"Of course the men wash up! The least they can do if the ladies cook for them! We'll put on the Editor to roll up his shirt-sleeves and join the happy

band! I'm simply longing to see Brendon rusti-
cating. Hope that isn't cheek, Mrs. Brendon?"

"Of course not! I too am anxious to see how he
comports himself. I have always known him as a
Londoner."

"This is no place for Londoners. He will have to
become the Compleat Tramp if he wants to get any
fun out of this. Ah! here we are, if we may judge
by the perfume that arises from Tessa's casserole!"

The two caravans stood in the corner of a sloping
pasture which dipped to the south-west. Below, in
the valley, a white road meandered towards the
village, where, two or three times a day, a branch
train deposited such travellers as had business in
the sleepy, mellow, red-brick-and-ivy place. As
soon as the three had finished lunch it was their
intention to pack and wander slowly down the
valley, avoiding the village, so as to reach their
next camping ground, about a mile upon its further
side, in time for supper.

The cooking-tent was Dan's own patent, of which
he was very proud. Whatever the weather, the cook,
as a result of its scientific arrangement, was inde-
pendent of rain and draught. Tessa came out, with
a fire-scorched face beneath her lilac sun-bonnet, her
skirt pinned up, and wearing a large apron.

"Barely ten minutes late!" said she approvingly.
"You are a reformed character, Dan. Dinner's
quite ready, if Astrid will give a hand with the dish-
ing up."

They ate out of doors, under the big elms, in the
exquisite weather which made life a joy.

"I shall be sorry to leave this lovely camp," said
Astrid as she helped the potatoes.

"Oh, you're a born tramp!" said Dan. "Isn't
she, Tessa?"

"She's a splendid companion," replied Tessa with energy. "I hope this won't be our last jaunt by many and many. If only we can persuade Mr. Brendon and Humphrey to like it as much as we do!"

"Doesn't Mr. Spence like it?"

"He has hardly had a fair trial," said Dan, with amusement. "Tessa led him forth at Easter—or, as he said, at north-easter—and he was a bit put off. It snowed most of the time."

"Even I don't much care about caravanning when it snows," said Tessa drily.

"It snows now," observed Astrid, catching in her hand a drift of hawthorn petals which the lazy breeze blew into her lap. "How delicious they taste! If one could do all one's cooking under a hedgerow, fancy the flavours you could introduce into your sweets—Crème à la violette, Gélée d'aubépine, Pouding chevreuille, and so on."

"Delicious!" echoed Tessa. "And the gorse, I always think it smells of almonds, don't you? Gâteau d'ajonc! How nice!"

Astrid made a little grimace. "Gâteau *fleur* d'ajonc sounds less thorny to me," she laughed.

Dan fixed his keen, kind eyes upon her. Yesterday was the first time that a glimpse of her native Irish humour had escaped their guest. She had started the expedition with a gravity, a shrinking quietude, which had disturbed him. He had guessed that it was a wrench for her to part from her newly-wedded husband. In fact, it had surprised both him and Tessa that she should have been ready to do so. The Brendons' circumstances were certainly not such as to make it imperative that she should work for money. But Dan was modern in many ways, though as inconsistent as the best of us. The idea of a young wife not wishing to be entirely

dependent upon her husband was to him by no means unintelligible.

"The Germans have a May drink, made of cowslips and things," he remarked dreamily. "But the best of all would be a primrose wine. To me the perfume of a primrose wood is the most subtle, the most unmatchable thing in nature. If one could capture it! But, like all the more esoteric forms of joy, it cannot be had at will."

"*A la bonne heure*," said Tessa, "I am grateful to Astrid for the hint. We will make cowslip tea; the fields round here are golden with the dear things."

"By the way, did the butcher bring out the letters, as he said he would?" asked Dan.

"Bless me, yes, he did! Nothing of importance, I think. Oh, yes, there was a copy of the *North Middlesex Courier*, which should contain an account of the Ralton-Faulkner wedding."

"I'll go and get it," said Dan, rising and entering the ladies' caravan, which by day was laid out as a sitting-room.

He returned with the local paper, and after a short search found the column devoted upon this wonderful occasion to the function, the presents, the costumes, and so on.

"The bride wore an exquisite creation of ivory charmeuse, veiled in pearl-sewn gauze, by Madame Cerisette.' H'm, h'm! That's all Greek to me. The bridesmaids were the Hon. Miss So-and-so. Don't know any of 'em—imported goods; let's get on to Thackridge itself. The church was magnificently decorated with the well-known products of Sir Charles Faulkner's magnificent hothouses, and his head gardener, Mr. Macready, is to be congratulated upon the impressive effect obtained by the massing of amaryllis, agapanthus, lapageria.' Good

Lord, what stuff! Is there no account of the ceremony itself? O yes—here at last. ‘The bride, who entered leaning upon the arm of her father, looked lovely, in spite of her pallor. It has been known in Thackridge for the last week that Miss Faulkner’s health had been unduly tried by the exertions which must of necessity precede a somewhat hurried wedding. It is not three weeks since Lady Faulkner and her daughter returned from Cairo, and Miss Vivien Faulkner’s friends were more grieved than surprised to hear that the bride had actually left her bed in order to have the ceremony performed. In spite of her temporary delicacy, the young lady, however, went through the trying ordeal admirably. Her jewels were’—O, who cares for her jewels?—‘The sheaf of lilies which she carried was arranged by’—some other tradesman, I suppose. Where does it go on? Ah, yes, here is something more!—‘We understand that the wedding was fixed at so early a date owing to the pressing engagements of the bridegroom in New York. Be that as it may, the date of sailing has been postponed. Mr. and Mrs. Railton did not leave the Park after the wedding yesterday. We were told by Lady Guestling, eldest sister of the bride, who most obligingly gave us a few moments of her valuable time, that her sister would take a day or two of rest after to-day’s ceremony, and then leave with her husband, to pass a week or two very quietly at some seaside resort in England, before facing the rigours of the Atlantic voyage.’—Well, Tessa, what d’you think of that?”

“I am not at all surprised. She looked very ill the night we dined there,” said Tessa composedly. “After all, she has been through a good deal during the last six months, enough to shake up an ex-

citable girl. I am glad that Mr. Railton is showing consideration for her. I rather liked the look of him."

Astrid had sat listening without saying a word. She had grown noticeably pale, and Dan, catching sight of her face, told himself that he was inconsiderate. He was a little puzzled, however. How much did Mrs. Oliver Brendon know, or care, about the story of her husband's first engagement? They had both been present, apparently on the best of terms and in the best of spirits, at the Park dinner the other night. The feeling she might experience on hearing that the marriage was an accomplished fact, would most likely be relief. One glance at her face, however, told him that she was profoundly stirred. Characteristically, she said nothing, nor did she ask to look at the paper. After some more talk, she quietly inquired whether Mrs. Brendon's name was down in the list of guests, and learned that it was.

"Not your husband," added Dan.

"No. He said he should not have time to go. He is living in town, as you know, because he is working very hard. The Congress of Foreign Journalists keeps him busy."

"He has done wonders with that paper," said Dan thoughtfully. "It must be a valuable concern by now, I should think."

"It does very well," she replied.

"I don't think the last few numbers have been so good—since Astrid came off it," observed Tessa.

"O, Tessa, what nonsense!" cried Astrid.

"If I were your husband, I'd appoint you sub-editor, at a good salary," continued her friend.

"She's first-rate at sub-editing," agreed Dan.
"Her care is extraordinary, and she has a genius

for punctuation. There is literature oozing out of the pores of her."

"O, please!" murmured Astrid, growing red and rising to escape from his enthusiasm. "Tessa, you are eating too many almonds and raisins, and we shan't have enough dessert to last till Monday! I am going to take them away from you, and wash up."

"I wash, you wipe," said Dan promptly. "I can smoke my pipe the while."

"You'll find clean dusters in the locker, and the kettle boils," said Tessa, stretching herself luxuriously, and opening a novel.

"I shall boil the kettle again, and make tea now, and put it in the Thermos," said Astrid, as Dan and she proceeded to the kitchen tent to perform their duties. "That will save our stopping to make tea as we go along."

"Great thought. Always said you were a born tramp," was the satisfied reply, spoken with the stem of his pipe between his teeth.

They washed, wiped, and chatted in full content. He was beginning to think that his secretary was a more interesting study than the plot of any of his tales. But a sound instinct warned him that his studying must be done with the extremest caution. Astrid was a ready and, at times, an interesting talker upon impersonal topics. On the subject of herself, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' was written up all around.

He spoke no word now of the wedding, nor of the bride's illness. But as his companion lapsed into silence, and her preoccupation increased, he knew well where her thoughts were.

The caravan tour, when it had been ascertained that the Brendons really were coming, had been

extended, and the plans slightly changed. The caravans had been sent by rail to a spot in the West of England, whence they could make their way by degrees to the south coast.

They were moving towards the sea, but Astrid did not know how near they were. It was Dan's little surprise, which he was keeping for her. He had been told, by an innkeeper the night before, that upon the crest of the next hill they would have a fine view of the Channel. He had heard her say that the Irish Sea was all she had as yet beheld in the way of marine scenery.

It was late afternoon when they came upon it.

The breeze had dropped to nothing, the sky was blue, with suggestion of haze which, so far, the wind had kept at bay. The sun was beginning to stoop, so that his light struck sideways upon the red trunks of a grove of Scotch firs near. The green hill-sides sloped richly, and where there was no grass, the soil was the colour of terra-cotta.

One behind the other, the ridges rolled away beneath their feet to where, beyond green pasture and red earth, lay the blue ocean, just blurred at the meeting-point of sky and sea.

They checked the horses, to rest upon the summit, and the three of them stood silently, gazing their fill upon the loveliness before them. Astrid was experiencing the power of nature to heal a sore heart.

When she joined the Selbys, not a week ago, she had thought herself so bruised, so deeply wounded, that her life must creep always on a broken wing.

Lying awake at night she lived over again the short, conclusive scene in the library. Oliver's indifference, his preoccupation, his carelessness as to where she went, or what she did : the utter failure

of her month of trial. Only for the sake of Sybil Brendon had she lived through those weeks of humiliation. She loved Oliver's mother. When her resentment flamed up hottest against her husband, she told herself incessantly, 'He is her son. He must have something noble in him.'

To-morrow she must go through the ordeal of meeting him again. She had not seen him since their last interview. A slight cold gave Sybil the chance to keep her in bed to breakfast for the few days that intervened before her departure with the Selbys. It seemed to her that she had got past caring now, what he said, or how he looked. Her heart was hard as a stone. But this beauty, this unrolling pageant of summer, this glad land, full of larks singing out an ecstasy which was inexhaustible—of buttercup meadows and the delicate fringe of wild carrot—of cowslips and white may, of little streams and great hills, of fan-like beeches and woodland glades—how could the heart of a girl remain hard therein?

Ah, but a heart, if it be soft, will begin to crave! Therefore she choked back her joy and checked the outrush of feeling. She held herself in with an effort which whitened her cheeks and quickened her breath.

Dan saw it. With the insight which was developing in him, he saw that the feeling was all there—that she would not show it. He wondered if her cold, hard creed, the inheritance of her Ulster Protestantism, lay behind—whether on principle she kept all her tender impulses thus in check. Something in the trouble of her eyes, in the corners of her pretty mouth, gathered in with mute pathos, caused him to feel a deep pity for her. He would have been grateful could he have found the smallest way to

help her—to offer consolation. He believed that the times when she was really happiest were those she spent in writing from his dictation.

He was beginning to develop a feeling of antagonism for Oliver, because he had more than a suspicion that he did not make his wife happy. This afternoon his mind leapt to a conclusion. Of course, young Brendon had married without saying anything of his recent—too recent—love affair. This his wife must have discovered since. The astute romancer began, or thought he began, to understand the willingness of the newly-wedded girl to come caravanning without her husband.

He sighed wistfully. Things happen very perversely. Here was a girl whom, had he known of her existence, he would have sought out and made his wife if she would have had him. Apparently she had been for two years immured in Brendon's office, right under the fine gentleman's nose, while he philandered with a cheap little person like Vivien.

Dan felt as if the plot of a novel lay ready to his hand—a plot which he could not, dare not, use.

CHAPTER XIV

We shape our deeds, and then are shapen by them.
To some frail heart a cruel gift we bring,
Turn from our acts away, and think to fly them :
Ah ! Theirs the stronger wing !—WILLIAM WATSON.

MRS. OLIVER BRENDON awoke next morning to the memory that something that day had to be undergone—something from which all her nerves winced away.

It was Tessa's turn to lie in bed while Astrid got breakfast, so she rose early, and went out to her work with a sense of gratitude that she had something other than her own destiny upon which to fix her thoughts.

The morning was perfectly beautiful, dew lay beaded upon the may blossom and buttercups, and haze upon the ocean at their feet. She had thought their late camping-ground almost perfect, but this far surpassed it. It was upon the edge of a wild moor with pines and gorse—a moor that flamed with the full effulgence of the golden broom.

The man who had attended to the horses had built and lit her fire, and she set to work methodically to unfold the folding-table, spread the cloth, lay the tea-things, cut the rashers, break the eggs, and do the various simple things that were necessary. The years that she had lived alone in London had given her a fine apprenticeship in this kind of thing, and had her heart been less heavy she would have enjoyed it thoroughly. As it was, the thought of her husband's

glance of distaste, the memory of his unfriendly voice, the coldness of his complete indifference, tortured her so that she found a tear slipping down upon her bare arm, and almost dropping into the frying-pan.

Upon one thing she made up her mind. She could not meet him for the first time before the Selbys. They were kind, unsuspecting people, but they would not be able to help noticing the strain of the situation. No; much as she disliked the prospect, she would stroll down the road that led to the village for half a mile or so, and meet him on his way. He had been carefully instructed as to his route, and had announced his intention of coming by a train due at about three o'clock.

After breakfast, afraid of her own thoughts, she persuaded Dan to dictate for a couple of hours, while Tessa went off with the man, Barry by name, to the village with a market basket, to do the Sunday marketing.

Lunch, it being Saturday, was cold, and consisted of tinned tongue and salad, which tasted delicious with the farmhouse bread, West Country butter and clotted cream.

It seemed to Astrid as if the morning took wings, as though lunch were over almost before they had sat down to it—as if, with no time left for preparation, she were launched upon this terrible mission—the encounter with her husband.

Just as she was setting out, Tessa called to her from the caravan to ask her to take Binks, who had been forgotten that morning, and was in need of a walk. Astrid was too kind to refuse, but the request was not very welcome; for Binks was a big Irish terrier of most pugnacious proclivities, and one needed to be wary when he met with other dogs.

However, his frenzy of joy when she let him loose touched her heart. There were no canine enemies in sight, and they started for their walk in great amity.

The way was beautiful. The road curved down into the valley with long sweeps, and each turn disclosed a new peep of the sea, dotted with distant sails. After a little, she could see the coast further west, where in a wide red bay nestled Dormouth Harbour, that popular watering-place. Even its big white hotels looked beautiful, softened by distance and atmosphere, in the radiance of the sunshine.

A pity indeed that all her heart should be full of black trouble in the midst of such beauty! Yet her despondency was too profound to be shaken off to-day, in view of what lay before her. It seemed there was no way out of her troubles but the way she knew she could never take—the way of self-murder.

Astrid was a fighter, one who would never surrender to her own misery. Yet in that moment, could she have avoided the sight of her husband by merely desiring her own death, she felt she would have succumbed to the temptation, so intense was her fear, her shrinking, her unwillingness.

The tears, rushing into her eyes, obscured her vision. For a while she stumbled on, too lost in her unhappiness to brush them away: and so she missed the first sight of a fat brown and white spaniel just appearing round a bend of the road.

Her earliest intimation of his presence was his imprudent, rude, and challenging bark. Needless to say, Binks waited for no further declaration of war. Before Astrid had time to say a word, he rushed upon the impertinent foreigner, and seized him in that

hold which so seldom relaxed when once it had fastened upon its prey.

Astrid flew upon him, gripped his collar, beat him with her fists, even took up a stone from the road and pounded his head with it; but he held on, the howls of his victim growing fainter by degrees. Finally the girl saw there was nothing for it but literally to choke him off his quarry. The handkerchief she drew from her pocket was, however, ludicrously inadequate. With the resource engendered by emergency, she unstrapped her leather belt, buckled it about the sturdy neck, and pulled as if her very life depended upon it. Absorbed as she was, she quite failed to hear the hoot of a motor approaching down the hill. Her back was towards it, and her figure came between the chauffeur's view and the two dogs who accounted for her presence in the middle of the road. The man thought she was fastening up a shoe, or something of the kind, and though he slowed down, still went forward, with the invincible belief of the driver of a motor that anybody will sooner get out of the way than be run down.

Astrid saw and heard nothing whatever. Just as the ferocious Binks succumbed to strangulation and dropped the spaniel from his jaws, the off wheel of the motor knocked her down, and she was flung into the road.

The man pulled up at once, and the only occupant of the car, an elderly gentleman, cried out in much anger:

"You silly fool, what are you doing? Running over a woman! What next, I wonder? What the deuce are you thinking about?"

"I'm very sorry, sir, the young lady was right slap in the midst of the road. I couldn't see what she

was doing, but she was separating two fighting dogs, it seems !”

While speaking, both had jumped off the car, and hastened to see the extent of the damage. Astrid had already managed to sit up, but was looking white and somewhat dazed. The spaniel had lain down in the road, faintly howling, and bleeding profusely; and Binks had, to all seeming, succumbed in good earnest to the constriction of the strap round his throat.

“Untie—my—dog! Untie—my—dog!” gasped the girl, waving a peremptory hand, while with the other she fumbled for something to stanch the blood that flowed from her cheek, but could not find it, as her handkerchief was at the moment lying soaked with blood in the road.

“Dear, dear, this is most unfortunate! My dear madam, my dear madam, permit me!” stammered the stout gentleman, offering a clean handkerchief.

“Thank you,” said Astrid, and was vexed to find that her lips shook in a way which made it difficult to articulate.

The chauffeur, meanwhile, had hastened to the aid of the unfortunate terrier, had unbuckled the belt, and was looking doubtfully at the limp form.

“Water!” gasped Astrid. “There is a brook there! Throw some over him.”

The chauffeur, anxious to atone for his misdeeds, took off his livery cap, filled it with water, and dashed it over the prostrate hero. After one or two applications Binks showed signs of life. Meanwhile the elderly gentleman assisted the girl to her feet, and she sat down shakily upon the step of the motor, unequal for the moment to the effort of getting in

"Leave that brute and bring the water here," said the owner of the motor gruffly. "Let me wash the young lady's face, and see how badly she is cut."

"The dog's alive, miss," pleaded the young chauffeur humbly, as he obeyed.

"Thank you—very—much," said Astrid, trying to smile as she met his scared and apprehensive eyes. "I never heard you coming, the dogs were making such a noise."

"It was inexcusable, simply inexcusable," protested the elderly gentleman, dabbing at her face with the wet handkerchief. "A more recklessly careless piece of driving it would be impossible to imagine. May I ask where you would like to be taken, madam? The car is, of course, at your disposal."

Astrid did not for the moment reply. To her own surprise and indignation she felt a sudden dimness of perception which suggested that she might be going to faint. The voices of the two men came from a distance, the landscape began slowly to circle round. . . .

It was certainly no wish of his own, but a sense of submission to the inevitable, which had induced Oliver to take train for Dormouth Junction that afternoon.

His life, he felt, had escaped from his own control, and he must trudge wearily along in its wake, as it were, not knowing nor caring whither it led. His depression had been increased that morning by an interview with Mr. Marsh, the proprietor of the *Penman*, which had left him vaguely uneasy.

The paper was going well, the rise in circulation was steady and increasing. He had suggested a slight change in the staff, not at all of an expensive or far-reaching character—the kind of thing which an

editor would expect to have granted as a matter of course. Mr. Marsh had hummed and hawed, and finally said that he would rather leave things as they were—exactly as they were—for a few weeks longer, in view of the fact that he might be desiring further changes before very long. He had added a warm eulogy of Brendon's own work—a eulogy which sounded perfectly genuine. But the interview had left the young editor with something of the 'rickety' feeling well known to the journalist whose whole income and prospects in life are dependent upon the whim of a rich man who takes up newspaper-owning and lays it down again at his own pleasure and inclination.

The trifling incident added to his sense of failure and wretchedness.

The journey was very hot. The time of starting had prevented his having lunch, and there was no restaurant-car on the train. He reached the station thirsty and tired, with a bag to carry. There was no conveyance of any kind to be hired, and, after some poor and inadequate refreshment at an inn, he prepared to face a walk whose tedium was not mitigated by any hope of compensation at its end.

The hill he had to climb exceeded his worst expectations. He was wearing his London clothes, and he disliked walking in the country in London clothes. He neared the top in a state of temper not far removed from savage, though he had resolved to behave as civilly as he could to the millstone that was about his neck.

He came upon a curious scene.

The white dust of the lane was intersected with a trickle of blood. Just beyond stood a motor-car, on the step of which reclined a girl in a blue linen suit, upheld by a stout elderly gentleman.

The chauffeur was bending over what looked like a dead dog in the road.

Oliver forgot his ill-temper as he approached this unlooked-for spectacle.

"Is there an accident? Can I help?" asked his clear, well-bred voice.

Astrid started. She tried to speak. At the same moment he drew near enough to recognise her.

One side of her face was bleeding, and her dress was splotted with blood. Her hat was off, her hair disarranged.

"Astrid! Good heavens, what's the matter?" he cried hurriedly.

"Sir, I beg to apologise, if you are a friend of this poor young lady—"

"Her husband," said Oliver shortly.

"I am relieved and thankful. She was pluckily engaged in trying to separate two dogs who were fighting. My chauffeur came along, she did not hear him hoot, and I am ashamed to confess that he did not manage to stop quite soon enough, and your wife was thrown down."

"Oliver—I'm all right," said Astrid feebly. "I don't know what made me silly all of a sudden. I think it was—seeing the dog killing the other. . . ."

"No doubt," said the gentleman compassionately. "Please lift your wife into the car, sir. I will drive her wherever she wishes to go. My name is Wolfe. If I may take her home quickly, I will go on and send a doctor at once."

"A vet would be best," said Astrid, with a faint smile. "I am all right. The dogs . . ." For some reason she did not seem able to speak fluently.

"Are both the dogs yours, madam?" asked Mr. Wolfe.

She shook her head. Oliver, turning to examine

the animals, recognised Binks. "That brute! He's always fighting," he said irritably.

"I don't know where the spaniel comes from," faltered Astrid. "He just—appeared."

Oliver and Mr. Wolfe consulted, with the result that it was decided to lay the wounded spaniel, who was badly bitten, upon some grass in the motor, and, after driving Astrid to the camp, to proceed to Dormouth in search of a veterinary surgeon. Binks had more or less recovered, though he looked limp and seemed cowed. The chauffeur thought the spaniel came from the Park, which at this point skirted one side of the road. He knew that Colonel Bruce, the owner, kept spaniels of that breed.

Oliver turned and went towards his wife, who still sat on the step. His approach seemed to galvanise her into action. She rose, holding on by the car, and stood upon her feet. It was her intention to jump in before he could reach her; but she had reckoned without the effects of the shock she had undergone. A twinge of pain in her side brought back the dizzy feeling, and she was only half-conscious of Oliver's arms lifting her up and of being placed upon the luxurious cushions of the motor.

"Oliver," she murmured, as he set her down, "lend me your hankie, please."

He complied at once. "I've got some clean ones in my bag," he said.

"This will do. Only to hold over my face until I can wash it. We are not far from the camp."

The rush of cool air was reviving. In the five minutes which sufficed to reach the caravans, she had pulled herself together wonderfully. She was able to thank Mr. Wolfe for his kindness, and to explain what had happened to Tessa and Dan when they rushed out in surprise and anxiety.

Mr. Wolfe evidently thought a caravan a very bad place for the wounded lady. So did Oliver, though he held his tongue until the apologetic gentleman and his subdued chauffeur had whisked away down the road with the invalid spaniel.

In face of Tessa's evident affection, and readiness to do all that was possible for Astrid's comfort, he felt it would be churlish to suggest taking her to an hotel, apart from the difficulty of getting her there. She was tenderly conveyed into the ladies' caravan, the door was shut, and Dan and he left to their own devices. Dan suggested a smoke and a stroll until tea-time, and soothed Oliver's difficulties about a doctor by explaining that he was every moment expecting the arrival of Humphrey Spence and Martin in Spence's motor, and that as soon as the car came it would be at Oliver's disposal.

"But I don't think you need be very anxious," he said. "The chauffeur says the wheel barely touched her, it just flung her down, and I think her faintness was due to the strain she had gone through with those two dogs. I told Tessa she ought not to be sent out alone with Binks, I am the only person he obeys in the one respect of other dogs, though he is obedient enough in other cases. I am awfully sorry it should have happened, but she will soon get over it. Tessa has a little medicine chest for emergencies—lint and so on."

By the time that he had changed, had a drink, a comfortable smoke, and a stroll round in the exquisite beauty of the moor, some of Oliver's load of depression had evaporated. At any rate, the worst moment was over. Astrid and he had met, and the accident had broken the awkwardness of their meeting.

"Mrs. Brendon was set upon meeting you," Dan

told him. "She hoped to get most of the way to the station, I think."

Oliver had to cover his surprise as best he could.

He had not looked for such luxuries as deck-chairs, nor a table for his food. "I thought you ate it out of the saucepan, on the grass," he said to Tessa, when she came out to lay tea.

"We shall teach you a very different tale," said Tessa cheerily. "Of course, I should like to do things like that, but Dan is wrapped up in creature comforts."

To Astrid also came the blessed sense that the worst was over. She and Oliver had met. She had been spared the dread of having to explain why she had come to meet him, the unpleasantness of assuming a quiet friendliness to mask her shuddering reluctance.

He had not been unkind. After the first minute of rather disgusted surprise, he had done what he could for her.

It was hard that she should have so disfiguring an accident at the very moment of his arrival. It was more a graze than a cut, right upon her cheekbone. There was considerable gravel in it, but this Tessa had washed out, and had bandaged it for the present with a chin bandage which made her look like a nun, though a nun with a worldly tress of fair hair escaping over the forehead.

She lay down upon her little bed and closed her eyes in sheer exhaustion, after the effort of putting on a clean frock and having her bruises discovered and treated.

Meanwhile, out of doors, Dan rigged up the hammock for her, that she might come out into the sweet air to have tea.

"Go and fetch her," said Tessa to the young husband, when all was ready. "Help her down the ladder, and put her into the hammock."

Oliver rose. He stood staring before him at the broom-edged rim of the moor, and the blue sky above it. He looked at his pipe. It was half full, but mechanically he scooped it out, dropped it into his pocket, and turned to his hostess.

"May I go in? I had better knock, I suppose," he said. He could not help showing his nervousness: and Tessa smiled. "O, cheer up, she's not dying," she said slyly: and liked him the better for flushing up so boyishly.

CHAPTER XV

"In love as in life, expectation avails us but little; through loving we learn to love; and it is the so-called disillusionings of pettier love that will, the most simply and faithfully, feed the flame of the mightier love that shall come, it may be, to illumine the rest of our life."—MAETERLINCK.

"WHAT a good thing, it is," observed Tessa, as she knelt before Astrid's berth to have her blouse fastened, "that it is my morning to get breakfast! I shall bring you yours, and then have plenty of time to help you dress before we start for church. I expect Mr. Brendon will want to stay and take care of you."

Astrid said nothing to this suggestion. She was still feeling shaken and unwell. The motor-wheel had struck her just upon the spine, and the blow had no doubt been the cause of her faintness. This morning she was very stiff, more so than on the preceding day, though she was most unwilling to confess it.

The weather was once more gloriously fine, and she could hear the laughter and chattering as Tessa and her Humphrey prepared breakfast, chaffed Martin, and banged upon the door of the caravan where Dan and Oliver declined to be aroused so early.

She made a valiant attempt to eat the really tempting contents of her breakfast tray; but her appetite was poor.

Every nerve in her was waiting for the tap at the

door which would presently warn her that Oliver stood outside, ready to help her into the hammock. When at last it came, it found her so unprepared that she shook in every limb. She must, however, invite him in, and he came, grave and considerate, avoiding her eyes, and extremely polite in his inquiries after her health.

She could not say that she felt well, but was earnest in her conviction that she only needed a few days' rest. "It is all right," she said, "for the Selbys want to stay at least a week in this camp, and I shall be able to write from dictation quite well, even though I have to be quiet for a time."

"You must see a doctor," said Oliver quietly.

"O no, please!" she begged him.

"It is most disagreeable to me to go against you in anything but sheer necessity," he replied. "But somehow I must get a doctor for you. The difficulty seems to be that there is no good doctor short of Dormouth, and it will take some time to bring him. But I will get Spence to go in his car."

"O, please don't! Please!"

He looked distressed. "It seems to me that I must, and as I said, it is painful to me to thwart you," he told her. "Could you try to make up your mind to it?"

The tears rushed to her eyes. Hot shame at such weakness only made them flow the faster. She snatched a handkerchief and brushed them away. "I beg your pardon," she said half inaudibly. "Yes, I am sorry to be so contrary."

"That's right. May I help you up? Why, you are moving with greater difficulty than yesterday!"

"Of course, naturally, I should feel stiffer to-day," she assured him eagerly.

"You must tell me if I hurt you," he directed, as

he put his arm round her. "Let me lower you to the ground in the doorway. Sit on the floor, and then I can pick you bodily up and put you into the hammock."

She was grateful for his strength and his impersonal, grave manner. "Thank you," she said from her heart, when she was carefully laid down among the cushions.

They all stood round her, full of anxiety, and Dan's blue eyes were so wistful that she laughed at him. "Why, Mr. Selby," she said, "I'm all right! Cheer up!"

"I don't like it at all," said Dan gloomily. "You ought never to have been asked to superintend that incorrigible dog. Brendon will think we are not to be trusted with you."

"He is more likely to think you ought not to be bothered with an invalid," said she brightly. "This hammock is simply luxury. Could I be in a better place?"

"The thing to do," said young Spence to Oliver, "is for me to put her in the car, you come along, and I'll run you into Dormouth in three-quarters of an hour, or less. I could make her comfortable with a chair or something to raise her feet, and you could sit in front with me."

"I believe it's the best thing," said Oliver, looking at his wife with an appeal in his eyes to which she responded at once.

"Yes, O yes, if you really think I ought!"

"I do," he said, with manifest relief.

Dan's eyes, sharp as needle-points, travelled from husband to wife and back—wondering.

"I'll have the machine ready in half an hour," announced Humphrey, with eager goodwill, taking off his coat and hastily getting into his oily overalls.

"I left her just as she was last night, so I must tidy her up this morning. It goes against me to take out a dirty car."

He ran to where the motor had been stationed, and was heard whistling as he worked. Martin went to help him, Dan joined Tessa to wash up. The Brendons were left together.

In the blue above a lark sang. The white drift of gulls' wings flashed in the sun, and the bees droned among the gorse.

Astrid felt that she must make an effort to break through the odious constraint which held them both. With Sybil as her ally, she could venture more: alone, her very heart quailed before the shyness she felt, the reluctance to invite rebuff.

The necessity for establishing some kind of intercourse was, however, pressing. After a pause, in which Oliver sat with tightly-folded lips, gazing under the brim of his Panama at the distant sea, she said as naturally as she could, "Won't you tell me a little office news? I have often meant to ask you how Prentis has been going on?"

He looked up with an obvious desire to respond. Prentis was a brilliant but unreliable young journalist, who did fine work when he was sober, but had been the cause of some *mauvais quarts d'heure* in the printer's room, by reason of the non-arrival of his copy. Oliver told her a story of the way in which an excited young member of the staff had dashed down Fleet Street after having seen Prentis stroll up to the door of the office, gaze blankly upon it, and turn away. Knowing he must have the indispensable article—one of a series—in his pocket, but guessing that he was too befogged to realise that he had not delivered it, the energetic youth pursued him for a long time before he caught him,

in the act of pushing his article, neither stamped nor enclosed in an envelope, into the slit of a pillar-box.

The story made Astrid laugh. She knew both the pursuer and the pursued, and the notion of the chase was certainly funny.

"I miss the office," she said, with a sigh, giving forth the words without reflection.

"I often wish you were back again," observed Oliver, who had cut a sprig of gorse and was paring the prickles from its stem with his knife.

The double edge in his remark occurred to him the moment he had said it.

"I could hardly go back," faltered Astrid.

"No. You couldn't do that. Not only because of—of your relation to me, but because I don't quite know what Marsh has got up his sleeve."

"Marsh?" she said, with a quick, apprehensive look. "Surely he is perfectly satisfied."

"So he says."

"Well?"

He told her the incident of the previous day. "You know what these millionaires are. They are as keen as mustard one week, and ready to sell the paper next Saturday morning. I heard that Marsh was huffy at not being in the Birthday Honours List. He may be intending to pay out the Government for that slip by changing the political colour of his paper—who knows?"

"If he were to do that, you would resign?" she asked, with keen interest.

"I should have to. I could not edit a paper with whose political views I was not in sympathy." He had forgotten his constraint now, and was talking to her as he used to talk in old days.

"Marsh is half American," he continued, "and

has a lot of American notions. You remember those articles he would put in, by the fellow from California—about the decay of Great Britain, and with the suggestion that as soon as she went under, her job would be taken over by that devoted daughter country, the U.S.A. ? Well, he has always that idea at the back of his mind. Anything that points to our national decadence attracts him. I don't trust him a bit."

"It makes you anxious ?" asked Astrid wistfully.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have always known what it means to be a journalist. I am better off than most. I walked almost straight from Oxford into the editorial chair, simply because Marsh's son was at Balliol with me, and recommended me to his father."

"But look how well you have done ! If Marsh should be so foolish as to let you go, you would not be long without something."

He smiled with scorn. "How many editorships are there going ? You might count them on the fingers of your hands ! How many young Balliol men ready and competent to step in——"

"Competent ?" cut in Astrid scathingly.

"Let us say, as competent as myself. Well ! We won't anticipate misfortune. But I don't like Marsh in this mood. I had fully intended to engage 'Dogberry' for our art criticisms, which I have never been able to get properly done. We pay twice what you get from the *Art Companion*."

The colour rose in the girl's cheeks, her eyes grew suddenly soft, and sparkled with pleasure. Oliver was not looking her way, but out across the sea.

"But, you see, I don't like just at present to ask for anything that sounds at all like a favour," he added.

Before she could reply, Humphrey came hurrying up to say that the car awaited their pleasure. Tessa and Dan appeared, and arranged cushions so that the invalid might recline at her ease. Oliver lifted her from the hammock—this time without hesitation and with real skill—laying her down carefully in exactly the right place.

He then took his own seat in front, beside Humphrey, and they started off, gliding along so smoothly that she was well able to endure the motion.

As they slid down the windings of the long hill, and followed the coast road, Astrid's heart was full of relief. She had not merely exchanged some natural conversation with her husband—finding him unexpectedly responsive—she had also discovered that he liked her 'Dogberry' articles—liked them well enough to wish to secure them for his paper. This was indeed gratifying. Compared with what she had suffered during the past week, her present state was almost like happiness.

The blue sea, with hardly a wavelet curling in upon the sand, seemed to laugh to her with unlimited promise. She longed to be well and able to go and bathe in its sun-warmed shallows.

They arrived at Dormouth easily in three-quarters of an hour, going softly all the way. Near the east end of the town stood a new and palatial hotel, and Humphrey suggested that Oliver should go in and inquire where the best doctor in the place was to be found.

Oliver willingly consented, and strolled to the lounge where groups of visitors, who had not gone to morning service, were sitting about in subdued mood out of a kind of unwilling compliment to Sunday.

The waiter whom he addressed thought that Dr.

Gordon had changed his address lately, and went to ascertain. Oliver sat down a moment, gazing out from the open doors to the sunlit sea.

Down the wide stairs behind him there came a sylph-like figure, in fantastically fashioned garments of great elegance. Her maid followed her, with silk cushions and a rug over her arm. The visitors all bestowed upon her a most flattering rustle and soft movement of general interest. This was the pretty, delicate young bride, who arrived two days ago with a devoted bridegroom, and went about in a Bath chair. Oliver was too abstracted to remark upon the new focus of attention.

Vivien, as she came down, was looking round, from end to end of the lounge, to find Calvert, whom she had not seen since breakfast. She saw Oliver Brendon instead.

For a moment she paused, and stood looking down upon him. An awful fear shot through her. Why was he there? There could be but one reason. He had come to pursue her, to torture her, to make her present discontent greater than she could bear. So far as she could see, he was quite alone.

In a moment her resolution was taken. "I feel a little faint," she said to her maid; "I will go back to my room for a few minutes."

"O no, ma'am! go down into the lounge and sit in the air; it will pass off," said the maid, offering her arm.

But Vivien could be obstinate, as Thérèse knew to her cost. She faced about deliberately and began to make her way up again. Thérèse suspected some reason for her flight. The maid turned her head, searched the lounge, and saw Mr. Brendon.

"O, mon Dieu!" she exclaimed.

"It is he, isn't it?" panted Vivien. "He must

not see me. Let me go upstairs; you stay and watch, Thérèse; tell me what he does."

But the maid, much as she wished to watch, knew better than to let her mistress, in her present shaky state, go upstairs alone. If Mr. Railton came unexpectedly on the scene there would be a history! He would make a history out of any trifle! She had always heard that in America the servants were as good as the master and mistress, but if so, then Mr. Railton was a very exceptional American! She followed Vivien back to the large, sunny, first-floor private sitting-room, part of the suite engaged by the rich man.

Vivien was hardly there before she was sorry that she had fled. The sight of Oliver aroused longings which she could not stifle. He was there, he had followed her, he must be in despair. Surely she might do something to help him, or pacify him—something to show him how futile it was to war with Calvert when he had made up his mind.

"If Calvert found out that he was here, he would punish him somehow," she thought, with fear in her heart. She was beginning to understand some of the terrible power wielded by the plutocracy.

"Thérèse," she faltered slowly, "I will write him a note to tell him to go away. You must take it."

"*Attention, Madame,*" whispered Thérèse, beating up the cushions on the sofa, "*Je crois que Monsieur est là*"—pointing to the door of an inner room with a motion of her head.

Vivien got up and walked across the room. "Calvert, are you there?" she said clearly. There was no reply. She went over to the writing-table and sat down. The maid flitted to the door leading to the corridor, intending to close it

"Ah, pardon, Monsieur," she apologised, drawing back with a start as her master entered through it.

"*Mais j'ai bien su qu'il était tout près, quelque part,*" she muttered to herself. "*Est-ce qu'il vient de monter? En ce cas, ils se sont déjà rencontrés.*"

Her watchful eyes were upon Railton as he entered, and she saw his gaze fly to his wife and fix itself upon her.

"Nearly ready for your promenade, young woman?" he asked with his air of calm indulgence.

Vivien's nerves were still uncertain, and she most unwisely started at his voice.

"I—I was just coming," she said, closing the blotter and rising from her seat.

"No hurry. Not the least in the world," he said drawlingly. "Finish your note while I light a cigarette. Thérèse, I'll ring when I want you."

"*Service, M'sieur.*" Thérèse vanished, and Vivien stood up. "I am quite ready, Calvert. I was waiting about for you. Where were you?"

"I had a letter to write. Sorry you waited. Did you look for me downstairs?"

"I haven't been downstairs."

"That so? Well, finish what you were about, won't you?"

"No. I'm ready, and if you are, we'll go."

"Good. Let me take your rattle-traps for you; but first, let me have a look at you. Why, I do believe the sea air is giving you a bit more colour already."

They stood together in the brilliant sunlight that poured in through the large windows. The man turned up the girl's graceful chin with his hand, until her face lay open to his keen gaze. His eyes seemed to plunge into the depths of hers, to fasten upon her inmost thoughts. The blood mantled to her fair face in carmine waves under the inquisition

She did not flinch, nor oppose his action, though she was held only by the light touch of his finger under her chin. After a long look, which seemed to her to last for ages, he stooped, without eagerness, but with a deliberation which had the effect of force, and set his lips on hers. She quivered, but dared not move. He resisted the impulse which tingled in him to catch her to his heart. He would not try her too far.

"Thank you, my dear," he said drily, as he raised his head. "I was hungry for that, and you were very patient with me. Now come along."

They walked a little way along the corridor. Suddenly he stopped, feeling in his coat, first one side, then another. "Got no handkerchief, wait one moment," he said, hastening back to the room they had just quitted. She waited, numbed to a kind of stupor by the kiss she had just endured, not suspecting anything.

Railton entered the sitting-room, opened the blotter, caught sight of the sheet of paper, and the words so recently scrawled—"O, Oliver, why have you come——"

Very quietly he closed it again, and, after a moment, during which he gazed thoughtfully at the floor, he rejoined his wife in the corridor.

They passed together through the hall. The presence which had so disturbed Vivien was there no longer.

CHAPTER XVI

"What matter—what matter—O friend, though the sea
In lines of silvery fire may glide
O'er the sands so tawny and tender and wide
Murmuring soft as a bee?"

"No matter, no matter, in sooth," said he :
"But the sunlit sands and the silvery play,
Are a trustful smile long past away :
—No more to me!"—ALFRED DOMETT.

DR. GORDON lived upon the sea front. When Humphrey had deposited the husband and wife at his door, he drove on, up to the station, whence Tessa had bidden him bring a parcel of grocery stores. It was arranged that he should pick up the Brendons, on the parade, as he returned.

Oliver, when his wife had disappeared into the doctor's room, that her injury might be examined and diagnosed, himself went out of doors into the sunshine. His mind was ill at ease. Suppose the apparently trivial accident were to have serious results—that Astrid were to become a chronic invalid? As he reflected upon the effects of such a state of things, he found that his regrets were not entirely selfish. He was thinking, partly, how it would irk a creature so independent, so determined to stand alone, were she to find herself permanently disabled.

As the minutes wore on, they seemed to him unduly prolonged. The doctor was taking a long time. He hoped she was not being hurt. He could

picture her face, white and tense, and how she would suffer to the last extreme sooner than cry out. How did he know this? He did not pause to ask; but during those moments of waiting there was born in him a vague feeling of *championship*, as though he stood on Astrid's side and protested against her being called upon to suffer.

He looked at his watch. Only ten minutes, after all. A very long ten minutes. He leaned against the rail which edged the landward side of the promenade and watched the open door of the doctor's house, whence the man-servant had promised to signal to him when Mrs. Brendon came out of the consulting-room.

A step sounded quite near him, and a man stopped close at his side. He turned and found himself confronting Calvert Railton.

"Mr. Brendon? Is that you?" said the American. The words were friendly, almost intimate; the tone was frigid.

Oliver was so suddenly snatched from thoughts not at all concerned with the Railtons that he was for a moment really taken aback. He stared at the speaker in confusion, which only the knowledge of the cold, watchful blue eyes upon him enabled him to control.

"This is astonishing," he stammered. "I thought you had sailed."

Railton never removed his gaze for an instant. "Did you?" he said. Had his words been—"You lie," he could hardly have made his meaning more plain.

"Changed your plans, I suppose?" asked Oliver, roused to answer with a demeanour to match. He spoke as if the question did not interest him in the least

"Our change of plans was pretty widely announced in the papers," remarked Railton deliberately.

"Indeed?" said Brendon, looking him up and down. "I own to a lack of interest in fashionable intelligence."

Railton examined the cigar he was smoking, as though something about its tip had become interesting. "Making a long stay here?"

Oliver, now fully alive to his meaning, and resenting it with all his force, was determined not to enlighten him. "I have no idea," he replied carelessly. "Are you?"

"Leaving to-morrow," replied Railton at once, replacing his cigar in his mouth. "The place doesn't suit my wife."

"Pity," was all that Oliver vouchsafed.

He did not change his attitude, nor move from the spot. He thought Railton impertinent and insufferable, but he was not going to put himself out on that account. The coast of England is free to all, and if Railton were such a Bluebeard that his wife must be kept under lock and key, that was his concern, by no means that of Oliver Brendon.

"How do you like that New Palace Hotel?" pursued Railton, after a short silence.

"I know nothing about it."

"Never stayed there?"

"Never."

Railton's eye again expressed disbelief almost as offensively as if his lips had spoken it. But Oliver hardly felt resentful. He was secretly relishing the thought that poor Railton imagined him to be in Dormouth in pursuit of Vivien. He felt a momentary impulse to remark that he personally had no use for other men's wives, but he did not consider the

American entitled even to the measure of relief which such a remark might bring him. Let him think what he chose.

At the moment the man-servant appeared at the opposite door, signalling to him that his wife's ordeal was over. He turned to Railton, whose eye had remained fixed upon his face, and who had therefore failed to see the summons he had received.

"Well, good day to you, I have an appointment to keep," he said, with a little nod, and strolled away across the road into the doctor's house.

Railton, after watching him disappear, walked back some short way along the parade to the shelter where he had left Vivien and her Bath chair facing the dancing sea.

"Why, wherever have you been, Calvert," asked the bride pettishly, "leaving me all alone?"

"Sorry, darling, I caught sight of a man I know, and I just passed the time of day with him."

She fixed her big, wistful eyes upon his face with a suspicion which died away as she saw his composure.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"A very slight acquaintance. By the way, do you like this place, Vivi?"

"Yes, I do. It is sunny and gay, and plenty to do and to look at," replied the spoiled child.

"And that thing they call a hotel, you can put up with it?"

"Why, of course, Cal. That's the worst of being so rich, you are always thinking, wherever you are, that you might do better and be more comfortable elsewhere! Besides, there's no other really nice hotel in this place, is there?"

"I'm told the George III is comfortable, though old-fashioned."

"But it's not so near the sea. I want to stay

where we are. I shall hate it if you are always so fidgety."

"I only want you to be happy, little girl."

"Well, let me get well here in the sun. I've planned to have hot sea-water baths to-morrow."

He gave it up. To move her suddenly, after this, would be to let her understand why. And he had told Brendon that they were leaving next day. That ought to be enough for him. He could hardly be down here for more than the week-end.

After some meditation he suggested motoring to the ruined castle, twenty miles inland, after lunch, and having tea there. She assented, though without much enthusiasm. As she leaned back, scanning the passers-by, her restless eyes, straying everywhere, told him her secret most explicitly.

His heart was hot with wrath against the man who could behave with such mingled folly and brutality. Himself barely six weeks married, Oliver Brendon could come to this place in pursuit of another man's wife.

Well, there was a way in which he could punish him. It had been confronting him for several weeks past, but he had decided that he could not take it. He had felt, beyond all things, constrained to behave well to the man whose betrothed he had stolen away from him. Brendon's present line of conduct, however, changed the affair completely.

He had seen him in the hotel that morning. Coming out from the writing-room, he had marked him seated there, waiting. Going upstairs, he had surprised his wife writing a note—her maid in readiness to carry it. He had actually read the beginning of the note. Later, he found the man hanging about the sea-front, probably on the watch for the appearance of Thérèse, with a verbal message, if not a note.

His manner, when addressed, had been such as to confirm every suspicion.

His intention of injuring Brendon grew to a fixed determination.

Meanwhile, Oliver had hastened across the road and entered the house, so eager to hear the verdict, that his meeting with Railton, and the consequent thought that Vivien was in Dormouth, receded to the background of his mind. As he entered, he was conscious of wincing from the idea that he might have to hear serious news. His quick steps lagged suddenly.

Astrid, white and nervous, was standing in the wide passage, fastening her gloves.

She looked up at him with an air of apology. "I am very sorry," she said with embarrassment, "but the doctor wants to see you."

Her voice was unsteady, he could see how the awkward situation was mortifying her. The doctor's desire to see him made him sure that there was something serious to communicate.

The compassion for his wife which he had so consistently refused her hitherto rushed over him. Her nervousness dissipated his own.

"Cheer up," he said, more gently than she had ever heard him speak, "we shall cure you, whatever it may be—we'll find a way." He led her into the waiting-room, which was empty, and put her into an easy chair. "Keep up heart," he told her kindly, "I won't be long."

He went out instantly, as though to force himself to face the news which awaited him before his courage failed.

Astrid remained, her heart full to overflowing of a totally new kind of unhappiness. Hitherto, Oliver's behaviour had been so unfeeling that her pride had

upheld her. She would not pity him because, she told herself, he did not deserve it. But if he was going to turn kind—kind to the woman to whom he was so wholly indifferent—she thought things would become unbearable.

Dr. Gordon raised his eyes as the young husband entered his sanctum.

"H'm! Ha! Mr. Brendon, I presume. Well, Mr. Brendon, I have no wish to alarm you unnecessarily." Oliver set his lips, and the doctor checked himself and hesitated.

"Please tell me straight out," said Oliver, in a low voice.

"My dear sir, there is nothing in the nature of awful news—nothing to 'break' to you," replied the doctor, smiling slightly. "The point is that Mrs. Brendon seems to be suffering more than is accounted for by so slight a blow. Her nerves are in a state of extremely high tension. I put down her condition to shock. She was flung down, she tells me, and also she was horrified at the dog-fight. She seems to have shown great pluck and promptitude in separating the dogs, but I cannot resist the conclusion that what she is suffering is not altogether the result of the accident. I did not like to ask her whether she herself could account for the state of her nervous system. She tells me she has been married only a few weeks."

Oliver looked at the carpet.

"There is a reason," he said quietly. "My wife has been through a very trying time. I need not explain to you more fully, but circumstances have been such as might easily conduce to a nervous state. The thing is that she has so much self-control that I have not been aware of it."

"Exactly. She has imposed even upon you. She

has been controlling herself at the expense of her nervous system. If this blow should set up neuritis in the spine, she may suffer tortures. If not indiscreet, I should like to know if there is reasonable probability that she will be more at ease in her mind for the future?"

There was a pause. "I think I may promise it," said Oliver then. "If I had realised how much it all meant to her!—But I did not know. Now that I know, I will make every effort. She is not at all what you call hysterical."

"No. She has too much fortitude. That is the difficulty. She will never let you know what she wants nor why she is breaking her heart. You must find out. You are the only person who can."

"Am I?" said Oliver doubtfully.

The doctor smiled humorously. "My dear sir, she has married you. I am as sure that she would not have done so without adoring you, as I am sure that nine young women out of every ten would marry the first man that asked them! There! Be as horrified as you like at my cynicism. I have a large practice among the hysterical young ladies, who come here by the dozen! I was called in yesterday to the bride of an American millionaire who has just arrived. Her nerves are all to pieces, because, so he tells me, she thought she had treated another man badly. I told her husband he need not worry. Whatever man happens to be on the spot will be the man for her. Out of sight, out of mind! Before she has crossed the Atlantic she will have settled down if he is kind to her; and he seems to be in love all right. But for the creature with whom you have to deal, it is far otherwise. She is a woman who will cling to an ideal, and stand or fall with it. I should say her happiness is entirely in your hands."

Again Oliver did not at once reply. His brain was whirling. At last—"I will do all I can," he said simply. "Tell me what to do."

"Let her be happy, satisfied, content. She tells me that she is caravanning, and at first I was inclined to stop that at once. But she seems to be enjoying it, and the weather is perfect, so I do not think I would cross her if I were you. Only see that she takes no chill. Here are my prescriptions, and you can get them made up at Evans's, just round the corner. I shall motor out to see her in two days' time, and it is possible that I might recommend a warm climate if this weather should break. Could you manage that?"

"Certainly. I have not yet had my annual holiday, and I can take her anywhere you think best; or if not, my mother could. She is attached to my mother."

"Excellent! And you think there will be no recurrence of the distress or strain from which she has evidently suffered?"

"I think not. I hope not. I will do all I can."

"She had better lie in the hammock for the next few days," said the doctor. "I have encouraged her to think that, if she does that, the chances are that she will be all right—the symptoms will pass off—but I own to you that the contrary may take place—the pain may increase."

"You think she is in pain?"

"Undoubtedly she is in considerable pain, and has been so since the accident. If you can induce a state of tranquil happiness without apprehensions, for the next week, it will probably turn the scale in her favour."

"I will do my best," repeated the young man, in a tone expressing a fixed determination.

CHAPTER XVII

But did one touch of such love for me
Come in a word or a look of yours,
Whose words and looks will, circling, flee
Round me and round while life endures,—
Could I fancy "As I feel, thus feels He!"

ROBERT BROWNING.

As he emerged from the consulting-room, for the first time in his life Sybil's spoilt child arranged his features with the view of producing, in another person, the effect he desired, of comfort and good cheer.

He went into the waiting-room with a smile which he bravely maintained, in face of the appeal in Astrid's eyes.

"It's splendid," he assured her undauntedly. "The doctor thinks you ought to be all right by the end of the week, if you do what you are told. How glad I am that I insisted upon your seeing him!"

He watched the thoughts sail by behind her eyes. He saw her bewilderment at his sudden access of interest in her; embarrassment followed hard upon it: and behind lay a sorrow so infinitely deep that a conviction of never being able to reach it smote him suddenly and brought a lump into his throat.

"Will you sit here," he begged, "while I take these papers to the chemist? The doctor says it's only just round the corner, and I will come back for you in half a minute. Here," he felt in his pocket.

"I have got Cawthorne's new book, it came on Saturday for review. Amuse yourself with that for a few minutes."

He received a wavering smile, half gratitude, half uncertainty, as he ran off with the two prescriptions.

The chemist's shop lay a little nearer the Palace Hotel than Dr. Gordon's house, in a street running up from the sea. As he emerged from the side door, having completed his errand, and came down towards the sea front, Vivien's Bath chair, and Railton in attendance, were just crossing the road.

They met face to face. He pulled off his hat and bowed, but the idea of stopping to speak did not occur to him. He was chiefly preoccupied with the hope that Astrid would not encounter these people. His keen anxiety that no untoward happenings should now disturb her, rose to the surface of his thought. He had a moment of hot embarrassment, but was conscious of nothing like despair.

He found his wife better prepared upon his return to her. She received him with composure. He led her out upon the parade, and they sat down to wait for the reappearance of Humphrey Spence. He talked of anything that came uppermost. "I'm to call at the chemist's for the stuff in ten minutes. How did you like the doctor? He says perhaps he shall send you abroad, and I told him I could manage that all right. I could take my holiday any time now, with a fortnight to arrange things."

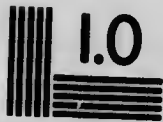
Astrid reddened and looked extremely uncomfortable. "O, I could not spoil your holiday! It won't be necessary for me to go away. I am having my holiday now."

He was pulled up short. The thought of all his previous behaviour to this girl rushed upon his mind. How could he have thought that a readjustment of



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



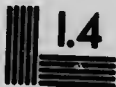
1.0



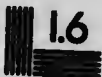
1.1



1.25



1.4



1.6

1.45

1.50

1.54

1.58

1.62

1.66

1.70

1.74

1.78

1.82

1.86

1.90

1.94

1.98

2.02

2.06

2.10

2.14

2.18

2.22

2.26

2.30

2.34

2.8

3.2

3.6

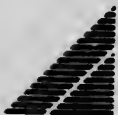
4.0

2.5

2.2

2.0

1.8



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 286 - 5989 - Fax

the wretched business could be thus easily achieved? "You would rather I did not come?" he said bluntly, or rather, muttered it, with a mighty red face and downcast eyes.

"O no, not that! But I mean—O what *is* the use of talking?" she faltered, swallowing tears.

Here was vexation indeed! The very kind of agitation which the doctor forbade was taking possession of her. What could he do? He could not say to her, "I beg and implore you to be happy, and I will pretend to be fond of you, so that your recovery may not be hindered!"

He bent down to her, his arms round his knees. "Astrid—won't you let me do anything at all to show I'm sorry I was such a brute to you the other night? I didn't know what I was saying. I was at my worst. I want to tell you that. I feel such a hound I am ashamed to talk to you—won't you make it a bit easier for me?"

He knew she was retracing in fancy the long, bitter series of slights, the coldness, the neglect she had received at his hands. As he thought of it now, suddenly, from her standpoint, he grew hot all over, and so humiliated that he bit his lip. "Ah!" he said, "I see that's asking a great deal too much. All right. I'll stand anything you choose to put on me. Only we must keep up appearances while we're with these folk, I suppose."

"O *don't!*" was all she said; and he felt a desperate consciousness of his singular failure to induce that mood of tranquillity upon which her medical adviser laid such stress. The hoot of Humphrey's motor put a stop to the distressing conversation. Astrid was replaced upon her cushions, and they went a short run out upon the cliffs at the other end of the little town to give her the view. Then they returned,

called at the chemist's, took up their parcel, and sped rapidly homewards.

They got back into camp just in time for lunch. Oliver now, as a matter of course, possessed himself of his wife, and carried her to the hammock.

"The doctor said she might sit up to her meals," he announced in triumph. "But she is to keep lying down mostly, until he sees her again."

Tessa was eager to know the treatment prescribed, and professed herself quite equal to all that might be needed in the way of applying embrocation and administering medicine. Oliver, looking upon all around him with a new eye, observed for the first time the expression in Dan's emotional face. The big man was watching the fragile Astrid as if she interested him profoundly. His gaze travelled from husband to wife. He was tingling to beg Brendon to tell him, in confidence, what the doctor had said, yet feeling that he had no claim to know.

Oliver, however, had determined to take Tessa partly into confidence. He himself must needs depart the following morning, having made no arrangements for absence. He hoped to be able to come down again before the end of the week, but go he must. Therefore he must leave a competent lieutenant behind him.

He said nothing for the present, but threw himself into the talk at lunch with a vivacity and keenness which surprised the Selbys. He had been monosyllabic the night before. They concluded that he must have been much upset by the accident, and that the doctor had reassured him completely.

It was quite curious how keenly he felt the necessity of averting the unfavourable developments which might arise if he were unable to compose Astrid's mind. He bent his whole intelligence upon the

question. He had been terribly serious in his love-making with Vivien. The possibility that he had been too serious now presented itself for the first time. Be that as it might, he had the penetration to see that all serious avenues of approach between himself and his wife were closed. He might go to her and say, "I repent." But that would bring them no nearer. She knew, for certain, that he had never loved her. The fact of his regret—of his remorse, if you like to call it so—might sadden, but it could not melt her. It only emphasised the gulf between them.

But as they lunched and talked, lightly and idly, there came to him a gleam of hope, a gossamer suggestion. He might take refuge in frivolity. He might establish some kind of fellowship by medium of the kind of chaff which makes for intimacy.

In old days, in the office, he remembered how he had appreciated her humorous comments upon men and things. Often her keen sense had seized upon some article in a paper politically opposed, had seen its weakness, had pointed out to him a line of ironical attack. Hidden behind that fortitude which the doctor had spoken of, there was a store of fun, could one but get at it.

He considered this silently, while talk rolled on. It happened to turn upon psychical subjects, which did not seem at all suitable to his purpose. They were not far from the old manor farm where the Screaming Skull is kept, and they were planning a visit there. Oliver was amused to find how every person present took the story from his or her own point of view. Martin gave it as his opinion that the occult was absolutely useless for stage purposes. The inference seemed to be that it was, in consequence, of no use at all. Humphrey said, calmly and definitely,

that all ghost-stories were rot. Tessa fell upon him tooth and nail, and told him that he was hopelessly ignorant, furthermore, out-of-date; and in conclusion, obscurantist: which last accusation was, as Humphrey pointed out, unanswerable, because nobody could understand it. Dan following, gave it as his view that you needed to treat such things in fiction very sparingly. One story of the occult stimulates the imagination. A series is always a mistake.

"Yes," mused Astrid aloud, "one sees that. The supernatural is the exceptional. If it were not exceptional, it would cease to be supernatural, it would belong to the ordinary course of things. A book filled with ghost-stories destroys the exceptional feeling. In tale after tale you foresee that a ghost will appear, or something uncanny is just about to happen; and one knows that this is never really so: the shock of such an experience lies in the fact that it is unexpected."

"That's it," said Dan at once. "Of course, you put the thing in a nutshell."

Oliver again observed, with a distinct feeling of gratification, the respect for his wife's opinion manifested by the novelist. "Martin says that stories of the supernatural are of no use," he said, carrying on the discussion. "What do you mean by no use, Martin? I conclude you must mean of no material use: you can't make money out of it. But if these things occur, it is surely useful to have some theory to account for them."

"Well, but what nonsense it all is," cried Humphrey. "A negro servant is murdered by his master, and his skull concealed in a bricked-up well. The skull screams if you attempt to carry it out of the house. How many negro slaves have been murdered

since the world began ? If they all took to screaming you wouldn't be able to hear yourself speak."

"You might as well argue," said Astrid, at once, "that the systems of wireless telegraphy would make such a noise that we can't hear ourselves speak. The conditions under which wireless telegraphy can make itself audible have to be carefully arranged. The conditions under which the supernormal becomes evident seem to us accidental ; but as we don't know at present what causes join to produce such results, they may be just as scientifically regular as the flashes of a lighthouse. It is because we don't understand that we think of them as random things, arbitrary, fitful, and only occasional."

"Their being occasional is what makes them so fascinating," cried Tessa.

"The whole thing is fascinating," went on Astrid, with manifest eagerness. "Doesn't it come over us all, from time to time, the feeling of how clumsy human ways of communication are ? I mean, of course, speech and action. You never can put into words any central thing that you feel. You know that you want some other medium, some way for one soul to reach another. I wonder that people don't go in for it much more thoroughly than they do. The wireless telegraphy seems to have given the key. If you could tune two souls to one another exactly, they could converse without speech, I believe."

"They *have* found out one or two things," said Dan. "For instance, the moment at which you are likely to receive the sort of message which I think you have in mind, is the moment when you are perfectly passive—when your mind is pursuing no special train of thought—when you are awake, but mentally and bodily idle. That is why so many cases of apparition occur when people are in bed."

"They all occur either when you're asleep or when you're drunk, Dan," observed Humphrey, with a grin.

"They never occur at all, to folks who live wholly on the material plane," replied Dan scornfully. "Tessa, I'm sorry for you. I've said so before, and I say it again. You have to spend the whole of your future life with a clod—a mere clod. Reconsider it while there is yet time."

"There isn't time," said Humphrey serenely. "She doesn't want an action for breach of promise."

"You'd have no case," cried Dan at once. "She became engaged to a creature who was, judging by appearances, a man. She finds that he is without spiritual perceptions, the thing which differentiates man from the brute. She breaks it off. Quite' right too."

"You don't seem to understand that I have a mission to reclaim Humphrey," remonstrated Tessa. "I do not flinch. I mean to open his eyes to all kinds of things by degrees."

"Brendon, I appeal to you," cried Dan. "Is such a marriage likely to prove happy? Husband and wife in fundamental disagreement, the only hope being the lady's determination to re-make the man according to her own ideas?"

"I back Miss Selby," said Oliver lightly. "Yes. If she takes enough interest in the man she will reform him."

Humphrey sat up. "Do you take an interest in me, Tessa?" he asked, in the voice which he knew would inspire reprisals. "Poor Tessa! A friendless orphan, brought up by a mountebank and a scribbler! Never mind, love, I will atone to you for all the errors of your youth!"

"Ha! Is scribbler your word, sirrah?" burst in

Oliver. "Then Dan and I are in league at once against you! The pen is mightier than the sword, and with it we defend our respective friendless orphans! I am already provided with mine," he added, waving a proprietary hand towards Astrid in the hammock. "And Dan will get suited as soon as he possibly can."

"Arrah thin, it's not much that *your* orphan colleen will need you to be defendin' her"—Dan dropped into an overwhelming brogue—"if the pen is mightier than the sword, it's hersilf can wield it with the best of us."

"I know," returned Oliver soberly. "That's the worst of it. When our friendless orphans are so completely able to take care of themselves, we begin to wonder what there is left for us to do!"

"And you find, as you ought to," burst in Dan, "that it is themselves that do all—you simply have to accept the gifts they shower on ye, and own yourself an inferior being."

"Here, shut up, Dan, before you make a complete fool of yourself," said Martin, really nettled. "What is the use of pretending you think yourself a woman's inferior when you know you don't?"

"It all depends on the woman, doesn't it, Dan?" asked Oliver, with intentional mischief.

"It does," cut in Humphrey, before Dan could speak. "We love the modest, retiring creature, whose graces and virtues cry aloud to us—it is to her we render homage, not to the violent person elbowing her way to the front—"

"Ah, but as your homage is all internal, we are none the better for it," cried Tessa instantly. "We modest, retiring creatures go without everything, even the knowledge of your good opinion of us! Unless we stand up and shout, we are merely shoved

out of the way. You sit at the tablecloth we have washed, beside the meal we have cooked, upon the chair we have polished, in the house we keep, wearing the clothes we have woven, the stockings we have darned. You watch us enter from the kitchen, red and heated, carrying the heavy dishes, which we humbly present to you: and your eyes fill with tears of sentiment as you murmur, 'How charming a thing is woman!' But if we come to you and say, 'Dear one, I have worn out my clothes in your service, I have scrubbed and cleaned and washed and mended and ironed, and I want a little money for a new frock,' you say, 'O fie! Go back to your kitchen, my beloved, and be content to be the object of a good man's affection!' Isn't that the way of it, Astrid?"

"I fully expect it will be Mr. Spence's way," said Astrid slyly. "I am thankful to inform you it is by no means Oliver's."

"O, of course, you daren't say otherwise while your tyrant is within earshot," cut in Martin.

"Then perhaps this conversation had better be continued to-morrow when he is out of the way," suggested Astrid. A few hours back she could not have so spoken. Something new, something approachable in Brendon, had given her the cue. He had expressed a desire to keep up appearances. The consciousness that she was 'playing up' to him gave her boldness. She glanced at him to see if she was doing right, and caught his eyes full upon her, alight with approval.

"I advise you to keep the firm's secrets, madam," he threatened.

"O," said Tessa, collecting the plates in piles, preparatory to the washing-up, "you can do some of that wireless telegraphy which Astrid was talking

about. I expect she spoke from experience. You will shoot her a message—'Beware! I am with you in spirit!' and she will not dare to say anything she would not like you to hear."

"Twaddle!" said Astrid. "I shall just hang up the receiver so that no messages can come through."

"O no, don't do that! I might want to send an urgent one," replied Oliver softly.

She knew he spoke to her only.

"Mixed metaphor!" observed Dan peevishly, getting up abruptly. "You are confusing the telephone with wireless telegraphy—I didn't expect such loose thought from you, Mrs. Brendon."

"You can't expect my brain to be working quite well after this admixture of motors, dog-fights, and doctors," said Astrid, lifting a coaxing smile to him, and wondering why his sunny temper seemed suddenly overclouded.

"Certainly not," came from Oliver promptly.

"This conversation has been unduly exciting, and the medical fiat is that the patient is to be kept quiet. Go away, all of you! Dan and Martin can wash up—Spence and Miss Selby can wander away in the golden gorse, and spoon as lovers use. I shall sit by the hammock and read my wife to sleep."

"Spoon, indeed!" observed Humphrey cuttingly.

"After the way in which my betrothed has just been spreading herself out, I shall have to begin by administering rebuke from the heights of my male lordship."

"All right," returned his betrothed, "that will give me nice time for a nap too. I want one worse than Astrid, since I was up early, breakfast-getting."

Dan said nothing. He stood, his hands locked behind him, looking wistfully down at Astrid in the hammock. He had had her a week to himself. He

was surprised at the vexation it was to see her appropriated. His head was full of a new development in his novel, which he was longing to pour out to her. They were, in a fashion, pursuing the thread of the plot, hand in hand. It hurt him that she was not available, though he knew that Oliver would be gone upon the morrow.

"That's the worst of having a married woman for your secretary! You only have the remnant of sympathy she can spare from her husband," he reflected. "Why do nice women go and marry? First Tessa, who was quite well off and comfortable until Humphrey came worrying—and then Mrs. Brendon. O, if I had but known her when she was Miss Carey! Why couldn't Brendon have brought her down to stay with his mother before marriage?"

The gaze he bent upon her was so fixed and troubled that she asked him whether anything was the matter. He hastily denied it, and half turned away, coming back to add, "Only it is so rotten your having got hurt."

"But she is to be practically well again by Saturday," cut in Oliver, "by the time I come down again. If they take care of you, do you think you could manage to get mended by Friday?" he went on, addressing her directly. "I might be able to get off then."

CHAPTER XVIII

"The devil laughed at you in his sleeve!
You knew not? That I well believe;
Or you had saved two souls: nay, four."

ROBERT BROWNING.

LONDON seemed dreary to Oliver Brendon upon his return from the moorland camp in the west. He was sleeping at his club, in order to keep up, as far as Thackridge was concerned, the fiction that he was with his wife. For the same reason, he could not allow himself the indulgence of going to dine with his mother.

His change of feeling, between his leaving London for the week-end and his return thither, was marked. Two things, both of some import, had occurred during those short days. He had seen his wife again, after the interview which had made any future intercourse seem impossible: and he had met Vivien, face to face, the wife of another man.

Had he been capable of analysing his emotions justly, he would have known that of the two events, the first had impressed him the more. The fact of his wife's accident had produced in him a revulsion of feeling. It seemed very pitiful that she, who had been so injured, so insulted by him, should be called upon to suffer bodily pain also. The fact that it was his passion for Vivien which had caused him to use Astrid with such cruelty, made him ashamed.

Poor little Vivien! The picture of her small

delicate face haunted him during his journey up in the train. She had looked at him curiously, he thought—not as though she were surprised at his being there : though, if you came to think of it, their meeting had been a remarkable coincidence. She had flashed at him a glance of something half reproachful, half eager, which at the moment he had disregarded, but which rose to his mind afterwards.

He could not think that she looked happy ; yet he caught himself echoing Dr. Gordon's words. She would soon forget ! Railton was attached to her, and could give her everything she wanted. By the time she had reached New York, her former lover would have become a memory.

Poor little soul ! He thought of her with a stirring of the old rush of tenderness. Little Vivi, who had opened up to him a new side of life—who had caused him to let himself go !

There is no doubt at all that, having once let oneself go, the re-coiling of the released spring, and its refitting into its former socket, is a painful business.

As he entered his office on Wednesday morning it was not, however, of Vivien that he thought.

Tessa, taken into his confidence respecting the necessity of tranquil happiness for Astrid, had eagerly promised to secure it as far as Dan and she were able. Moreover, she had volunteered to write him a full and true account of the doctor's report, after his next visit ; and the said report was due this morning.

A pile of letters awaited him as usual. On the top were three, all from ladies, and all bearing the Dormouth postmark. The uppermost was addressed in the straggling, childish hand he had learned to know so well and to await so impatiently all last winter.

He turned scarlet, and raised his eyes to make sure of being alone. Why should Vivien write to him? What was there to be said? There could be no doubt that her marriage should have put an end to all correspondence between them. He held it with mingled fondness and distaste. As he held it, his eye fell upon the next letter—in the firm, cultivated hand which he had so prized when it belonged to his irreproachable secretary. He opened that first.

It was very brief, but assured him that she no longer felt pain, and was getting well fast. "I shall be mended by Friday," was a phrase which gave him pleasure.

Turning to Tessa, he found that she confirmed the cheering account. The doctor had found his patient much better than he had expected. There was perceptibly less tension of the nerves, more ease, both of mind and body. He was to see her again on Friday morning. The weather continued ideal, and Astrid was eating and sleeping better than before her accident.

He leaned back with a sigh of relief. Somewhat in the same manner might one who had well-nigh killed a man in a fit of mad rage, hear the news that his victim was out of danger, and that he would not have the sin of murder on his soul. The sun, pouring in through the high, smeared window of his room, instead of being an annoyance, now seemed sympathetic. If it was too hot to be pleasant here in London, at least it was making summer for the poor girl down there.

He continued to turn over his letters. One from his 'boss' he opened with misgiving. It merely asked him to keep free from appointments between eleven and twelve, as Mr. Marsh proposed coming to see him. His brow puckered. Marsh was up to some-

thing. Was it something to which he would be unable to consent? With a shrug he touched his bell, and gave orders that nobody but Mr. Marsh was to be admitted till after twelve.

When the new secretary—whom he disliked—had disappeared and definitely closed the door, he picked up Vivien's envelope and opened it with a feeling half eagerness, half shame.

“ Oh Oliver, you are punishing me! It was bad enough to come down the hotel stairs, and find you sitting there below me in the hall, when you had never given me the least little hint that you meant to come! But it was cruel of you to disappear again without speaking one word, or sending one line.

“ I am tormenting myself, wondering what happened. Of course, Calvert thinks I knew you were coming. I am certain he does, though he has not said one word. I cannot help believing that he found some chance to speak to you, and tell you to go away.

“ Oh, yes, I know it was best for you to go. But why did you come? If you knew how desolate I feel, how home-sick! Do, dear Oliver, send me one word, only to say you have forgiven me, and wish me well. Send it to the Post Office, Thérèse will fetch it.

“ N.B.—Calvert is going to town on Wednesday, for the day. If you get this in time—(I have only just found out he is going)—you might perhaps run down here, if only for half an hour, to forgive me, and say good-bye.

“ But I expect you had better not. He is sure to get to hear of it. I believe he tips the hotel servants to spy. If you *should* be coming, telegraph to the

A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE

Post Office, and I will meet you on the Parade, so that you need not be seen at the hotel at all.

"I doubt if I shall ever be happy again.

"Your foolish

"VIVIEN."

A kind of despair came to Oliver as he read this effusion. Flinging it on the table, he thrust down his hands deep in his pockets, rose, and stared at the windows of the opposite house. What madness! And yet he could see how it seemed to her! She must have seen him sitting at the table in the lounge at the Palace Hotel while he was waiting to learn the doctor's address. She had seen him, and had jumped to the same conclusion as Railton—that he must be in Dormouth in pursuit of her! She had not seen the motor, nor Astrid. Neither had Railton: and Oliver remembered that he had said nothing that could enlighten him.

The grim jests of coincidence! It was really laughable, if you came to think of it.

The point for him was, how to deal with the childish letter? He was full of pity, but in this mood Mrs. Railton must not be pitied, nor petted. His first impulse was to leave her appeal unanswered. But he reflected that he could not well do this; for if no answer came, she might conclude that he had not received the letter: and further trouble would most likely ensue. It was better to write, and in such a manner as to preclude all chance of her desiring to continue the correspondence. It was brutal, but it would probably effect a cure.

He sat down, seized a sheet of paper, and wrote—

"DEAR MRS. RAILTON,

"Your letter has surprised me. In justice to myself, I send a line in reply to explain my presence in Dormouth last Sunday. Let me assure you that my intrusion upon your honeymoon was quite unwitting. I had no idea you were staying in Dormouth.

"I came to bring my wife to see a doctor. We were staying about fifteen miles off, for the weekend, and on Saturday afternoon Mrs. Brendon had a slight accident. I went into the Palace Hotel for about five minutes, to ascertain the doctor's address. When Mr. Railton spoke to me, I was standing outside the doctor's house, waiting for my wife to rejoin me.

"With my good wishes for your happiness,

"I remain, truly yours,

"OLIVER BRENDON."

He addressed the letter to the Palace Hotel: and, after some moments' thought, put Vivien's letter to himself in his own private portion of the safe, and turned the key upon it.

After this, he settled down to the business of the morning, with a determination that all should be done in good time, so as to leave no doubt of his being able to get off by Friday.

He had not much leisure for work, however. At eleven o'clock exactly, Mr. Marsh walked into his room, took off his hat, and drew up his chair as if for a long talk.

Somehow, before he began, the young editor was aware that what he had to say was something final. He was palpably nervous. He faltered, chose his words carefully, alluded to his own age, to the un-

certainties of newspaper ownership, and the continual competition and cutting of prices. At first Oliver thought it might be merely a large reduction of his own salary, and began to calculate how much he could stand without resigning. But before long he was undeceived. The murder was out. Marsh had sold the *Penman*.

"I must make myself perfectly clear, Mr. Brendon. I believe, I may say I am sure, that the transfer of ownership will make no difference to you. No difference at all, I may assure you. The purchaser authorises me to say that he trusts you will remain editor, and conduct the paper on its present admirable lines——"

"Without change of policy——?"

"—I should say, its present lines as far as relates to the various departments—advertising, art, literature, the Drama—I think I may say no paper can beat us in our reviewing. As regards the tone of the leading articles, the purchaser has acquired the paper only on condition that he possesses complete control." He looked down at the table, and his own two pudgy hands folded upon the blotter, as though lamenting that they had let go what they held. "Complete control! There may be some alterations in policy," he concluded, with a sigh. "On the reciprocity question, and so on. But nothing that need entail any sacrifice of principle on your part, Brendon. Nothing."

Oliver settled himself well back in the editorial chair.

"I conclude that the name of the purchaser is not a secret?"

"Oh no, dear me, no. Not at all. Why should it be a secret? It is a name I am proud to mention. As you have known, my sympathies have always been

with that great and progressive country, the United States. The purchaser is the great newspaper proprietor, Calvert Railton."

Oliver sat quite still. Up to this moment he had had hopes. He might be able to influence a new owner as he had undoubtedly influenced Marsh. It might have been possible for him to hold his post, in spite of the change.

But Calvert Railton! His mouth curved in a bitter smile: Railton was master, and had commissioned Marsh to tell him he hoped that he would remain editor, the new owner reserving complete control!

"So you have sold an English newspaper of high position to a foreigner?" he asked quietly.

"Foreigner! O, come, come, Brendon! That's no way to talk if you want to stay where you are! The Americans are not foreigners."

Oliver cleared his throat, for his mouth had grown suddenly dry.

"There are reasons, other than political, why I cannot possibly edit any paper owned by Railton," he said. "When does the *Penman* change hands?"

Marsh looked a little crestfallen. "You don't mean that you will resign?" he stammered.

Brendon smiled. "You don't mean that you didn't expect it?"

"I didn't! I give you my word! Reconsider it! You're young and hot-headed! Reconsider it! I dare say he would raise your screw if you demanded it. He won't find you easy to replace."

This time Brendon laughed out. "He has no doubt a Yankee up his sleeve—a smart young man—waiting impatiently to come over here, to 'speed up' and 'brighten' the paper. In a few months he will be giving us columns with big headings—'Three great

o

actresses give their views on Divorce,' and so on. Well, Mr. Marsh, you will, of course, see in my regret only the natural mortification of the man chucked out of his berth; but I must express it nevertheless. I am sorry; and I am disappointed. The *Penman* was doing a good work, and on the way to do a better. However, it was yours and you had the right to throw it away."

Marsh did not speak for a minute or two. "I'm sorry you take it like this," he said at last. His tone was resentful.

"I will say no more, sir, and I apologise if I have said anything unfitting. You won't expect me to give up the work to which I have devoted myself so completely, without a regret, will you?"

"Brendon, this thing can be arranged. Railton isn't going to play the goat. If he had wanted an out-and-out Yankee organ, do you suppose he would have bought the *Penman*? Why, his public would disappear in three months! He's too good a man of business to be monkeying with a paper that way! Stay for six months and try how you get on!"

Oliver shook his head. Suddenly he leaned his arms upon the table and said hurriedly:

"This thing is actually completed, is it? Or is there still a loophole? If you are set upon selling the paper, it is quite possible that my mother and I between us might acquire it, to save it from the degradation——"

Marsh broke in with a wave of the pudgy hand. "Useless, my dear Brendon: quite useless. The thing is done. Mr. Railton had no time to waste. He is leaving for New York almost immediately, and it had to be arranged. If you resign at once, I fear it will leave him awkwardly placed."

"That is his look out," said Oliver grimly.

"You know, Brendon, you are quite a young man—No! You must let me speak! As far as your opinion of Railton goes, you are under a misapprehension. He has a high standing. His firm bears as good a name as any in the States. You would like him, and he would like you——"

Oliver turned a set jaw and blazing eyes upon the late proprietor.

"If you want to know what Railton is I can tell you in one word. He is a skunk. If he had had the feelings of a man of honour, as we in England understand the word, he would have done anything, foregone anything, sooner than injure me again."

"Again!"

"Yes. He has done it once. He and I are enemies. He has bought this paper with the deliberate intention of ruining me."

Marsh, who had grown red, and started, as he heard the first part of the accusation, now protested. "You are altogether wrong, Brendon. Mr. Railton has been trying to buy the *Penman* for nearly two years past. He made me an offer last summer, which I declined. He made me another some weeks ago, and then withdrew it, I don't quite know why. He telegraphed his final offer only two days back."

"Offering you more than the paper is worth—more than you are likely to get from anybody but a man rich enough to pay for the satisfaction of a private grudge! . . . Ah, well, it is done." Leaning back, the young editor flung his pen down upon the table as if thereby renouncing all claim to authority over the *Penman*. "No words of mine can undo it! And now my explosion is over, and we will come to business. I forget what are the exact terms of the contract between yourself and me. I have an idea that it becomes void upon your parting with the

paper. I fancy you bound yourself not to sell under three years; and we have been together more than five years, sir! Therefore, I suppose that I am free to walk out of this office to-day, and not return. But if it be otherwise—if I am in any sort bound to give due term of notice to any new owner, then I break my contract deliberately, and leave Mr. Railton to seek his remedy in the Law Courts."

Mr. Marsh stared. "You mean that you won't even stay to bring out this number?"

"This week's number is complete, all but the leaders. I can write those from home, and will send them in by Thursday night, as usual. I will not enter any office that is owned by Calvert Railton."

Apparently Mr. Marsh was moved—disconcerted. "I wish I had known of this," he stammered. "I had no idea there was anything personal between you——"

"Had you taken me into your confidence, I could have enlightened you," responded Brendon drily. "But I do not think you would have hesitated to sell at a fancy price, merely because I do not like the man who buys. I have no right to resent your having done this behind my back, though I may be allowed to own that it has hurt me. I suppose we are all apt to set too high a value upon our own services. But I believe I may say, without vanity, that you owe the fact that the paper to-day is a property well worth buying, in some degree to myself."

"I grant it—I grant that," said Marsh eagerly. "I give you my word, Brendon, no thought of turning you out ever entered my head, And I still contend that you are mistaken. Railton spoke to me in the most explicit way about hoping that you would stay by the paper——"

"He could afford to do that. He knew I could not

stay and keep an ounce of self-respect. Well! I must lose no time in looking out for a job. It is awkward to have to do so without notice; but it must be done. I suppose I may rely upon you to say something kind about me, if I should be lucky enough to find anything suitable?"

"Tut, tut!" said Marsh, in a bewildered way, looking appealingly at his late editor.

The office boy knocked at the door. "Mr. Railton wishes to know if he may come in, sir?"

There was a moment's pause. Then Oliver said quietly:

"By all means, show Mr. Railton in."

Calvert entered, with an air of quiet benevolence.

"Well, Mr. Brendon, I hope I see you well—all the better for your week-end at Dormouth, no doubt? So it seems you and I are to be more closely associated in the future—eh?"

Oliver turned from his extended hand as though he did not see it, and took down his straw hat from its peg.

"Mr. Marsh has informed me that you have acquired the paper," he said temperately. "If you are leaving London this evening, you will have much to arrange. I will leave you together."

"Leave us together?" He fancied that for a moment Railton was genuinely taken aback. "It seems to me that we shall find it difficult to arrange anything without you, Mr. Brendon."

"O, I think you underrate your business capacity, Mr. Railton. But in any case, I fear you must do without me. My connection with the paper has ceased."

"Since when, if I may ask?"

"Since you acquired it, naturally."

Railton sat down and passed his stumpy, carefully

manicured hand under his moustache. "You say *naturally*," he remarked thoughtfully. "Well, there is something to be said for your view. But I think there must be some agreement which will interfere with your plan for leaving us completely in the lurch?"

"I am not sure about that. If there is, you have your remedy. You can sue me for breach of contract."

Railton looked steadily at him, with a movement of dislike and enmity which surprised himself. Oliver looked so handsome, with his jaw set and his eyes glowing—so handsome and so dangerous, that his heart was filled with black envy. He removed his gaze from the tall, alert figure, and dropped his eyes to the table. *They fell upon an envelope addressed to his wife.*

"By the way," said Oliver, approaching the table, and pushing the envelope towards Vivien's husband, with two fingers. "I heard from your wife this morning, and that is my answer. Perhaps I may ask you to take it to her, if you are going down to Dormouth to-night?"

For a moment Railton lost command. "Damn you, sir, you heard from my wife this morning?"

Marsh rose hastily, for the two men stood confronting one another like two dogs about to spring.

Oliver smiled slowly at the other man's agitation. "I'll give you one word of advice before we part—send away your wife's maid," he said blandly. "Well, good day to you."

He walked to the door. Railton, darkly flushed, made a movement to follow. Marsh, trembling with fear lest there should be a row that might get

into the papers, laid a desperate hand upon his arm, clutching it firmly. He could see in fancy the headlines before him.

**EDITOR AND MILLIONAIRE
AFFRAY IN A NEWSPAPER OFFICE**

As the door closed on Oliver he panted with relief. "Good heavens, Mr. Railton, I never knew there was anything personal in your desire to buy the paper," he gasped out. "I don't think I should have done it! A fine young fellow! Just married too! Cast out without a penny!"

"It serves him right," said Railton, suddenly pale, as he put the letter to Vivien into his pocket.

CHAPTER XIX

But certain points, left wholly to himself,
When once a man has arbitrated on,
We say he must succeed there, or go hang.
Thus, he should wed the woman he loves most
Or needs most, whatso'er the love or need—
For he can't wed twice.—ROBERT BROWNING.

ONCE out in the street, the fumes of anger, passing by, left Oliver a prey to deep despondency.

Not for a moment did he regret the stand he had taken. Were all to do over again, he would still have shaken the dust of his beloved *Penman* from off his feet, and fared forth into the world to begin life anew.

But one does not sever a limb, however inevitable the operation, without pain nor without regret.

It had been his happy lot not only to enjoy the most congenial of home lives, but also—a rare thing in this world—to be able to earn his living by working at the thing he liked best.

The power of discrimination, of selection—the art of putting things—the delightful knowledge that he was one of those who count in the formation of public opinion—that he had a rostrum and an attentive and growing audience: all this had combined to please and satisfy him. And now the gods, not content with spoiling his home life, must take from him income and position at one dire blow.

He was just a journalist now, like any other of his kind. The men who had been so polite, so cordial

—who had deferred so eagerly to his opinion at the Club—had come hat in hand to visit him in his editorial sanctum—these were his mates, his equals to-day. He was down again in the crowd, to be hustled and pushed and most likely rejected.

As he went out of the room where he had spent such varied hours, the last object upon which his eye fell had been a pile of Continental time-tables, which he had procured that morning as he went to work, with the idea of thinking out a tour for his mother, himself, and Astrid. He had decided that Sybil must be of the party. His wife and he were not yet capable of supporting each other's unmixed society. He had got as far as to say 'not yet,' however!

The design upon the cover of the Belgian State Railways time-table dwelt in his memory as he walked; and there came to him with a pang the knowledge that, workless though he was, he could take no holiday now. He must try and 'get in' somewhere before he thought of foreign tours.

This brought him right up against the consideration of how this reverse of fortune was likely to affect his marriage. Oddly enough, he found himself wondering what would have happened, supposing he had actually done what he so nearly did, supposing he had eloped with Vivien?

Railton would have struck, as he had struck now—and Oliver would have been almost a beggar. After reading the letter he had received that morning, he knew how easily Vivien could have been persuaded.

He was thankful to have been spared that.

As he walked, more or less aimlessly, he was seized with the idea that he would take the train down to the west, and surprise Astrid, before Friday. Then

there flashed upon his mind the disturbing thought that she must hear nothing that would agitate or distress her. He could not hasten to her with the story of his troubles. Was it possible that he had desired to do so ?

Suddenly his mind was filled with the question as to how he could keep the news from her. She was an industrious newspaper reader, as becomes a practical journalist; and would certainly come upon it when it was made public, as it would be in a day or two. Somehow or other he must communicate with Tessa, and get her to see that such a calamity did not occur. He hurried to his club in order to write a letter to Miss Selby. It would not seem odd that he should write, since he had to thank her for sending him the doctor's report. He sat down and wrote hastily, telling her the bare fact, not mentioning Railton's name—simply that the paper had changed hands, that he was no longer editor—that the thing must inevitably be announced, and that Astrid was not to see it. He would break the news at his own time, in his own way. At all costs her recovery must not be retarded. He said nothing of his own coming. He had not had time to think that out.

Presently, glancing at the clock, he perceived that it was late. He went into the dining-room, lunched, and sat down to smoke and reconsider his position. With the exception of the two Marshes, father and son, he had no personal friends in a position to help him. Professionally, of course, he knew most of the journalistic authorities.

Hitherto, however, the fact of his comfortable home, and the congenial circle of personal friends among whom he moved, had rendered him independent, socially, of the men with whom he mixed

professionally. In his sudden reverse of fortune, he knew this was a bad thing. He had no reason to suppose himself unpopular; but he could think of nobody of whom he cared to ask a favour.

Not only are editorships few in number, but even among such his own range was severely limited. He would not care to edit any paper that was not literary. In politics, too, he was antiquated enough to suppose that the editor should be in sympathy with the views of the paper he ran.

That he should again become an editor seemed, then, out of the question. The point to consider was, what could he do instead?

Somehow, the thing did not seem real. The *Penman* office had stood to him for so large a portion of his life, that to be cut off from it in one stroke was hardly conceivable.

He recalled the days, before his engagement to Vivien, when he was wont to see, at her little table in the corner of his office, the diligent bent head and busy fingers of the secretary who was never in the way. He recalled her gravity, her flashes of fun, her eager interest in anything that concerned the fortunes of the paper, her faculty for knowing the thing he wanted before he asked for it.

His work had never seemed the same since her departure. Until now he had, however, attributed this fact, which was so evident, to a very different cause. He had thought that all the world looked black because of his defeated love, his fiasco marriage, his own personal deterioration. Now he could no longer disguise from himself how much it would have meant to him to be able to tell her, as he might have done in the old days, without self-consciousness or embarrassment, of the blow which had been dealt him, the bewildering sense of bereavement which

he was undergoing. He had an idea that she might have been able to suggest something. She had always been able to suggest something.

Well! He must on no account confide in her just now—now when all depended upon her content. But there was one person to whom he could go—the mother whom he had neglected, insulted, left outside the doors of his miserable heart. She would not blame, in any case. She would help if she could, she would comfort, without a doubt.

In the late afternoon he sallied forth and took train for Thackridge.

It was a day to melt the heart in ecstasy. Two days more and the world would burst into the full glory of June. The grass was already deep in the meadows that sloped away from the Abbot's House, down across the valley to the distant ridge upon which passed the Great North Road, blaring with motors and electric trams.

The beauty of her garden, the quiet and the song of the birds, had induced in Sybil a fatal softness of heart, that sense of something unbearable in the surrounding beauty of the world which we all feel, now and then, even at fifty.

The absolute solitude of her life was crushing her. In one little hour she had lost her lifelong companion, the young man who had been, as Walter Waring truly said, her idol. Now she sat alone. Whether he turned to his wife, whether he went astray after his early love, or whether he sank lower yet, Oliver would never come back to his mother any more.

Her ruin had been wrought—as her son's had been that day, if only she had known—in one unforeseen hour. Her heart lay empty, her love unclaimed: and she felt rebellious and altogether miserable, for

somehow, at fifty, one cannot feel that life is quite over. She was still full of health and activity, longing for the kind of happiness which until lately she had always known—the delight of sharing in a man's interests, of caring for him, helping him, loving him.

It was over. Had it happened naturally, happily—had she been able to transfer her hopes from Oliver to Oliver's future son, she could have borne the physical absence of the beloved. Gradually her point of interest would have travelled on. This rupture, sharp and fierce, was something different. Her son had done worse than leave her. He had disappointed her. He had cast upon her the reflected shame of his own deed. He had made her feel that the woman whose son could so act must have been a bad mother.

Humiliation is always worse to bear than sorrow.

That beautiful afternoon her thoughts were unusually painful. Oliver had always sympathised in her gardening interests, and this was the first year that she had succeeded in arranging her succession border to the very day, so that a new glory of bloom was born as soon as the former passed away.

The thought that Oliver neither knew nor cared had completely upset a calm which had lasted for three days. She gave way to such weeping as made her feel ashamed of herself. When Drew brought out the tea she escaped down the garden walk, and stooping as though to fasten a broken flower, escaped notice. Half an hour later, Walter Waring, walking unexpectedly through the drawing-room window, found her with tale-tell eyelids.

He did not at once comment upon them: for his Aberdeen, trotting at his heels, had his usual snarling encounter with the toy spaniel, and the two owners had to patch up the quarrel, and assure the two

dogs that they were neither rivals nor enemies, but the best of friends.

This accomplished, and fresh tea brought, the Colonel drank with appreciation. Afterwards, leaning back in his deck chair, he laid one of his muscular hands over hers, and said firmly :

“ Darling, this can't go on.”

She did not pretend to ignore his meaning. She raised her heavy lids with a wan smile. “ It must go on, Walter. By degrees I shall get used to it.”

“ I never shall, which is the important point.”

She looked at him wistfully.

“ Sybil,” he said, “ it is now or never. There is no need to go over the thing again. I have waited patiently for this moment—for the moment when you should, as I knew you must—lose Oliver. If you don't marry me now, I know you never will. But I feel pretty sure that you had better. A woman with a heart like yours was never meant to live alone. O, my dear”—leaning towards her, he possessed himself of her hand, holding it in both his own—“ you might make me so happy : and he does not want you now.”

She made no answer, and he spoke once more, gently but resolutely : “ I have been patient. Now at last, this is the end. If you say No to me this afternoon, I shall not ask you again ; and I shall leave Thackridge.”

“ O, Walter, isn't that putting unfair pressure on me ? What will become of me if you go away ? ”

“ I know what will become of me, if I do. I shall be an old man, a downright old man, in a few weeks. Whereas, if I may be with you always, I feel as if I shall never know the meaning of old age, nor of weariness of life. Don't you care about me at all, Sybil ? ”

"I do. But I hardly know how much," she answered, in broken tones. "I did not want you as long as I had—him. It seems, somehow, insulting to you, to be ready to marry you now that I am left alone."

"Tut, tut!" said he fondly. "If I am content——" He broke off, thinking for a moment, then resumed—"Sybil, I know all about you. I have known you almost ever since your widowhood. I have loved you all the time. You have always been kind to me, have seemed to value my friendship, and to have forgiven the fact that I made a grave mistake in the early days by asking you to be my wife too soon. Now it is almost too late. If quite, then I have made my second and last mistake, my dear."

All in a moment she knew what the comfort of him would be. A true, kind soul, to fill the emptiness of her days—one who understood her, and would never be intrusive nor tiresome.

"O, Walter, can you be content with such a grudging capitulation! To have me take you because I have nobody else in all the world to care about me?"

"So long as you take me at all, darling—You will? O, God bless you, I hardly dared to hope it!"

He snatched her hands, and bent his fine head above them, kissing them like a boy: and as he did so, Sybil looked up, and saw her only son standing in the open window.

She gave a little gasp. "O, Walter! There is Oliver!" She sprang to her feet. Her comely face was still deeply coloured, her lips quivered with an emotion half pain half pleasure. She hastened towards her son, who stood irresolute, then came forward to meet her.

"Mother!" he said—"does this mean——"

The Colonel answered for her. "Yes, Oliver, it does. Your mother is to be my wife. I expect you know I have always worshipped the ground she walked on."

"I—I suppose I did," said Oliver, a little hurriedly, hardly knowing how to take this news. "I hope—I should say—why, I believe I must wait till I have got my breath. This is so sudden, you see!"

The sound of his voice, the look in his eyes caused a throb of the mother's heart. This was surely her own Oliver, the real Oliver, her son and darling, come back! Was the mocking fiend exorcised? If so, how, and by whom? Had she been just five minutes too soon? Ought she to have waited yet longer? Oh, she might have known that he would come back—that the devil would be driven out of him! . . . Had she hurt him, done something he could not pardon? She trembled at the thought, coming near to him with beseeching eyes. A couple of months back she would have clung to him, but now she doubted: and Oliver, with the remembrance of his own atrocious behaviour behind him, was terribly shy.

"Yes, yes, our affairs will wait," breathed the mother. "Come and sit down, Ollie; have some tea! Is Astrid with you? How have you found time to come down and see me?"

"Oh no, Astrid is not here. You have heard about her accident? I have only run down just for a peep at you," he replied at once. He spoke soothingly, for suddenly it dawned upon him that his mother was terribly agitated and unlike herself. There was an appeal in her look, as though she feared his displeasure, an anxiety, a wistfulness, which struck him as infinitely pathetic.

"I have been such an unexampled brute," he said

to himself, "she thinks that I am going to be angry with her—to raise objections. That would come with a good grace from me after my own behaviour.—I suppose Astrid told you about her accident?" he added aloud.

Sybil paused in the act of pouring out his cup of tea. "She did mention having been knocked down by a motor, but made very light of it. Surely she was not seriously hurt?"

"N—no. But she had a pain in her back, and I insisted upon her seeing a doctor. He hopes she will be all right in a few days, but told me that she had had a nervous shock, and ought to be taken great care of."

He spoke with his eyes upon the grass, munching a sandwich, and holding his teacup in his hand. He made his voice as calm as he could.

"Tell us all about it," said the Colonel. "I have heard nothing of this accident. To be knocked down by a motor sounds alarming."

"It seems to have been going dead slow. She was in the middle of the road, trying to choke that beastly Irish terrier of Selby's off another dog, whom he had by the throat. She actually did so, with the greatest pluck, but was so absorbed that she did not hear the motor hoot."

They went on pressing him for details, and he told as much as he thought prudent, avoiding, however, all mention of the word 'Dormouth.'

He described how he had come along the road just after the accident, and found his wife sitting, half faint, upon the step of the car; and how concerned the owner had been. "He is a Mr. Wolfe, a wealthy bachelor who lives about twenty miles off. He has twice been to inquire since, so they tell me."

"And I suppose you will be going down at the week-end?" said Sybil.

"I shall if I can get away. But I don't feel positively certain. I am very busy this week."

He hardly knew what he replied, for all the while he talked his mind was working busily. His mother was contemplating re-marriage. What difference would this make to him?

The allowance she had made him, since his Oxford days, had been discontinued since he acquired his editorship, on the understanding that the amount represented what he now desired to contribute towards the housekeeping. Instead of his mother paying him his allowance, and his repaying it in the form of board-money, it had been simpler to let it lapse. Mrs. Brendon had complete control, for life, of his father's money. He was not penniless. He had never lived up to his income, and had some hundreds invested in one thing and another. There was enough to keep him for a while, but considered as the basis of an income the amount was negligible. He had rested upon the thought that his mother's house was open to his wife and himself until they could make further plans. Now she was to be married, and it was not to be supposed that the Colonel would see any reason for delay. She might not feel able to continue his allowance—she would certainly not want to have him and his wife quartered upon her during the first few months of her new married life.

His eyes fell upon the face of Walter Waring, alight with a joy, a fervour which seemed a little surprising. Oliver was still young enough to feel fifty to be the bourne of all things. To begin life again at fifty! It sounded dreary. Yet the faces of the two people beside him wore the reflection of an ageless emotion.

With a pang, half jealous, half envious, he felt that he could not select this moment to break to his mother news so distressing as his loss of employment. He knew her devotion to him. It was shown in every look, every movement. The Colonel meant much to her, but he was not Oliver, her only son. In the light of their hopefulness, hope came to Oliver. It was, after all, just possible that he might 'get in' somewhere in the course of the next few days, or weeks, and then he need not tell his mother of his change of fortune until he could also tell her what his new work was.

He choked back all that he had come prepared to say, and turned to the Colonel with a smile which had no resentment in it.

"But let us talk of you and my mother," he said. "I suppose now that she has given in at last, you won't be letting the grass grow—eh?"

"It should be to-morrow morning if I had my way," was the reply. "But women won't be rushed like that. I feel I owe you an apology, Oliver, for I fear you'll have to put up with my presence in the house that's always been your home till now. But I know you will agree with me that it would be cruel to turn your mother out of the Abbot's House."

"Of course," assented Oliver promptly and warmly. His demeanour had the effect of causing his mother's tears to run over and slip down her cheeks. How charming he was! How dear! He was just like his old self, courteous, considerate, loving.

"No, not to-morrow precisely," went on the Colonel, following up his own train of thought, "but as soon as it can be done. In three weeks, eh, Sybil?"

"In a month," said Sybil weakly. She was surprised at herself for saying it. But the thing was

to be done, and she had a feeling that it would be well to get it over.

Oliver was still shy ; he could not face his mother's eyes. He put out his hand and took hers, a very rare demonstration on his part.

She grasped his passionately, fighting down her rush of feeling.

It seemed like a miracle that he should have come, just then, to take away her haunting scruples and give her leave to be happy.

" You'll stay an' dine, Ollie, won't you, dear ? " she whispered, when she could trust her voice.

" No, mums, I mustn't. I am frightfully hard at work. Besides, two is company—there's no need to complete the platitude, is there ? "

CHAPTER XX

A lady! In the narrow space
Between the husband and the wife,
But nearest him, she showed a face
With dangers rife.—JEAN INGELow.

It was Saturday morning. Astrid sat alone upon the moor, keeping guard over the camp.

Her face was pale, and she looked as if she had not slept.

It seemed to her as though years had elapsed since yesterday.

Towards dawn of the previous day, the weather changed, the wind rose, and her sleep had been visited by dreams. In her dream she saw Oliver in rags and bare-footed, standing upon the other bank of a river, and forbidding her to cross. "I can swim, I can swim, let me come to you," she had pleaded: and he had answered, "What help can you be? I don't want you. Go away!"

In the trouble caused by this dream she awoke, to hear the rain pouring down upon the roof of the caravan and the wind moaning in the fir trees: awoke to the joy of knowing that it was not true! Snuggling down in the comfort of her bed, she had told herself that it was only a dream. To-day was Friday, and Oliver had said he was coming. She was well—she could walk without pain in her back—she was counting the moments till he came. Would he still wear the new aspect of kindness and sympathy,

or was it only her being hurt which had evoked his pity, just for a minute ?

That day she would know. The rain would stop—oh yes, of course—'Rain before seven, fine at eleven'—and she would take him to walk in her favourite wood, and show him the little glen where, under the moss, was a heap of grey stones which she was certain was the remains of an ancient forest altar.

The rain had tried her faith severely, but it had duly cleared off soon after eleven, gliding away over the sea, with the rarewell smile of a glorious rainbow, and leaving everything gladdened and refreshed, every grass-blade a-glimmer, all colour intensified in the lovely dewiness.

In the first hotly poured glory of the sunshine, the girl had run to the road to watch for the appearance of the farmer's boy who brought the letters.

There was one in Oliver's writing, and for her. She carried it out of sight of Dan and Tessa, and her fingers shook as she opened it.

Then the glow and splendour of the day died, as the sun slipped behind a huge purple cloud. Oliver was not coming.

It was the only solution he could plan. He was in all the discouragement of the man who, for the first time in his life, looks for work in London. His mother's marriage was heavy on his heart. He could not see into the future, it seemed to him that all was dark. How could he come to Astrid and hide all this ? He felt that he could not. If he had to pass two or three days in her company, what was there to talk about, since he could not mention either of the subjects which were absorbing him ? And even if he did not speak of it, he would not be able to conceal his depression, and she would be troubled. The only thing to do, since she must not be disturbed nor

distressed, was to keep away. Knowing as his wife did, all the affairs of the paper, it was difficult to make his excuses sound as convincing as could be wished. He had to lie pretty roundly.

Poor fellow! He wrote out of a miserable heart. To not a soul had he been able to mention his circumstances, except to the more or less uninterested ears of men who ceased to be glad to see him the moment they found out that he wanted something.

To have poured out the story to Astrid—Astrid who knew and loved the *Penman* almost as he did—would have been a supreme relief. But in his new-found and slowly growing unselfishness, he forewent a strong desire, because his conscience accused him of so much unkindness to his wife in the past, that he would not add to the sum of it by retarding her convalescence.

So, at much personal sacrifice, he did the very worst thing he could have done. The loss of his appointment would have affected Astrid only inasmuch as it affected him. She would have risen to the occasion, put heart into him, overflowed with plans and designs. Nothing could have hurt and distressed her like his absence.

Being all unconscious of the nervous tendency in her which the doctor had discovered, she was unaware of the sudden change which took place in her demeanour, directly she knew that Oliver was not to be expected. She was, as always, courteous and gentle, and scrupulous in the performance of her secretarial duties: but the light had gone out of her.

The flow of spirits which had been increasing ever since her husband's visit last week, disappeared. She had the look, the expression of a woman who could not make a joke.

It was very obvious to Dan, and it cut him to the

heart. At all risks Oliver ought to have come down. Even Tessa, who knew the young husband's motive in part, though the full extent of the catastrophe was not confided to her—thought that he had made a great mistake.

Astrid's appetite was gone. They could see, at lunch, that it was all she could do to swallow food at all. The oppression she suffered was so great, that at any moment it might have found vent in a storm of tears, but for her relentless self-control.

She sat down after lunch, ready for her afternoon's dictation; and Dan, feeling that he ought not to notice her unhappiness, prepared to do his part. But an hour's blundering showed him that, for that afternoon, detachment was impossible. He could not fix upon the creatures of his imagination an attention already concentrated upon the high-strung girl before him. He had to own that he was not in the mood; and his secretary became reluctantly conscious of the extent to which his humour depended upon her own.

The fact did not now strike her for the first time. She doubted the wisdom of her employment. A man so sensitive ought not to dictate. He ought to shut himself up alone and write down his own thoughts. The presence of another person influenced him too much.

She dared not, however, suggest that she was bold enough to fancy that his inspiration depended upon her sympathy. She contented herself with talking to him seriously of the danger of taking it into one's head that one cannot write, and doing it only when 'in the mood.' "The mood comes," said Astrid gravely. "The mood comes, if you wait upon it."

"It won't come this afternoon," returned Dan shortly, "so we had better go for a stroll."

The stroll resolved itself into a kind of duel between them, Dan wistfully seeking a confidence, Astrid

determined upon being wholly impersonal. The novelist returned from that walk with a new impression of feminine reserve and feminine determination. He knew Astrid too well not to see the restraint which she was putting upon herself. He was growing baffled, hurt, half angry : a dangerous mood for a man who as a rule lived mostly in the clouds.

On Saturday morning, conscious of a temper that was wearing thin, he removed himself out of sight of the fixed white face and veiled eyes which tried his patience so acutely. He went for a long walk, in the hope, so he said, of finding a place near enough to the heart of civilisation for him to get his fountain-pen mended. Tessa set forth as usual to do the Saturday marketing ; and Astrid, who was not yet allowed to walk far, remained in charge of the camp.

She sat among the gorse, thinking of last Saturday, and her terror of apprehension. She lived over again her own sensations when, sitting upon the step of Mr. Wolfe's motor, she had seen her husband appear over the brow of the hill. She thought, too, of the grip of his vigorous arms, as he lifted her to and from the hammock, each time with increasing ability and confidence.

Oh, if she could but still the craving of her starved heart !

That day, for the first time, she reviewed her position as one grown desperate.

As long as she was with Sybil she had not actually despaired, not even after the terrible interview in the library. Sybil had urged that Oliver was mad—he had been taken hold of by a passion which had mastered him ; but such passions are never lasting. He would come back, one day, to wisdom and sanity ; and would be grateful to the woman whose existence had kept him from wrecking his whole life.

Now, in her desolation, Astrid told herself that Mrs. Brendon had never faced the truth. Oliver had already wrecked his life: that was done when he married Astrid Carey. It was too late to save him. He had made an honest effort to tolerate her—he had duly arrived to pass a week-end in her company. He had shown his natural good-feeling by his sympathetic anxiety for her at the time of her accident; but his courage had not been equal to a repetition of the experiment.

There was the conclusion of the whole matter.

With all the strength that was in her, Astrid that morning wished for death.

The long, arid years of her life lay before her. She saw herself the object of the negligent pity of the world. A neglected wife! One whose husband chose solitude, rather than her company. For the first time she began to think of suicide as not altogether beyond the pale of possible solutions.

Since the beginning of the week, she had not heard from her mother-in-law. Sybil, as a matter of fact, was waiting to hear from her. She concluded that Oliver, upon leaving the Abbot's House on Wednesday, would have conveyed the news at once to his wife: and she awaited Astrid's letter with a curious nervousness. Her daughter-in-law's opinion had already grown to mean something that mattered to her.

Oliver, however, had in his overwhelming concern for his wife's unbroken peace, kept this news from her as carefully as that of his own change of fortune.

Astrid was thus completely isolated from the only creatures in the world who belonged to her, with the solitary exception of the Dublin aunt, whom she had not seen for five years.

A dim idea of going over to Ireland, without

previously stating her intention to Oliver, came to her. She had funds enough, and could easily reach Fishguard from Bristol, and so cross to Dublin. There, she could in all probability earn a living of a kind.

If her separation from her husband were to be permanent, as now seemed certain, it was obvious that she could not retain a post which would keep her in Thackridge.

Lost in such dreary thought, she sat, her knees drawn up, her arms resting upon them, and her brow upon her arms, a very figure of despair. She heard a motor humming along the road—heard the engines stop, and the distant sound of voices. At first she thought it might be Mr. Wolfe, come to see if he could drive her anywhere. He had taken her for a run, several times, and she was growing to have a real regard for him. Unattractive as he was at first sight, he was a man of wide reading and abreast of his times. He happened to be a constant reader of the *Penman* and thought it ably edited. The discovery that Astrid was the editor's wife had disposed him favourably towards her.

A moment's reflection, however, told her that this was not Mr. Wolfe's car, which had a somewhat unusual kind of horn, so that she knew it from a distance. Forgetting that she was in charge of the camp, she sat where she was for some moments, without moving. Then suddenly, feeling instinctively that some one was approaching, she lifted her head and saw a figure in a motor dust-cloak and veil, standing among the gorse at a short distance staring at her.

For a long moment neither girl moved. Vivien Railton stood still, Astrid Brendon sat motionless: and they stared at each other without a word.

Then, as though stung by a sudden thought, without preface, Vivien burst out :

"Is Oliver here?"

Astrid raised her arms, shook back her hair, and refixed the comb from which it was in part escaping. "No," she returned unemotionally. "He is in London. Did you want to see him?"

"I should think not!" cried Vivien vehemently. "Never again so long as I live!"

Astrid lifted eyes of dull surprise to the flaming face. "You seem upset," she remarked, picking a piece of broom, and absently stripping its butterfly bloom.

"Upset! I'm perfectly miserable! Heart-broken!" cried Vivien immoderately. "I hate you! What are you doing here, living like a gipsy when your husband is in London? I little thought, when I got out of the car to see if there were gipsies here, whom I should find! But now I have come, I will give you a piece of my mind——"

"Thanks! I don't want it," replied Astrid uncivilly.

"You're sure he isn't here?" pursued Mrs. Kailton, advancing nearer, unrebuffed.

"Quite sure."

"Then I'll give you a message from me to him, and see that he gets it——"

"—I won't! Why should I give a message from you to Oliver? I never heard of such a thing! Go away!" cried Astrid, roused at last. She sprang to her feet and confronted Vivien with raised colour and heaving breast. "You had better go away," she repeated. "We rent this bit of the moor, and it is private."

Vivien stamped. "I won't go away till I have told you what I think! Was it your idea, I wonder, that

he should give his letter to Calvert to bring to me? Well, it was simply a fiendish thing to do! O yes, I don't wonder at your being furious with Calvert! I told him it was a mean, mean vengeance to take—to pay a man out by taking the very bread out of his mouth! But, you see, the whole thing was a mistake, and if you would have a minute's patience I could explain."

Astrid had gone from red to pale. Her heart beat heavily, and she felt giddy. What was she about to hear? Whence came this disturbing vision of Vivien? Was it treachery to Oliver to listen, or might she glean something that would enlighten her a little? *Taking the very bread out of his mouth!* What could that mean?

"I don't know what you are talking about," she stammered.

"I dare say you don't know the whole story," replied Vivien dolefully, "but please, please, do let me show you that I am not so much to blame as you perhaps think! When I saw you sitting out here, with only a caravan to live in, just for a moment I had the awful thought that you had no other home—that Calvert had done this! I feel that he has turned you out, robbed and ruined you both, and he wouldn't have done it if he had known the real reason why Oliver came to Dormouth last Sunday."

Astrid could only stare.

"Please, please don't be so miserable," pleaded Vivien, abandoning all attempt at dignity and beginning to sob. "Of all people in the world I did not want to see, you are the very one; but as we *have* met, do let me explain— Ah, do! I don't want you to blame me too much for all this dreadful trouble."

"I don't blame you," said Astrid, bewildered

"Well, you see, it was like this," broke out Vivien, apparently considering herself sufficiently encouraged to continue. "When you came to Dormouth last Sunday—you did come, to see the doctor, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Spence brought Oliver and me in the motor."

"Then what Oliver told me is true. I saw him, but I didn't see you. He came into the Palace Hotel, where we were staying."

"Yes?"

"Well, he didn't see me, but I instantly thought he must have come to Dormouth because—because he knew I was there. And Calvert saw him too, in the hotel, and afterwards on the sea-front—both times he was quite alone. Calvert actually spoke to him, and he never mentioned your being there, but seemed annoyed at being spoken to. So, of course, Calvert thought as I did. If he had not, I do assure you he never would have bought the paper! He has always wanted an English newspaper to handle, but he had decided he could not buy the *Penman* because Oliver was editor. He only did it to punish Oliver for running after me! Oh, can you imagine anything so dreadful?"

Astrid locked her fingers tightly together. Her eyes were blazing. "Go on," she muttered.

"Well," said Vivien once more, this being apparently the only narrative formula she had at command. "You see, I was certain that Oliver had come after me, although the real truth was, that he did not even know we were there! Anyhow, I wrote to him, a very stupid letter: and what do you think he did? Do you know?"

Astrid shook her head.

"He handed his answer to Calvert, and asked him

to take it to me ! So that evening, Calvert came back to me from London, very quiet—you know he never gets angry—and he made me open the letter and read it and let him read it. So, of course, he found out about Oliver not having known I was here, and what was worse, he found out that I had written to him ! ” She broke off, for tears suddenly gushed out and impeded her utterance. Astrid had not time to analyse the feeling that was invading her. She only felt that, come what might, she must hear all that Vivien could tell her. Stepping forward, she grasped the tiny, futile hand.

“ Don't cry ! Be sensible ! Let me hear your side of the matter ! Sit down, and go on. ”

Vivien sat down as desired, staring doubtfully at the other girl's flushed face.

“ Has Oliver—not told you—what I did ? ”

“ I haven't seen him since Monday, and it's not the sort of thing you write, ” said Astrid, confused, but hiding her confusion as well as she could. “ Oliver can tell me his part when he comes—you tell me what Mr. Railton did, when he found out that you had written to Oliver ? ”

“ He was terrible. I have never seen him like that before. He had to go back to London the following day, because, you see, Oliver having left him in the lurch, he did not know what to do. We were to have sailed to-day, but we must wait till next week now—— ”

“ How do you mean that Oliver had left him in the lurch ? ”

“ Why, you see, as soon as Oliver was told who had bought the paper, he just walked out of the office there and then ! He declined to set foot in an office that belonged to Calvert : and you can't wonder, can you ? ”

"No," said Astrid, whose eyes were sparkling with something remarkably like triumph. "You can't!"

"Just what I told Calvert, but he said he would bring an action; only then he found out he couldn't, because Mr. Marsh and Oliver had only had an agreement for three years, and they had been together for nearly five, and had not had a fresh one! So he has no remedy."

"I see. What will he do?"

"He has cabled for one of his best men from New York, and he must put things in train for him, in fact he is not sure that he must not wait until he comes. He would have got out of his bargain if he could, but unfortunately, it had all been done, hard and fast, before they told Oliver, and Mr. Marsh quite declined to reconsider the matter. But the thing that I know Calvert really minds, is that letter of mine that Oliver has got." Here the tears again began to flow.

Astrid looked hard at the weeping child, for she seemed no more. There was compassion mixed with the contempt of the full glance.

"What in the world made you write to him? What could you hope or expect to accomplish, except to make him unhappy?" she asked curiously.

Vivien looked blankly up at her, with great blue eyes, upon whose fringes the tears hung yet. "I—I was feeling so—so home-sick!" she gulped.

"I don't understand. Surely you love Mr. Railton? I mean, you prefer him to Oliver? You actually threw Oliver over for him, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. And I am sure, if I ask myself, I don't know which of them I like best. You see, I'm afraid of Calvert, and Oliver was afraid of me. That was the difference. But I did love Oliver, and what

was worse, I knew I had treated him badly; and marriage is a—a very *alarming* thing, you know, when you are a little afraid of the man you have married; and just at first, after the thing was done and everything was for-ever-and-ever-amen—you know—somehow, I felt as if I couldn't bear it! I wanted Oliver to comfort me, to say he forgave me, to tell me he was not unhappy—Oh, I don't exactly know what I wanted! But I can tell you what I did! I was fool enough to ask him to write to me at the post office, and to come down and see me while Calvert was away! Of course, I had no idea that the business upon which Calvert went to London had any connection with him, or that they could possibly meet!”

“I see. Have you told your husband what was in the letter?”

Silence.

“Did he ask you?”

Still silence. Looking down, Astrid saw the delicate Dresden china face flushed crimson.

“I told him a fib,” said Vivien at last. “I told him that I had written merely to reprove Oliver for coming after me when I was married.” She spoke recklessly.

“And now I suppose you are afraid he may find out that it was not true?”

“Well, he has, partly. I had a maid called Thérèse. It was she who suggested the post office, and that I should tell him to send his letters there. Of course, I see now why she did it—it was to get me in her power, so that I should have to give her money, for her not to tell Calvert. It appears that Oliver, when he gave his letter to Calvert, gave him a hint that she was not to be trusted, and she was packed off that very night. But what I want you to do is to get

Oliver to burn the letter. If he doesn't, I know Calvert will never rest until he gets it."

"I hardly know why Oliver should wish to keep it," observed Astrid.

"You may tell him for me, that if it is in existence, Calvert will have it somehow," remarked Vivien. "You do not know what things these millionaires do. They are always being blackmailed, you know, and they have private detectives, and ways of doing things—if you only have money enough, you can get simply anything done! Calvert says it makes him laugh sometimes, to hear people say, 'Oh, what nonsense! Such things can't be—we live in the twentieth century!' He says you can do things now that no feudal baron of the Middle Ages would have dared attempt. Something will happen to Oliver. He will have his pocket picked, or something of that kind. There will be no suggestion, of course, of Calvert having anything to do with it. Then, if the letter is not in his pocket, there will be a burglary. Somehow, the thing will be done. I wish you would ask him to burn it."

Astrid sat contemplating the little creature who had spoilt Oliver's life. She hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. To her sound sense and clear mind, Vivien's lack of principle and confusion of thought was hardly credible. She realised to the full what his mother had meant when she said how unfit a wife Vivien was for Oliver. She even believed that all his present suffering was nothing compared to what he might have suffered, had he found himself in the position which was now occupied by the American, a man far better fitted to cope with it.

"O, don't be so severely silent," entreated Vivien, after a long pause. "You don't know how wretched I feel about Oliver and you! One thing on the top of

another! It always seems to happen so! But when I heard from mamma last night, about Mrs. Brendon being about to marry Colonel Waring at once, I felt nothing but— Oh dear! Another blow for poor Oliver!”

For a moment Astrid had much ado not to cry out in her surprise. She knew all now! All the ill news which was to have been kept from her—which Oliver would so carefully have ‘broken’—had been, as it were, flung at her, by the hand of the silly little flirt to whom she owed her present luckless state.

With a great effort the shock was surmounted, and Sybil’s daughter-in-law realised that she must pretend to have been fully aware of this piece of intelligence.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “it does sometimes seem as if everything comes at once.”

“How wonderful you are, to sit there so patient!” cried Vivien. “In your place I should want to be tearing Calvert’s eyes out!”

Astrid hesitated, then took a decision, and spoke boldly: “In my opinion, your husband has done a mean act, unworthy of a gentleman. I have noticed that such acts bring their own punishment. There is no need for people to interfere. Unless he is a bad man, which I don’t think, he is already suffering a good deal in his conscience.”

“I believe he is,” said Vivien dolefully. “He is quite grumpy and preoccupied, not a bit like he used to be in Egypt.”

“Well,” added Astrid, with a sudden sigh, “I believe he will be much sorrier before he has done with this business. He will live to wish he had never touched it.” There was a light of purpose in her eye.

“Oh,” said Vivien, after a while, “you don’t know what a relief it has been to talk to you—to have

somebody to whom to pour it all out ! I do hope you won't think too hardly of me, and will tell Oliver how desperately sorry I am about it all : and *do* ask him to burn the letter, won't you ? And write to me to tell me that he has done it ? ”

Astrid could make no such promise. She was now chiefly occupied with the desire to get her visitor away before the return of the campers-out. Fortunately, she found Vivien quite as reluctant to meet the Selbys as she herself could be that the meeting should take place.

As soon as Mrs. Railton fully understood who were the other campers-out, and that their return was imminent, she almost ran back to her waiting chariot, and directed the chauffeur to take a different road back to Dormouh.

CHAPTER XXI

All was lost then? No! a cricket—
Some mad thing that left its thicket
For mere love of music—flew
With its little heart on fire,
Lighted on the crippled lyre
Saves the singer from defeat
With her chirrup, low and sweet.
Did the conqueror spurn the creature
Once its service done?—ROBERT BROWNING.

NOT a word of her visitor nor of her visitor's electrical tidings did Astrid say to her companions upon their return.

Dan, closely observing as usual, gathered that there was a change in her spirits since the morning, though he was not convinced that it was for the better.

She was more talkative and seemed full of energy; but she had silent periods, during which her broodings were certainly serious, if not sad.

The afternoon was marked by the arrival of Humphrey Spence and Martin Selby. The whole party motored down to the shore, where all but Astrid had a swim, and the evening passed with lively talk and a good deal of gaiety.

On Sunday, Astrid asked Humphrey whether he would motor her, after lunch, to call upon Mr. Wolfe, in order to thank him for his diligent inquiries, and to show him that her recovery was complete.

Humphrey was delighted, for the road thither was

charmingly pretty, and Tessa and he could roam together while Astrid made her visit.

They left the camp accordingly, soon after lunch, and an hour's run brought them to Wellholme, as the place was called.

It was a moderately good house, of the late Georgian period, with most of the attributes considered necessary in the days of Jane Austen. There was a shrubbery, a sweep, a wide prospect, and a gravel terrace, where presumably the ladies of the family might have walked in their sandal shoes without fear of wet.

Inside, the whole place spoke of the same date. Mr. Wolfe was an only son, a man who had never been either handsome or attractive, the child of elderly parents, brought up at home, never sent to a public school or university, with all the love of seclusion and dislike of society, which such a rearing will induce in a man by nature without self-confidence or social graces.

He had been the catch of the county all his life without suspecting it. The sole alteration he had ever made in his peaceful, out-of-date habits was the purchase of that motor which had been the means of introducing him to Astrid.

Upon his car, his garage, and his chauffeur he spent considerable sums. His only other expensive hobby was literature. Early in their acquaintance, therefore, Mrs. Brendon and he had found themselves on common ground. The man who was far too shy ever to open his lips to the county girls he met, could talk eloquently to the pleasing young married woman who had the literary gossip of London at her fingertips.

At sixty-five the old bachelor was interested in a woman for the first time in his life.

She had heard some of his long-hidden ambitions, his unfulfilled plans—nothing but plans, because he had never chanced to come across any one who could influence him sufficiently to enable him to realise them. During a long motor drive, he had said that he hoped this was but the beginning of their acquaintance. Mr. and Mrs. Brendon must do him the honour of being his guests in the near future. He had always feared that he had nothing wherewith to amuse a young woman. But the motor and the library together—hey? Astrid had assured him of her perfect content with such a combination.

She heard now that Mr. Wolfe was at home, with a new trepidation in her heart. She walked, at the elderly butler's subdued invitation, into the faded, rosewood-furnished drawing-room, with lips set in firm resolve.

In her prettiest summer frock she stood in the sunshine in the big bay window with its maplewood panellings, and gazed across the lawns with eyes that saw nothing outwardly.

Mr. Wolfe appeared, to welcome her with sincere pleasure. His ugly face was quite pink with the satisfaction it gave him to see her so completely restored. He suggested that they should go into the library, and she accepted with alacrity, for this was the one habitable room in the house.

As soon as they were seated she turned to him and, waiting till he had exhausted his very limited flow of polite chat, she spoke.

"Mr. Wolfe, I am going to risk your good opinion of me," she said, looking him steadily in the eyes, "by doing something which is quite unwarranted by the shortness of our acquaintance. I am going to ask you to talk business with me."

He could only just stammer his pleasure in the

idea of serving her. He was evidently much surprised.

"I am not going to ask a favour of you," said she steadily. "Please bear that in mind. I am going to make a business proposal, and you must not answer it to-day, you must give me neither yes nor no, but think it over quietly."

"You interest me, Mrs. Brendon," said Mr. Wolfe. "Pray proceed."

He was no fool, in spite of his secluded life. His little eyes were much on the alert as he looked at his visitor, and acknowledged to himself that he was not unsusceptible to the charm of her liquid dark eyes under the brim of her rose-trimmed hat.

"Yesterday," she went on, in her usual clear, rather cold tones, "I had a great shock. I heard bad news. You too will call it bad news, for I know how highly you think of my husband as an editor. The *Penman* has changed hands, and my husband has been forced to resign his post."

"You don't mean to say so! This is indeed bad news! Had he no idea of it?"

"None. The proprietor acted behind his back, because he knew how much Oliver would disapprove. He has sold the paper to an American."

Mr. Wolfe stared. "An American?"

"Yes. My husband felt that the tone of the paper must necessarily be changed, and resigned at once. I understand that the new owner is going to put in an editor from New York. Now, can you not foresee what will happen?"

"Only that I shall discontinue my subscription to the paper!"

"Precisely! Will not other readers also? It is impossible that the *Penman*, with an American editor, can retain its present public. It will be dead

within a year. Now do you see my idea? Do you remember the talk we had, about it being the dream of your life to start a paper?"

He raised his head and looked at her keenly.

"Suppose my husband were to come forward and perhaps offer to edit for the first year without a salary? You would want patience, mind you. You would have to put in money enough to enable you to hold on. It might be two years, it might be more, before you began to make a profit. But there it is. Oliver has the reins in his hands, he could retain for you the services of most of his own men. They will all be glad to come to him, for though I expect Mr. Railton will offer high pay, he will not be likely to sign contracts; and that is the very thing that I would advise you to do. Have contracts for three years, get your men in good heart, prepared to make a fight for it. I believe that within the first year you would have captured the *Penman* public."

She could see that the imagination of her host was blazing. He sat looking at her with kindled eye. "What an idea!" he said slowly, "what a great idea!"

She leaned forward. "I had no idea of this terrible thing until yesterday. Nothing was further from my mind than the bare possibility of my making such an appeal to you! You know next to nothing of me, or of my husband, except his work, which you admire. You would have to go into things, to find out all about us, to ascertain what Mr. Brendon would be prepared to put into such a scheme, and so on. But I felt as if I had to come and say it. There is my husband, a first-rate man! Here are you, longing to have an organ of your own, and with the capital to back it! You would have an editor who knows all there is to know about printing,

paper, advertisements, distribution, all the thousand and one things that one must know in order to run a paper at a profit. I felt that, even at the risk of your looking upon me as a scheming woman, I had to put the thing before you ! ”

and
n a
our
out

CHAPTER XXII

We talked on fast, while every common word
Seemed tangled with the thunder, at one end,
And ready to pull down upon our heads
A terror out of sight.—E. B. BROWNING.

MR. WOLFE asked nothing better than to have the thing put before him in all its bearings. He found that Mrs. Brendon knew almost as much of the working of a paper as did her husband. Her knowledge surprised him as much as it excited his admiration. They talked on, not heeding the time, until the motor appeared at the front door, and Tessa meekly begged to know how much longer Mrs. Brendon was likely to be.

It was almost eight o'clock by the time we reached the camp. The sun was very near its setting. The light upon the moor was flushed with rose. The dazzle of the sunset and the fact that she was sitting behind in the car, with Tessa and Humphrey in front, impeded Astrid's view. She did not see that beside Martin and Dan, who were standing in the road on the look out, there was a third male figure, upon whose face relief succeeded anxiety as the hoot of the horn was heard.

She had no warning, nothing to break the shock of seeing Oliver step forward and open the door for her to alight.

The sudden sight of him demolished for a moment even her fortitude. It seemed impossible that she could conceal the disorder into which she was

thrown. Her voice shook so that she dared say no more than "Oh! . . . You were able to get away . . . after all!"

She had risen, and would have alighted but that he stood there, looking at her with eyes of apprehensive caution, as if he dreaded what she might say or do.

"Don't you want me to lift you out?" he asked, covering his nervousness with a smile.

"Oh no, no!" she earnestly assured him. "I am quite well, I don't want any help."

He stood back as though snubbed, and watched her step down. "That seems all right," he remarked, trying for cheerfulness. He took from her the warm cloak she wore, and as he did so, became conscious of the agitation which thrilled her. He told himself he was a selfish brute to expose her even to the disturbance which his unexpected presence caused her.

"Well, Mr. Brendon, what do you think of her?" cried Tessa, coming to greet him with a smile and a robust hand-shake.

"You are wonderful—you, or the doctor, or the moorland air, or all three," he answered, with real gratitude.

"And where do I come in?" asked Dan petulantly.

It seemed to him ages since the motor had rolled off, carrying Astrid away for hours. Now she was back, and here was this unwelcome husband, come to spoil the exquisite evening hour, when Dan had hoped for a quiet talk. Why couldn't the man keep to his word? He had said he was not coming, and must needs drop in unexpectedly, just when one felt safe from him. "Where do I come in?" asked Dan. "I have been contributing what little I could towards the convalescence."

"He has been doing my washing-up for me," acknowledged Astrid gratefully, "and beating up milk and eggs, and I can't tell you what beside. They are both as good as they can be to the orphan within their gates."

"Supper before anything," cried Martin. "Dan and I have been obliged to turn our backs in order to resist the temptation of falling-to upon the lobster salad. As for Brendon, I understand he has had no meals since the day before yesterday, and is in a state of semi-collapse from hunger."

"O, I am so sorry, it is all my fault that we are so late," cried Astrid, hurrying forward.

"You can walk!" said Oliver's voice in her ear, with an accent of satisfaction.

"Walk, indeed! I can *run!*" she retorted, suiting the action to the word, and darting away from him into the caravan, whither Tessa had retired to pass a comb through her wind-ruffled locks.

He could not make out whether the little break in her voice were a laugh or a sob.

A few minutes later they were all together round the table, doing justice to the supper, with the exception of Astrid, who could never eat when excited. Only when she saw that her lack of appetite was drawing upon her the attention of Oliver did she make a great effort, and swallow food which threatened to choke her. She already knew all that he had come to tell her. It was a piquant thought.

She only dared watch him by moments, when his attention was diverted: for his own eyes were continually upon her. She felt for him. How awful to have to come and confess reverse of fortune to the woman whom you do not love, and whom you more than suspect of having married you for your position! She appreciated the effort that his coming must

have been. There was encouragement in the knowledge that she could make things easier for him.

Then, in the buzz of general conversation, she heard him saying to Tessa, who sat next him, that he must leave early next morning.

Well, what had she expected? He had come down, as naturally he would, at the latest moment, so as to have as few unpleasant quarters of an hour as need be.

Supper over, he begged them to excuse his wife from her share in clearing away as he wanted to have a talk with her—there would be no time tomorrow morning.

Tessa wrapped up Astrid, though the night was beautifully warm; and together the husband and wife strolled away, out of sight of the camp, into the long twilight of approaching midsummer.

At last they were quite alone. They stood among the clumps of gorse, their feet half buried in the flowering thrift, while the aroma of hawthorn bloom was carried to their senses by the little, wandering breeze. Oliver stopped when they came to a suitable nook; and they sat down side by side.

She was not trembling now. She had braced herself, and was prepared. Her quiet seemed to relieve him of some of his apprehension.

"Astrid," he said, "I don't know what to do. The doctor told me last week that you must on no account be distressed or disturbed. And I have decided that I must do both. The reasons I gave you for not coming on Friday as I hoped to do were not true. I stayed away because I hoped to spare you bad news. But I have decided that I must tell you because there is nobody else who can. I—I—you don't know how I hate having to do it."

She sat with lowered eyes, but presently ventured

a look at him. He had his head turned from her, and was picking bits of thrift and making a little bunch of it.

"Don't be afraid, Oliver, I am quite well, and able to take things as they come," she told him gently. "If there is bad news I would rather hear it from you."

"Well, you see, it is not wholly bad now," he rejoined. "There is some good to add, so I don't so much mind. But it will be a bit of a shock to you at first, I know. It is, shortly, that I have lost the *Penman*."

There was a perceptible pause. "Well," said she softly, at last, "the only thing that I should really mind about that, would be that you had lost it through your own fault, and I don't think that is likely."

"You don't?"

"No."

He stared at the ground between his stockinged legs. "In a way it *was* my own fault," he said slowly. "No. I don't think I can say it was. Calvert Railton, having injured me, chose to consider himself my enemy. He bought the paper in order to turn me out."

"I'm not quite unprepared for this, Oliver. Last week you remember you told me you thought Marsh had something on his mind."

"Ah! So I did. But do you realise what it means? It means that I am entirely dependent upon my mother, except for savings of my own, which are not very considerable."

"It means that you and I must each earn our own living," she replied tranquilly. "That does not sound nearly as bad to me as I suppose it does to you. It is what I have always had to face."

"It is just the one thing I had hoped you might not have to suffer as my wife," he replied, in a very low voice, which somehow expressed the depth of shame he felt.

She had no answer to that. Sitting upright, she lifted her eyes to the wonderful tender depth of the slowly darkening sky. Oh, if only she were not his wife! If she were just his servant, his faithful secretary! The bitterness went out of her like swiftly flowing water as she realised that he was suffering. Her heart swelled, but she sat on calmly. She must not let him think that she was moved.

"Do you feel as if you could tell me all about it?" she asked after a while.

He told her then. He made a clean breast of his having seen the Railtons at Dormouth on the previous Saturday.

"I didn't tell you I had seen them," he explained, "for the reason that I don't think it affected me very profoundly. I looked on it as an awkward accident. I was anxious about you; and in my mind, the fact of Vivien's marriage was—well, it was final as far as I was concerned. But, of course, when I got her letter, I saw how likely it was that she should have supposed I had come to the place with the object of seeing her. I thought it right to disabuse her of any such idea, at once and completely."

He gave her, then, a detailed account of the scene between himself and Railton at the office. He went on to describe how he had thought of hastening to tell her all, there and then, until he remembered that he must do nothing to hinder her recovery: how he had gone down to Thackridge to see his mother; and how he found himself supplanted.

He spoke, as he went on, more naturally, more as he had been wont to do when she was his right-hand

man, as he used to say. Her knowledge of the ins and outs of his profession, her capacity to understand just how he felt, and why, were infinitely soothing.

He avowed frankly that he had not dared to face her with such a load upon his mind, for fear the temptation to relieve himself by confiding in her should be too great.

She assured him that she was not so weak-minded as to be overcome by tidings of disaster. "I have no fears for your future," she said quietly. "You are known, your work is known, and held very high. As soon as this gets about—as soon as it is matter of common knowledge that the *Penman* has changed hands—you will find that there are people eager to secure you. I feel quite sure that it will be so."

He listened with pleasure. Her belief in him was gratifying. Little as she had cause to trust him as a man, she had not lost her confidence in his professional ability.

"Ah," he said, "if you had been, as I have been, scouring about in editors' rooms for a job, for the last few days, you might be less sanguine. However, as I told you, the news is not all bad. I don't think I could have borne to come down and tell you if it had been. But as things are, I felt I had to come. I've got a job, of a kind."

She started. "You have?"

"Not permanent; but just a bit of luck. I went to the *Sentinel*—you know Cray has always been rather a friend of mine; and the man who was going to the front for them, as war correspondent, has just fallen ill with appendicitis. I have got his job, and am off to-morrow evening for Tripoli."

She locked her hands together. In the fast-deepening dusk he could not see the whiteness of

her face. A tide of feeling which it seemed impossible to fight stormed at her heart. Her eyes grew dim.

"If we had a war of our own going on," he went on, gazing out to sea, his chin on his hand, "it would have been easy. I should have made my will and enlisted. There would have been a chance of freedom for you then." He turned with a start. Surely he had heard her sob. His eyes eagerly sought the face he could only see as a shadow—he made a movement towards her which he could not himself explain. "What's the matter?" he blurted out, in a voice tense with anxiety. If only he knew what to do for the best, how to save her pain!

There was but a slight pause before she answered exultantly: "There now! And you said it would be so hard to find work! I knew better! But——" she hesitated. It was not in her power to tell him of Mr. Wolfe's designs. She had begged that good friend not to let Oliver know that the proposal had been her own suggestion. Mr. Wolfe, ostensibly, had not made up his mind. When he had done so, and when the fact of Oliver's severance from the *Penman* was publicly known, he intended to come forward. But until his offer had been formulated it remained indefinite.

"But? What is in your mind?" asked Oliver gently.

"Does it not seem precipitate? Are you not clutching at the first thing that offers, without any real necessity? You could afford, could you not, to wait for work which is worthy of you. May you not miss something, perhaps . . . by being out of the way?"

He drew a deep breath. "Perhaps. There are two reasons. One was that I was spared the humiliation of coming to tell you that I was one of the un-

employed. The other was—was—well, that I suppose I am feeling restless."

"Oh," she cried, as if his words reproached her, "of course! Of course! Forgive me," she went on, speaking fast, "I should have thought of that. I was thinking only of your professional future, not of your personal unhappiness. Yes, it is right, it is best. No doubt it is the only way."

He was puzzled. She seemed quite collected, full of common sense and that power of seeing round a subject which he had always admired in her. He had been mistaken, then, when he thought he heard that smothered sob? The mistake had set going some current of feeling which affected him oddly. Aided by her composure, he left unsaid some words which had rushed to his lips—words of regret and a plea for forgiveness. He must on no account upset or distress her. There was much to be arranged, and he must keep the talk upon a business footing.

"The main thing that you and I must discuss to-night," he said, "is your future while I am away."

She broke in. "You must not trouble about me. I shall manage very well."

He continued as if she had not spoken. "I went down again to Thackridge yesterday," he said, "and told my mother everything. I felt less unable to do it because I had not to appear altogether in the light of a beggar. We had a long talk, and the upshot of it is that she wants you at the Abbot's House, if you will come. She is preparing for her marriage, and has nobody with her. She said . . . she said she would rather have you than anybody in the world."

There was a silence. Astrid could not have spoken, and he was not able immediately to proceed.

"The arrangement," he went on at last, "is

exactly what I could wish. It would have the advantage of allowing you to continue your secretarial work, if you still desire it. The Colonel and my mother plan to take a long holiday after their marriage, and you would be left in charge of the house during their absence."

Again silence. A bird called from its nest among the bushes. The murmur of the sea rose to their ears, very far away and soft.

Astrid had been summoning all her fortitude. If anything definite was to be said, this was the moment. If she weakly allowed this suggestion to be adopted, consented to the continuance of the present position, simply because she had not courage to face things, then she would be cutting away the ground from under her own feet. Her pride forbade that she should accept anything more from Oliver, even though it soothed his conscience to give what he could.

"Don't you think," she asked him quietly, "that it would be better to accept this break, which comes in the natural order of things, and—make it final? I don't want to say one word in bitterness, but we have to look things in the face. I know you are sorry and ashamed of the thing you did. But all the blame was not yours, your mother showed me that. What happened could not have happened if I had had a woman's proper pride. I waited a month because your mother asked it of me. At the end of that month you told me to go where I liked and do as I pleased. It is best that I should do so."

Before she had got far with this speech she had realised that to him it was quite unexpected. He turned his face towards her with a start of hurt surprise, and gazed upon her as, somewhat lamely, she faltered to her conclusion. "So that is how you feel," he said, in a low voice "You want your

liberty. But you understand that I cannot give it to you completely ? ”

“ Yes, I understand that. No mistake that is once made can ever be undone. But you would be free of the responsibility of me, of the continual fret of my presence, the—the constant reminder of all that is so—very—painful to you. You had better let me go.”

“ I can't,” he said sharply, and the words, as he spoke them, were a surprise to himself. “ If you go, it is against my wish, without my consent.”

“ It is quite a mistaken idea of duty and honour that makes you think you are bound to keep me.”

He was for the moment at a loss. Uppermost came a feeling of irritation against her. She seemed born to make him exhibit his worst feelings. “ You mean that you won't go on with the present state of things ! Why ? Is it so much more unendurable this evening than it has been any time during the past weeks ? ”

“ Yes.” It was hardly audible. It was merely breathed.

Her voice, coming to him from unseen lips, sent a thrill through him, and he cried out like a petulant boy—“ Why, Astrid ? Why ? ”

Her two hands went up to her breast as she gasped out, “ Please, Oliver, have pity. I can't put things into words. Have you no sort of idea what my life has been to me lately ? I know you have suffered too—I know your heart has been filled with the thought of—of another woman's pain ; but just for a minute try,” her voice sank to a whisper, “ try and think of me.”

He made some kind of a sound which was really sympathy, but sounded like exasperation. He was desperate because he realised that he could show her only the homage of respect ; he could not comfort her.

She seemed so small, so lonely, sitting there on the ground, he had the impulse to snatch her to him, to offer the consolation of caresses. But her pride and strength were about her like a barrier. He dared not touch her.

"I *will* think of you," he said, in an agitated voice. "It shall be as you decide—exactly as you decide. Will you swear to me that it is your own wish and desire to divide your life finally from mine? If so, then I go out. But it must be your own decree.

The moment was upon her. She thought that she detected, in his excitement, in his curious irritation, the hope of freedom, carefully held in the background. Once convinced that she desired to leave him, he would joyfully accept the measure of liberty available to him. She summoned all her strength. Only a few words and it would be over.

"I assure you that I think it best that we should part."

He sat a moment as he was. Something in him jumped like a tortured nerve as the slow words fell upon the silence of the summer night. "Very well. We are to part," he said, with bitterness. "Let us lose no time." He rose to his feet. The moon was just sailing into view over the hill; and, holding his watch to catch the light, he could read the dial. "If I hurry, I may catch the last train to town from the Junction," he remarked.

She also rose to her feet, and catching her hand, almost roughly, he swung her round so that the light of the moon fell upon her face. It bore signs of agitation which cut him to the heart. "What a brute I am! I came down this evening, meaning to be so careful of you," he said gruffly. "You are perfectly right. I'm not worth sticking to. I haven't even got money now. If there was anything I could do

to show you I'm not altogether the cad I have seemed to you! But every word I speak is making things worse for you! Do you mind if I go? I shall just get that train if I run—and I'm so awfully disappointed. I don't think I had realised your contempt for me—not altogether! You must do in all things as your judgment approves. I have no claim . . .” He was down on his knees, kissing her two hands; and then, with a hurried “God bless you!” was gone, and she was left alone in the moonlight, too amazed, too stupefied by his outburst, to have the power of articulating a single word until it was too late.

It was not until many hours afterwards that she remembered her intention of saying something to him concerning Vivien and the letter which was causing her so much anxiety.

She reflected that it was perhaps as well that the subject had remained unmentioned. Oliver had most probably destroyed the letter, and she did not so much as remember the wild words spoken by Railton's wife of the methods her husband might be likely to employ in order to obtain possession of it.

CHAPTER XXIII

Peace, peace! such a small lamp illumes, on this high way,
So dimly, so few steps in front of my feet,—
Yet shows me that her way is parted from my way. . . .
Out of sight, beyond light, at what goal may we meet?

D. G. ROSSETTI.

It was a dull, heavy morning, threatening thunder, when Oliver's leisurely night train drifted into Waterloo.

He sighed wearily as he stepped out upon the pavement. All night he had not slept a wink.

He was telling himself how many kinds of a fool he was, to have wasted time in going so far, when he had so much to do before his boat-train left for Southampton at seven-thirty that evening.

Why had he done it? That was what he had been asking himself all night. He had spent time and money, neither of which he could afford, to go and say good-bye to a woman who had calmly decided never to set eyes upon him again. His spirits were very low, as he drove to his club, and even a good bath and breakfast did not accomplish much in the way of cheering him.

There were no letters for him, and when he had breakfasted, he went out to buy certain things still lacking to his kit. He had to go and consult a man he knew who had been in the same sort of business, and all this took up time. It was half-past two before he was able to wend his way to the *Penman*

office, in order to pack and remove such of his things as were still there.

Having ascertained that the new owner was nowhere on the premises he went up, to face a room full of exasperated people, afraid to quarrel with their bread and butter, but one and all ripe for mutiny.

"Why don't you start a paper on your own?" was their cry. "We are all here, ready to go on with you! Another week, and we shall all be in the street, you bet! Everybody has had his salary raised, and no contract! That's a sure sign! We shall all be ready for you, if you decide to go ahead."

The sub-editor, in particular, was confident that, with Oliver in charge, they could capture the *Penman* public. It really began to seem to Oliver a possible development, should he return from Tripoli with no more definite prospects than he had at present.

Everybody turned to with a will, shovelling his books into cases, packing his papers, and eagerly helpful in all ways. While they were busy, the hall porter looked in.

"Mr. Brendon come? Ah, there you are, sir. A gentleman has been asking for you, sir. Gave the name of Barrymore."

A sensation ran round the room like a flicker of lightning.

"Jove!" said young Prentis, with a smear of dust across his intellectual brow, and a bundle of papers in his hand. "Not *the* Barrymore?"

"Mr. Barrymore of the *Hermes*, and the *Birmingham Bulwark*, he bid me say, sir. There was more, but I forget the rest."

Sensation. No doubt about it. This was *the* Barrymore, millionaire and newspaper owner. And he was inquiring for their late esteemed editor!

"Gent asked me to say, sir, that he will be at this address until past five this afternoon, sir. I was to give you this card, too, with a red mark on it, and to say that, if you hand it to the hall porter on entering, you will be shown up at once. He said, not to ask for him by name, sir, as he is troubled with journalists to a considerable extent." A shout of laughter greeted this entreaty.

"Cheer-o! Why not take your crew behind you, Brendon?" cried Prentis. "'Enter the Editor of the *Penman* and Staff!' Jove, what I would give to be sent for by old Barrymore, I don't think!"

"I heard it rumoured at the Institute last week that Probert was going off the *B. B.*," put in the sub-editor. "I wouldn't mind betting he's going to offer you that. And though it's not London, you have got to recollect that the *B. B.* leads the whole caboodle of provincial rags."

Oliver stood holding the card, on which was inscribed in pencil—Room 17, second floor, Golden Ball Hotel, Strand. His heart leaped with ungovernable excitement. He looked at his watch.

"I shall just do it, boys. I can dine on the train all right——"

"Go, with our blessing," urged Prentis. "Leave us to deal with this chaos and old night, we'll see it through. You get into a taxi and shoot off to the Golden Ball forthwith. Take time by the fetlock, as the wise say."

"Will you chaps really finish up for me? The labels to be nailed on the cases are all here, ready. Well, then, I'll say Good-bye, and good luck to you all till we meet again. Oh, by Jove, I was forgetting the safe!"

He went to it, unlocked it, and opened also the inner compartment which was his own. It contained a

dispatch-box, on the top of which lay Vivien's letter, hardly noticed by him in his haste. More because he did not wish to pause to unlock the box than for any other reason, he put the letter in his pocket-book, gave the dispatch-box to the men to pack, and was ready to be off.

In the taxi, try as he would, he could not prevent his hopes from rising absurdly. This man Barrymore could make his fortune: and this man had sent for him! The enthusiasm of his underlings, most of whom might share in any of his good-fortune, had sent him off a trifle exalted. He found himself wondering what Astrid would say. He pleased himself by picturing her expression of eye and lip as she received the tidings: and chid himself for letting his mind dwell upon her. He thought over the various organs owned by Barrymore, and wondered which he should prefer. He forgot that he was hungry and tired, that he was on the eve of an expedition which would tax his fortitude and somewhat humble his pride—that he had bade a sad farewell to his mother, and a final one, so she willed it, to his wife. He was upheld by the glow of hope which illumined the future. If Barrymore had a definite offer to make, there were at least two good men in his own office who would take on his present job for him.

The traffic in Fleet Street and the Strand was thick, but in a few minutes he was at his destination, had handed in the mysterious card, and was at once ushered by a boy in livery, whom the porter summoned, up two flights of stairs.

What with the emotions he had gone through the preceding day, his night journey, the state of hustle he had been experiencing ever since, and the mysterious summons, he was in a state of excitement very unusual in him. As they hastened along a wide

corridor, a door close to him flew open, a man ran out, and collided with him with such force that Brendon went staggering some paces in order not to fall down.

"Confound!" he exclaimed angrily, flushing with annoyance, and turning to stare after the hastening man, who with hardly an apology was walking away. The boy conducting him, who had been in advance, seeing Brendon's red face and perturbed aspect, halted a moment, wondering whether there would be further developments: then, as if deciding that there would not, he opened a door, and called sonorously:

"Mr. Brendon."

Oliver went in. A handsome, middle-aged man was seated at a table reading the newspaper, with a tray and decanters beside him.

"I trust I am not too late," began Oliver, somewhat in a hurry.

The man stood up, and shook hands. He looked curiously at the young man's raised colour and heated aspect. "Dear me!" he said. "No hurry, sir! No hurry at all. I fear you have been putting yourself to unnecessary trouble."

"I hurried a bit," replied Oliver, conscious of a sudden fall in his spirits, since this man was certainly not Barrymore, whose features were as well known to all journalists as those of his Most Gracious Majesty. "I have been out of London, and only received Mr. Barrymore's message a few minutes ago. I conclude that as I am late, he has been unable to wait to see me."

"Not at all, not at all. He is at this moment dictating to one of his secretaries. I will let him know that you are here. He was most anxious to see you, Mr. Brendon. I think I may take it upon myself to say so much. I—I understand you have severed all connection with the *Penman*?"

"That is so, I am going abroad—starting this evening, in fact."

"Sit down. You look a bit fagged. Have a drink while I go and summon Mr. Barrymore."

The man's manner was reassuring and kind. He poured out a whisky and soda, for which Oliver felt truly grateful.

"I understood you to say," went on the unknown, as his visitor sipped his drink, "that you are leaving England to-day. I hope that does not mean that you have accepted permanent work?"

"Not permanent," said Oliver, vaguely. He was surprised to find that he felt quite stupid. Surely a little hurry, a little agitation, could not have so dire an effect. "Merely temporary," he added, and had much ado to separate the syllables so as to make the word sound clear.

He saw the other man come near the table, rest his hands upon it, and look curiously at him. "Do you think you had better finish that?" said he softly. "I am inclined to suppose that you have had enough already."

"On the contrary," replied Oliver, stung to anger by the insinuation and eager to show that he could articulate properly, "I have had nothing all day—this will pull me together." He emptied his glass, and set it down.

"I will go and tell Mr. Barrymore," said the other man. His voice came from a long way off. Suddenly it seemed to Oliver that there was but one thing to be done, and that was to yield for two minutes to the drowsiness that was stealing over him. He saw the man go out of the room, he heard the door close behind him. His eyes also closed, as it were, simultaneously. He would be sure to awake when that door opened again. He had once or twice, after a

long night's work, been overtaken by momentary drowsiness before. This had come on very suddenly. The chair was comfortable. His dark head fell back against the cushions, and consciousness left him.

He awoke, after a fashion. That is, he became partially conscious. The room, he thought, was full of people, moving, murmuring, quarrelling. He wanted to speak, to reprove them, to ask them to go away. After many efforts, he succeeded in making his voice heard. The effect was extraordinary. Immediately he was in solitude and darkness. He sat up.

One shaking hand to his throbbing forehead, he tried to decide where he was. He felt about him. In a chair:—near a table:—that was all he could find out without rising. Then he had better rise.

Ah! That was a difficult matter. Weights of lead seemed to hold him down. At first he really thought that he was bound. But nothing held him except his heavy limbs. He rose, and the world rocked.

He felt in his pockets for matches. There they were, but he could not stand erect if he used both his hands. He had to grope for the chair again, sit down, and make many efforts before he could strike a light.

The flicker showed him a hotel sitting-room, and the whole thing rolled back upon his dulled brain. How long had he slept? Had he missed his train? What could have happened to him?

His brain was still far too bemused for him to reason, but the one dominant idea that he had missed the boat-train overcame him. He pulled out his watch, and saw that it pointed to a quarter to twelve.

A quarter to twelve!

The match went out. He lit another, and saw the door. With a sudden energy born of despair he rose, crossed the floor, and managed to open the door and

pass out into the hotel corridor, lit from end to end. All was quiet, he saw nobody. He could not remember in which direction the staircase ought to be. He could not see clearly, but he thought he remembered that it was a long way from the door of the room from which he had just come. He started to run, staggering and lurching; and in a minute had, as it were, stepped off into nothingness, and fell heavily, rolling over and over down the wide stairs.

There was a confusion of voices, then. Somebody came and took him up. He found himself in a chair, in the hall. He heard a remote voice say contemptuously, "Drunk as a lord! Lor', there's a providence watches over 'em!"

He tried to speak, and his voice was so thick and guttural that he did not recognise it. "I am hurt, I am hurt," he repeated.

There seemed to be a consultation. "Can't keep 'im 'ere. Give 'im in charge."

"He come drunk, in the afternoon, went barging into Number Twelve and near upset him."

"I am—not—drunk," repeated Oliver, in a thick voice. Then came a policeman, bending over him. Then they helped him up, and he was taken somewhere, he did not know where, nor how he got there, for between pain, and the as yet unspent force of the drug, he was almost wholly unconscious. He knew they tried to make him stand up and answer questions. He knew that a doctor felt his pulse, for the result was to make him cry out in pain, upon which the doctor possessed himself of his wrist, and some others held him to prevent resistance, while the doctor did something which hurt vilely. After that, at last, they laid him down to rest. The desire to catch his train had all faded from his mind. He only wanted to be alone, quiet, in the dark.

Another awakening. This time to full consciousness, but only confused memory, and a dull sense of pain.

He saw the doctor plainly this time, as he came in, and understood when he was told that he had broken his right wrist. He eagerly assured the doctor that he was suffering from drugs, not drink. The doctor listened politely, but with evident lack of belief. The young man had smelt too strongly of whisky when he was brought in. Oliver further assured him that he must have been robbed—he had been decoyed to the hotel to be robbed. The doctor called a warder, and they examined the things taken from him overnight. There was his gold watch, his sovereign purse, his handsome silver cigarette-case, and his pocket-book, intact, with four Bank of England notes in it. Even to Oliver's own mind, the charge broke down. Why should thieves decoy him to a hotel, drug him, and not proceed to rob him? He felt so incredibly foolish that he ceased to urge his innocence of the charge of drunkenness. Brought up before the magistrate, he refrained from repeating his story, or from saying anything which might make the case of enough interest to get into the papers. His name he could not withhold, since he had letters on him, and a card-case. He paid his fine, and found himself in the street, ill and sick, disheartened and bewildered, the only thing that was clear to him being that he had lost his job. He could not proceed to the seat of war with a broken wrist.

What to do was a puzzle. At first he thought of going to his club. But the idea that the account of his being before the beak, fined for drunkenness, might be known by the time the evening paper came out made him flinch from that.

In his heart was a desire which amounted to

positive longing, to go to his wife. He remembered Astrid, one evening at the Abbot's House, when Sybil had had a headache. He recalled the tenderness without fussiness, the soft movement, the knowledge of what the sufferer wanted and would like. But, apart from her repudiation of him, a caravan was no place for a sick man with a broken limb.

It seemed to him that he had no choice but to go to Thackridge.

He felt so utterly stupid and heavy-headed that he was not even competent to wire to the *Sentinel* that a serious accident obliged him to throw up his job. His mother must do that. He hailed a taxi, and gave orders to be driven the whole way. He had just sense to go first to the club and pick up his luggage; then he threw himself back upon the cushions, and tried to force connected thought upon his aching brain, until the agony became too keen, and he subsided into semi-coma.

CHAPTER XXIV

—He sorrowed,—not as one
Who can command the gamut of despair ;
But as a man who feels his days are done,
So dead they seem,—so desolately bare.

AUSTIN DOBSON.

SYBIL had just finished lunch, and gone upstairs to make ready for a motor drive with the Colonel.

The engagement into which she had entered so half-heartedly was becoming by degrees a delightful thing to her. Not only did her personal pleasure exceed her expectation, but it seemed already to have had the effect, which the Colonel had predicted, of causing Oliver to realise that his mother did not exist wholly and solely on his account.

During her son's last visit—the visit in which he confessed his change of fortune, and more than hinted of a corresponding change of heart, she had been nearer happiness than she had thought she could ever be again. Oliver had been his own natural self. He had spoken and felt just as he ought—as she had always taken for granted that his father's son would speak and feel.

Grieved though she was at his loss of position, and perhaps still more at the manner of it, she yet felt that the plunge he was about to take—his going abroad, his roughing it, his new sense of personal responsibility—would in all probability be the making of him.

He avowed to her his intention of journeying,

in spite of the short time at his disposal, all the way down to the gipsy encampment, to announce his new departure to his wife. Knowing what she knew of Astrid's carefully concealed heart, she hoped much from that last farewell. The girl would appreciate the feeling which had brought him so far, with so little time for his final arrangements. She would have seen that some strong force had drawn him to her, had made him feel unable to leave England without seeing her. She could hardly continue to believe in the complete indifference of the man who acted thus. It might, in conjunction with what she herself would be feeling, break down her pride enough for her to send him away with some kind of hope.

That hope stirred strongly in Sybil's own breast to-day. She felt like a girl herself in her soft summer raiment as she strolled down the garden path, waiting for the sound of Walter's motor. To him she knew that she was just the same beloved woman that she had been twenty years before. Love, which could so triumph over the years, might surely also prevail even over the memory of past cruelty and heal the deepest wounds.

She heard the motor, and, turning, ran back with the light foot of the woman who goes to meet her lover. Quickly she passed through the house, her eyes filled with the light that Walter loved to see in them—the light that had been so carefully hidden during all the years of his dull patience.

It was not Walter. It was a London taxi-cab, and when she came out upon the gravel, Drew and the driver were both standing by the door, with their heads very close together. She heard Drew say, "Oh my! Oh dear! There must have been an accident!"

An accident! When she looked back upon it

afterwards, she could hardly believe that in that first moment her thought flew, not to her only son, but to Walter. She pressed forward; and as she did so, the driver, leaning into the interior of the cab, drew its occupant forward, and with Drew's help lifted him out. His head lay upon the man's shoulder, and his eyes were closed. It was Oliver.

Oliver! Who should have sailed for Tripoli last night!

They got him, between them, into the hall, and laid him upon a sofa.

His right arm was in a sling, his clothes were tumbled, his forehead and chin were cut and bruised, and he was unshaven.

In terror the mother demanded where the man had picked up his fare. He told her in the street, not far from the Police Court, adding that the gent, when he took him up, was leaning on a 'copper's' arm. He was conscious then, had given the address, and asked to be taken to his club, whence they had carried the luggage which he proceeded to produce.

The cab paid and dismissed, Sybil and the maid speedily brought salts, brandy, and hot water; and in a short while Oliver opened his eyes. Evidently he knew his mother, for an expression of satisfaction dawned on his face. He was persuaded to drink, and the effects were soon apparent. He sat up, pushing back his chair as though in a painful effort to make his mind work.

"Mustn't forget," he said in a queer, stuttering way, "wire to the *Sentinel*. Can't go. Accident. Wrist broken. Send for——" He paused, as if a terrific feat of memory were necessary in order to continue. "Tell them, send for P—Prentis. Charles Prentis, at the *Penman*. He'll go, in my place. Mother, do you hear? Am I talking sense?"

"I think I understand. I am to wire to the *Sentinel* that you cannot go, and suggest they send young Prentis instead?"

He looked satisfied. "That's right. Now I can let go my head. It . . . it's so mighty hard to k—keep it on my shoulders. Will it matter if I . . . let go?"

"Not at all, dearest. Never mind about your head. I'll see to that. But do you think, with our help, you could walk upstairs to bed?"

He agreed to try, and somehow the two women got him as far as the bottom of the stairs. But there they must have laid him down, had not the Colonel at the moment arrived to the rescue. A few hurried words, and exclamations, and he had grasped the essential fact that Oliver must be got up to bed; and in a short while it was done.

The doctor, when he arrived, was anxious. There was a high temperature, with delirium. The brain was excited. The young man was in just such a state as might develop into brain fever. The greatest care was necessary, absolute quiet, a first-rate nurse—ice and other remedies.

The setting of the wrist was examined and improved. Applications to lessen the pain were applied. The sickness which supervened was a grave symptom. It was in all probability the result of shock. They concluded that Oliver must have been knocked down by a motor; but there was no mud on his clothes.

The telephone brought a nurse in a few hours' time; and Sybil and the Colonel were left in deepest anxiety to await the developments of the next twenty-four hours.

It was some days before this anxiety was wholly

removed. The brain congestion passed off, to the mother's profound relief, without the threatened fever. Nevertheless, there remained a condition of cerebral irritation, which demanded great care and perfect quiet.

Sybil, after somewhat profound thought, decided not to send word to Astrid. Her reasons for keeping her in ignorance were many. Among the strongest was her desire that Astrid should remain, at least for a time, under the impression that Oliver had really left England. She would not be expecting news from him for several days, so that she would be in no undue anxiety; but Sybil hoped much from the parting, as she in her own mind imagined it to have been, and the succeeding absence and possible danger of the young man. Another reason was the fact of Astrid's own late ill-health, and the doctor's warning respecting her nerves. If things turned out very badly, and brain fever supervened, then it would be but just to inform the wife. But to alarm her unnecessarily would be unwise and cruel. She was presumably regaining strength each day, and would be in a better state to bear the bad news if bad it should prove to be.

Since Oliver's precipitate journey and return, Sybil had had but one note from her daughter-in-law. Thus it ran:—

“ MY DEAR MRS. BRENDON,

“ Oliver tells me that you are good enough to wish to have me with you for a time. I need not tell you that that is what I wish also. Will you let me know whether you would like me to come at once? The Selbys are not thinking of breaking up the camp until next Monday; but I

can come when you want me; Mr. Selby says he will spare me. Oliver also told me of your approaching marriage, and I should like to wish you happiness.

“ I am, sincerely yours,

“ ASTRID BRENDON.”

Underneath a hasty postscript : “ You deserve it ! O, you do ! You do ! ”

This letter was not wholly satisfactory to Sybil. It was colder and more guarded than Astrid's letters had been of late. It made her wonder what, if anything, had transpired between the two. Oliver's words to herself, before going to take leave of his wife, had inspired her with hope. He seemed to be filled with regret for his unkindness to Astrid, and anxious to do all he could for her. His tone and manner had seemed to express more than what he actually said. They had led his mother even to the length of hoping that ‘ all he could ’ might be something that Astrid's pride would allow her to accept. Well ! She *had* accepted this arrangement which he had made for her—that she should come back to the Abbot's House. Sybil guessed that she would be glad to do this, because of her much-prized secretaryship. She could imagine the gratification it would be to the girl's fierce independence to know that she had this post, which would prevent her having to apply for money to Oliver. The mother-in-law pulled a wry face as she reflected that it is possible to be too proud, and perhaps wished her son's wife a trifle more malleable.

There was a thought floating about in the background of Sybil's mind. Oliver had told her that the Selbys were extremely fond of Astrid, thought

nothing too good for her, made a great fuss with her : Dan had said that dictating to her was in itself inspiring.

Would it be unnatural should the girl, so despised where she should have been most treasured, turn with thankfulness to those from whom she had obtained instant recognition of her attractiveness, instant restoration of her almost perished self-respect ?

Sybil liked Dan Selby sincerely ; and the result of her meditation was a conviction that something ought to be devised for taking his perfect secretary away from him.

She wrote a brief but affectionate reply to Astrid's note, saying that the time suggested would suit very well, and she would expect her on that date. As the days passed, her own concealment of what had happened caused her some mental disquiet ; but as there was, after the first four-and-twenty hours, no danger, she held to her resolution, thinking that, when the delirium passed, she might obtain a clue to Oliver's own feeling on the subject.

She was not surprised that almost his first coherent words to her should be, " I hope you have not said anything of all this to Astrid ? " adding, after a pause, " On no account must she be distressed. When I am all right again, she can be told, if necessary. But I daresay she will have gone to Ireland by then."

His mind was evidently full of his wife, and his mother listened with some surprise to his opinion as to her probable movements. She had in her pocket her daughter-in-law's letter, promising to come to her in the course of a very few days. She did not say so, however ; she waited to hear more. Oliver lay very quiet for some time without speaking, his eyes open, evidently thinking deeply. At last he

said in a kind of helpless depression, "I shall never see her again."

"Never see her again, dear?" she asked timidly.

"No. She has done with me. One can't be surprised. I rather wish those chaps, whoever they were, had finished me."

This was a reference to his accident. Sybil eagerly longed for more on that head, but did not dare put questions to him, as she was warned that he ought not to talk. The nurse came in at the moment and deprecatingly begged that there might be no conversation.

The next day, however, the patient was stronger; and the day following, which was Saturday, Sybil ventured to ask if he remembered the circumstances of his accident.

He replied, a little huffed, that he certainly did. His mind seemed in all respects perfectly clear, and his mother was unprepared for the wild story he told. Manifestly he was talking rubbish. That he should have been decoyed to a hotel, drugged, and left helpless, without being robbed, was so improbable as to seem hardly worth considering. He told it all, however, without the least suspicion that the truth of his statement would be doubted.

Sybil, much bewildered, repeated what he said to the Colonel and the doctor. The latter admitted that the state in which Mr. Brendon had arrived home was quite compatible with his having been drugged. Respecting the truth of the rest of the story, the Colonel had only to go to the Golden Ball Hotel and inquire, which he did that very day.

Oliver's story received some confirmation, although the authorities, to whom Mr. Barrymore was well known, denied that he had been to the hotel for some months past. However, on the day named, a gentle-

man had engaged a room for a private appointment, and had been in a difficulty because the client whom he had appointed to meet had unfortunately arrived too drunk to transact business. The gentleman explained that, not detecting an already advanced stage of intoxication, he had offered a stiff whisky and soda, which the young man, having finished at one draught, was then engaged in sleeping off. The gentleman, who gave the name of Brown, had engaged the room for twenty-four hours, paying in advance. He therefore left the young man there until his brain should clear, and went off, saying he would return later.

The Colonel asked for a description of the man in the alleged state of intoxication, and felt no doubt that it was Oliver. Mr. Brown, they said, had come back early the next morning, to see if his friend were sober enough to settle the matter in hand. They had had to inform him that the person left in occupation of his room having caused a disturbance in the middle of the night, they had given him into custody. It was not at all an unusual thing for them to let a room for business appointments.

The hall porter and the man who stood at the hall desk alike declared it their firm belief that Oliver had rolled downstairs in a state of intoxication. When the Colonel gave his opinion that a man who had broken a limb should have been sent to a hospital, and not to the lock-up, they replied that they had no idea of his having broken a limb, and as a rule those who were 'tight' never hurt themselves seriously.

The whole thing left the Colonel both puzzled and troubled. He did not like to make too much fuss about it until he could be quite satisfied that Oliver had not behaved in a discreditable manner. A year

ago he would have been furious had such a charge been levelled against the young man who stood so aloof from the more vulgar forms of folly. But a man who will marry his typewriter girl out of pique will also perhaps commit other indiscretions.

It seemed inconceivable that any one should be decoyed to a room and drugged with no object. Was it possible that some one had a reason for preventing Oliver's going to the front? This suggestion was unconvincing, because his enemies could not have foreseen his broken wrist; and a few hours' delay would, without that injury, have made little difference.

They hesitated to cross-question the invalid. When first he told his story they had listened, disbelieved, and waited for a time when his brain should clear. When he repeated it, they pointed out to him gently that he had not been robbed, and they wondered why he should have been drugged. This produced vexation and querulous impatience. "Did they take him for a fool?"

They relinquished inquiry until his convalescence should have reached a more advanced stage.

Down in the west, the June days dawned and set in splendour. But to Astrid there had passed away a glory from the earth.

She lived, over and over again, her parting from Oliver. She asked herself whether she had done right or wrong. The question being quite unanswerable, she wearied herself both by day and night to find an adequate reply.

Tessa, who had been inclined to think that there was a biggish rift in the Brendon matrimonial lute, was changing her opinion when she saw how the girl felt the parting. Astrid bore her sympathy, though

writhing at the false pretences under which she accepted it. She had a feeling that, since it was settled that the parting between herself and Oliver was final, she ought perhaps to tell these kind friends of hers that so it was. They would have to know, sooner or later.

The prospect of telling, however, daunted her. It must be later, not sooner. Her husband's absence, felt to be inevitable, was paving the way for the future. Soon she would have got over the sharpness of feeling, and be able to mention these things calmly. Just now she could do no such thing.

The week passed melancholy. Dan was in deep depression. Though he knew that she would be at the Abbot's House for the present, and was to come to him every day, he saw that the brief business hours would be another thing indeed—wholly unlike the gipsy companionship, the intimacy of cooking and washing dishes, the long strolls, by sunset and moonlight, the everlasting talks, concerning things literary and things personal.

It was hard on Dan. Oliver, by putting his wife in a false position, was injuring more than herself and him. Dan's very nobility made him suffer more. He knew he was nothing to the one woman in the world whom he would fain have attached to himself. He felt the unusualness of Astrid as deeply as Sybil herself. He viewed Oliver as the ordinary young Oxford product, looking down upon the world from the height of a well-taught but not much more than mediocre ability—a young man whom you could have matched over and over again from among his own set; Astrid he saw as a bright particular star, beyond and above her sex; a warp of sterling principle, with a woof of that Irish humour which is more than half sad.

It might have done Oliver good, could he have known the light in which Dan Selby viewed his *mésalliance*.

So the days slipped away, to the very last. As each minute of it ticked by, Dan knew it was the end. The whole expedition was etched in upon his memory with fidelity as detailed as the fine touches of a mezzotint. He knew that it was the fortnight of his life. He would never have such another. The memory of the small pale face, the characteristic movements, the clear voice, with its cadence that was not quite English—they were with him until the last days of existence. Let the future hold what it might, it never again could hold just that.

Tessa saw and understood. She would have given much that such a trouble should not have fallen upon her brother. Yet she could not help knowing that he would be a greater artist because of it. He had seen, as in a magic glass, the vision of what a woman might be. The woman was removed from him by a barrier not to be broken. The whole thing was thus raised to an Ideal. It was a sorrow, but a sorrow full of beauty, a thing that might enrich his life and enable him to put upon paper the impression of a wonderful experience.

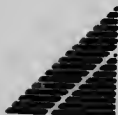
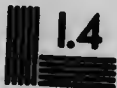
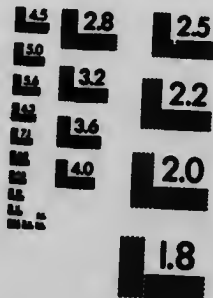
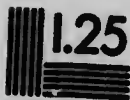
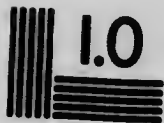
Not yet. It was too fresh, too near, too actual. Hereafter.

It is difficult to say which of the three felt most acutely the strain of those last days. The two men, Martin and Humphrey Spence, came down as usual for the week-end, finding the party in another camp, a day's journey nearer London. It was half pain, half pleasure to Astrid to leave the moorland camp. She slipped away when she could, to sit in the very place on the moor where Oliver had sat during their last talk. She recalled his looks and words, and the



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482-0300 - Phone
(716) 288-5889 - Fax

evident mortification with which he had received her last suggestion—an attitude for which she had been wholly unprepared. She thought of him out in Africa, hot, weary, thirsty, badly lodged—

He need not have gone. He would not have gone but for the disorder of his spirits. He had said so.

There was one glimmer of light. He would be pleased when he heard that she had betaken herself to Thackridge for a while, to help his mother.

"It is exactly what would please me most." She could hear the cadence of his voice as he said it; and she dwelt upon the way in which he had repeated his mother's words. "She said she would rather have you than any one in the world."

There had been exultation in that speech. His mother loved his wife. She knew she could not escape from the knowledge of his being gratified that this should be.

She had two minds. One, the inner and most central, was convinced of his hopeless indifference; had been convinced of it from the moment when she first saw Vivien. The other, the one more easily influenced by sense, still craved, still snatched at hope. The struggle tore her.

So passed the last hours.

For the previous two days they had been upon the road, and had reached the town whence the caravans were to proceed by rail, like themselves. The silent tragedy lived itself out, without one word. There were the three—two conscious, and the third unaware. Had Astrid known the state of Dan's heart, it is certain that she would have fled: but her pre-occupation was far too deep for that. Tessa was on guard, unceasingly. She never left the two together, and spent her time in preparing conversation which should be impersonal yet interesting—a difficult thing,

when personal claims are crying in the heart, and nothing else seems to matter.

It is probable that there are no more pitiful battlegrounds than these of victorious silence. The future was as puzzling as the present to these three; for Dan was fearing future intercourse, yet longing for it: Tessa's heart was sore for his lonely life, and torn with doubt as to how she could put a stop to the secretarial arrangement, and Astrid was determining to go away to Ireland or perhaps Australia, the moment that Sybil ceased to need her.

And after all, there was nothing—nothing said or done.

All the pathos lay in what was left unsaid and undone. Nobody but Tessa and her brother would ever know what those days had meant, and no word on the subject could ever pass between them.

Dan held out manfully. His masculine density failed to detect the delicate stratagems of Tessa. When it turned out that he could have no final stroll with Astrid, because Tessa had forgotten something which he must fetch from the town, he took it as a part of a general scheme of "rotteness"—a perversity of fate which was just now evilly disposed towards him. He knew nothing of the sisterly tenderness with which her heart was charged.

If Astrid's heart had wavered, or her allegiance been for a moment in doubt, all might have gone otherwise; but in those days Dan might almost as well not have existed as far as she was concerned.

Thus the desperate situation was surmounted. Dan travelled to town in a smoking-carriage, and left Tessa and Astrid free to discuss wedding details. The two weddings upon her immediate horizon were a source of some interest to Mrs. Oliver.

Up to the very door of the Abbot's House, the kind escort accompanied the secretary.

Her modest luggage was taken from among their own. Tessa leaned forward from the cab, and said gaily, "Good-bye, my dear, or rather—au revoir!—see you to morrow or the next day!"

Dan, standing on the doorstep, uncovered his rough head, and held out his hand much as he might have held it in the sacrificial flame. Astrid took it, and let it fall. "You *have* given me a good time! I shall never forget it," she faltered, not looking at either of them. "I will let you know as soon as I find out how much of me Mrs. Brendon wants. Then we can make arrangements. Good-bye for to-day."

"Good-bye," said Dan, in a most commonplace tone. He added no other syllable. Then he took his seat by his sister, and as they drove out of the gates, Tessa said with interest, "Just look, Dan, how that Dorothy Perkins has grown! It was only put in last year!"

"Jove, yes. A good three feet already, I should say; and it's only June!"

His own words startled him. Was it only June? What was he to do with the rest of the year—with the rest of his journey along the long, dull road?

CHAPTER XXV

You have the fair face : for the soul, see mine !
I have the strong soul : let me teach you here.
I think I have borne enough, and long enough,
And patiently enough, the world remarks,
To have my own way now, unblamed by all.

R. BROWNING.

ALAS for Dan Selby ! Astrid had liked him very much, when she was at leisure to consider him. Of late she had found him wearisome.

Since her final parting from Oliver, her interest in Dan's novel had faded, her work had become mere routine. She could not however fail to be aware that this withdrawal of her sympathy had been very disappointing to the novelist. The knowledge had made the last few days of their tour difficult and unpleasant to her.

But now it was over. Now she could feel that the tension was relaxed. When Dan and she met again, she would have come to a clear decision, her plans would be made, and she would have to face the unpleasant moment of avowal—the breaking to him of the news that his second secretary also was about to forsake him. This would be distasteful, of course ; but it would be definite ; and she need not worry over it at this moment, when her whole being was centred in quite another direction. The sound of his cab wheels had hardly died away before there sprang into the foreground of her heart the mingled

feelings, the sickness of excitement which her return to the Abbot's House must bring. In a few minutes she would have news of Oliver, and she would see Sybil.

It was now ten days since Oliver had left England. She had not expected to hear from him direct. Her dismissal had been—or he had chosen to think so—too definite, she supposed, for him to let her know his address, or even of his safe arrival. To what end should he have done so? She did not intend to write to him.

His mother, however, would no doubt be in possession of the much-desired knowledge. Astrid carried in her bag Mr. Wolfe's letter, containing, in proper terms, his offer to finance a weekly paper of which Mr. Brendon should be editor.

Astrid and he had had a good deal of correspondence. Everything had been satisfactorily arranged between them. Now the urgent matter was to forward the glad news to Oliver himself. Her whole mind was possessed with the overmastering desire to put the letter safely in the post.

It excited some wonder in her that Sybil was not in the hall to greet her, and she asked Drew eagerly where Mrs. Brendon was.

Drew seemed confused. "Mrs. Brendon's upstairs, ma'am. I will let her know at once that you are here. Would you go into the drawing-room a minute, ma'am?"

Astrid did so, with a faint surprise that the sight of her should seem to be causing the parlourmaid agitation. Any such thought however was but transient, and was soon merged in the keen memories with which the sight of that room was fraught for her.

How she remembered her first entrance! The gown Sybil had worn, her own impression of almost

fabulous beauty and luxury in the surroundings : and the fierce, shy girl, shivering with apprehension and resentment, while her husband asked her what her name was ! . . . Then there was another picture. Herself, clad in her very first pretty gown, the room filled with guests on a Sunday afternoon, and Dan Selby making friends . . . last of all there flitted by the memory of a princess in a fairy-tale, all white and blue and golden, standing in the glow of the fire, while the rain beat upon the panes, and Oliver looked from the girl he loved, to the girl to whom he was tied.

With that thought came, as usual, the conviction of her own powerlessness. She might remove mountains, she could never capture the heart of the man who loved Vivien. The sound of the opening door found her with the quivering shadow of such thoughts playing over her face. Sybil greeted her with a look which awoke in her vague anxiety. There was deep affection in the embrace in which she found herself folded ; but she noted that Oliver's mother was nervous. She concluded that her dismissal of her husband was known, and not approved. She was only too anxious to pour out her vindication. There was a limit, even to her self-effacement.

"Why, you are looking well, Astrid—even very well," said Sybil with approving voice. "I am glad. You have quite got over the effects of your accident?"

"Yes, wonderfully," was the reply, a deep blush heightening the pretty colour which fresh air had imparted to the white cheeks. "It was quite slight, really. Oliver made too much of it. He was very very good to me——"

She did not complete the sentence. In speaking of him she found it hard to control her voice. The one urgent question must be put ; but she had to be content, for a while, to answer affectionate inquiries

concerning her accident, and to-day's journey, and all the other small topics of the first ten minutes of meeting. At the first pause she managed to ask, pretty quietly, "I hope you have good news of Oliver? Where is he now?"

Sybil had of course expected and been prepared for some such inquiry; but not so soon and not quite in that form. She coloured, and looked embarrassed, as she replied drily:

"So you still take some interest in the poor fellow?"

Astrid looked her squarely in the eyes. "I expect he told you, before he sailed, that we had agreed to separate permanently?"

"N—no. I don't think I understood quite that. My impression was that it was you who ordained it and he merely submitted to your wish."

"That's not fair—Oh, it's not fair," said the girl, in a low tone.

"From what I heard, I own I was surprised when you wrote and said that you would come to me. I believed I had seen the last of you," went on Sybil.

"Does that mean that you would rather I had not come?" The question burst out swiftly.

"Indeed, no! But I feel rather in the dark as to why you came."

"He is abroad—that makes it safe—we shall not meet—and I hoped you really wanted me. I wished most earnestly to be of use to you . . . because I love you."

She received a smile and a hand-pressure, both undoubtedly sincere. But she felt there was a reservation in the mind of her mother-in-law.

"Mrs. Brendon," she pleaded, in a voice whose pathos struck her hearer with a great pity, "you know there is a limit—one cannot go on for ever—"

"Go on with what?"

"With a position which is wrong, and false—a position which is a perpetual humiliation. I tried, you know I tried, for a whole month . . ."

"I know you had much to bear, my dear. But, after all, a month is not so very long, when the happiness of two whole lives is at stake."

"If there had been a chance—a hope—ever such a tiny one—I would have served seven years! But there was none." She hesitated a moment, then hurried on—"You don't consider, you can't know, what these last weeks have meant, to me. It was infinitely worse—it got worse steadily. Here, during the awful month, it was easier. His manner never changed, it was always hard and cold. But after my accident, his manner did change. He was kind—even tender with me. He was penitent, I was a thing he had hurt, he wanted to show me that he was sorry. . . . Can't you see how much worse that was? . . . Remember, I love him! I could hide that from him while we were enemies; but when he wanted to make it up, I lived in terror of losing control, of letting him find out that I was perpetually offering a devotion he did not want. I was miserable when he was there, worse when he went away. So, when he came and said he was going abroad, I felt the thing had got to end, somehow. How could I be left for weeks and months like that—feeding on a hope that most likely was without any justification—a shameful, monstrous hope, that not even my self-respect could strangle? It was better to know the worst, and be done. . . . And it *was* the worst. He was honest with me. He had nothing to say. He just accepted my decision, and went off. He was sorry for me, and ashamed of himself. That was all. There was no more; and it is better to know it definitely. I—" her voice was

half strangled with a sob—"I think I have suffered enough."

Sybil answered softly, "He thought so, too. He said he only got what he deserved."

Astrid was weeping. She repeated to herself, as she mopped her wet eyes, "It was so unbearable—so unbearable. I had to escape. I only wonder I did not kill myself. I think I should have, but that I thought I saw one last way to be of service to him."

"To Oliver?"

"Yes. You have heard of Mr. Wolfe, the man whose motor ran me down?"

"Of course I have."

"I knew that he had always longed to own a paper, only he knew nothing of the journalistic world, and was so afraid of hitting on the wrong editor. He liked the *Penman*—it was exactly his idea of what a paper should be, with a few differences in detail. So I thought I would try what I could do . . . and he is going to finance a weekly, and make Mr. Brendon editor, if he will consent."

Sybil sat gazing upon her, incredulous.

She had done this! She, this young, insignificant typist, had saved Oliver at the moment of his deepest need! She had seen what she might do, she had, moreover, done it.

"Don't you think it a good idea?" pleaded Astrid wistfully, puzzled by her silence. "We shall have practically all the *Penman* staff, and, I believe, in a few months, the *Penman* public too. I have the letter here with me," drawing it out as she spoke. "I want you to put the address upon it, because he must not know that I had anything to do with the transaction. I should hate to suppose that he knew. He might think I was trying to worm myself into his favour, or something like that. Will you take the

letter, please, and add the address, and I will run to the post with it."

Sybil had not failed to note that manifest unconscious use of the "we." Her mind was in a ferment, and she was glad that the news was of so surprising a nature as to make her emotion seem quite natural.

"The boy is just going with the letters, in a quarter of an hour," she said. "He can take it. I will address it for you. But I can hardly think coherently, I am so surprised. What astonishing luck! Or rather, what astonishing good sense on your part! Child, you are constantly surprising me, but you have never done it so effectually as now! What will Oliver say?"

"He will say yes, of course! Mr. Wolfe is very wealthy, and a bachelor. He is the best backer any one could possibly have."

"I wonder what he will think!" sighed Sybil. "Poor fellow, his pleasure will be a good deal clouded, I fear, by the fact that he cannot share it with you."

Astrid's eyes fell, and her mouth grew hard. "I think you are mistaken," she replied coldly.

"Well," said Sybil, with a rainy smile, "we will put off further discussion until we have had tea. Come upstairs, I have put you into the room next mine, I thought you might like a different one. You shall unpack and I will send off this letter. We will wait tea a quarter of an hour, for Colonel Waring."

They went upstairs together, parting at the door of Astrid's room. Hardly was she shut in, when Sybil fled, her knees positively shaking under her, the letter in her hand, along the passage to Oliver's room. He was sitting up to-day, for the first time, and also shaved for the first time since his accident. He was weak and depressed. The depression seemed to

increase with his convalescence. The future looked dreary enough.

His mother received rather grumpy replies to her inquiries. He felt injured, because she had been called from the room by a maid, and had left him to his solitary reflections.

"Oliver," she said, "I have a letter for you. It was sent to me, to be forwarded to you, abroad. Did you ever hear of a Mr. Wolfe?"

His face darkened. "You mean the man whose motor knocked down Astrid?"

"Yes. The letter is from him, I am told."

"What on earth——" said Oliver irritably, as he took and opened the envelope. Evidently his eyes were held by the first few lines. He read on, with an expression of mingled incredulity and excitement. It was a long letter. When it was done, he rested his arm on his knee and leaned forward, staring into the fire. "Well!" he said, in tones of stupefaction.

"Is the news momentous?" asked Sybil.

"Read it," he bade her: and his voice trembled with excitement. "Read it! Why, I can't believe it! It would alter everything!" . . . Then his head dropped into his hands, and he concluded dreamily. "What does it matter after all? *She* doesn't care!"

His mother spoke clearly. "To whom do you refer? Who does not care?"

"Astrid, of course."

"I did not know there was any 'of course.' I thought it might be Mrs. Railton of whom you spoke."

"I have had enough of the Railtons, thank you."

"Why should you conclude that Astrid doesn't care?"

"I have told you already, she has given me the chuck."

"Did she do that for her own sake, or for yours? Are you sure she wished it, or only thought that you did?"

He turned towards his mother, examining her face closely. It showed signs of perturbation. "What do you know about it?" he asked slowly.

"Not much. If I knew, I should not ask to be informed. What I really wish to be told is the state of your mind, if you know it, which I doubt. Suppose that it depended merely upon your own wish, would you want to have Astrid with you always? In plain words, do you love her, Oliver? If you don't, she is entirely in the right, and it is best for you never to see her again."

There was a pause. "I see what you mean," said Oliver slowly.

"And you have no answer ready?"

He still stared into the fire. "Have I? I am not quite sure."

"Exactly. But it is your place to be sure. Until you are, please don't be putting the blame of your separation upon your wife. Now let me see this letter which is exciting you so greatly."

He handed it to her absent-mindedly, without speaking.

She read it and could not resist a little cry of triumph. "Oh, Oliver, this will take the wind out of Railton's sails!"

His eyes kindled. "It will that. I should like to write to all the boys to-night—all my old crowd, and tell them to be on the jump. Why, I could start the whole thing in a week or two—I have got it all in my hands—it only needs to wait until we have done some flaming advertising—you see, he leaves that entirely to me! If only I had her here! I say, wouldn't she be keen!"

"I think she would."

"You have always appreciated her, mother."

"I have always thought her much too good for you."

"And I looked upon her as a negligible quantity," he replied dreamily. The enthusiasm of his new idea faded, and his weakness reasserted itself. "I don't feel as if I could touch this without her," he faltered.

"Oh, nonsense, that is only because you are feeling ill. You will be getting stronger every day, more especially now that you have this to work for."

"I wonder if I *am* in love with her," he uttered slowly, as though thinking aloud. "She seems shut up too tightly to be loved. Her scorn of me hurts. I always feel as if she were thinking, 'What a skunk that man is, what an unspeakable brute!' But I am always wishing she were here, for all that."

"It would distress you to hear that she was ill, or—or—for the sake of argument—dead?"

He sprang to his feet. "*Mother!*"

She was frightened at the emotion she had provoked. "Sit down, Oliver, sit down, you are not strong enough——"

"You have had bad news!"

"Nothing of the kind! I assure you, boy——"

"You are trying to prepare me for something! Something serious! She is in danger, or—or lost to me, somehow!"

"Indeed, indeed, no. I am sorry I made such a stupid remark. I only wanted to try and find out what you really thought. You do not like to think that she is completely lost to you?"

"Oh, don't torment me," he said brokenly. "You can see how I feel."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I do see how you feel."

"But there is something—something you are keeping from me! I know there is! Mother, I demand to hear it! You are trying to prepare my mind to hear something I shan't like, but it is far worse to keep me on tenter-hooks like this. Tell me the worst! Does she want to be legally free?"

He was working himself into a state of excitement which she felt was dangerous. "Oliver, be quiet, at once. I give you my word—my oath, if you will—that to the best of my knowledge and belief, Astrid is well and safe, and there is no fresh news about her."

She succeeded, at last, in calming him. The entrance of the nurse, with his tea upon a tray, made a break, and she succeeded in escaping, telling him that she had a visitor to tea downstairs, so could not stay to take her own with him.

She left him to digest the surprising news.

Her heart beat fast as she hurried downstairs. She knew not how to deal with the situation. It behoved her to walk warily. She could not help fearing that, were Astrid to become aware of Oliver's presence, she would flee from him.

The Colonel was in the drawing-room, standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the flowering begonias, as though a fire burned there. Astrid had not yet come down. Sybil ran to Walter as to a refuge.

"Oh, dear man," she said, "what am I to do? Counsel me!" Dropping her voice, "They are both in the house and neither knows of the other's presence."

"Well, well, dear me! That sounds difficult. What is the exact state of things between them?"

"Briefly, that each is longing for the other, and each is persuaded of the indifference of the other. I don't know what to do. Shall I tell him she is here? Shall I tell her he is here? Shall I tell both—or—

and here is the fourth and last possible course, the one I prefer—shall I tell neither, and send her into the room to fetch something ? ”

He whistled softly. “ Oliver is pretty shaky still, isn't he ? ”

“ He is weak, certainly. But I don't think it would hurt him. ”

“ She would have to know about this—this curious affair of his being in that hotel. ”

“ Well, but as far as we know, there is a mystery, but no disgrace. I do not believe he had been drinking. He told the exact truth about it all—— ”

She paused, because the Colonel was looking conscious and worried.

“ It's a very queer story, ” he muttered obstinately. She regarded him uneasily, for the thorn that pricked him was hidden from her. She had just now nobody of whom to be jealous. Walter loved her, Oliver had come back to her. The Colonel, however, was tormented every day by the green-eyed monster. To have Oliver in the house—ill—exacting a great deal of his mother's attention, had been a final trial of the patience of this most patient suitor. That small, unworthy jealousy coloured his thoughts of Oliver. He knew it ; his nature was thoroughly sweet ; and when he saw her look distressed he was ashamed and wondered at himself. “ He might be more likely to tell the whole thing to her than to anybody else—eh ? ” he said encouragingly.

“ You think so ? I half believe that you are right. ” To his remorse she seemed to be choking back tears. “ He was the victim of some kind of trick, ” she said, achieving composure with an effort. “ I don't believe he understands it himself. But of one thing I am sure, since—since the last half-hour. He—he does love Astrid ! ”

The tears came.

"Well," expostulated he helplessly, "but that's what you wish, isn't it?"

She nodded mutely.

"If she is—er—getting to care for him, would it put her off, do you think?" he inquired awkwardly.

"I mean, would she think the worse of him if she hears of this escapade?"

"She will have to know, Walter, that he did not go to Tripoli."

"That's true. Well, do as you think right. How can I advise? A woman's instinct in these matters is surer than a man's."

She wiped her eyes, and sat down to her tea-table with a smile, summoned on his account.

"I always thought my daughter-in-law wonderful," said she, "and to-day I find she is more—almost miraculous. She has done a thing that nobody else in the world could have done; and done it so that he will never feel an undue sense of obligation."

"What has she done?"

"Mended his fallen fortunes. Oliver is an editor once more—with capital to back him, a free hand, and all he could have dreamed of in his rosier moments! I must tell you about it, though very sketchily, for she will be downstairs in a few minutes."

She told him of the use Astrid had made of her acquaintance with Mr. Wolfe. There was the offer, in black and white. She herself had seen it. "It has put new heart into him already," she exulted; "and her one desire is that he should not know he has her to thank for it. She is great—don't you think so, Walter? That word seems to describe her."

"She's a vast improvement upon poor little Mrs. Railton," replied the Colonel somewhat obtusely.

"By the way, I met Sir Charles this morning. He tells me the young folks have not yet sailed. Railton is kept in London, I suppose, by this *Penman* business, which I gather the baronet knows nothing of. He said some financial business, and he was evidently annoyed at his son-in-law's plunging into that kind of thing on his honeymoon. Vivien is in London. I thought he sounded a bit querulous, as though he had a suspicion of her not being very happy, though naturally he said nothing of the kind. I kept my tongue between my teeth, of course. Poor little Viv has been sacrificed to her ladyship's ambitions. It is a pity."

"Not for Oliver," said Sybil firmly.

"Well, I agree with you. She would not have suited him."

"He would have begun at the top," returned Sybil dreamily. "His wedding day would have been ecstasy, his honeymoon delirium, with perhaps one or two glimpses of consciousness. The first twelve months disillusion, and the rest of life regret! Now, with Astrid he may go on all his life, discovering new points in her which he had not suspected. . . . Oh! Don't you feel that about her yourself? You see her only as the young business woman, the typical secretary; or as the rigidly controlled, neglected wife. I see her, in a vision, wearing the crown of love and joy and motherhood. I see her fine nature in flower, and her deep heart responding nobly to each fresh call upon it. In most girls the heart develops before the brain. With her it has been the other way—only think how interesting!" . . .

Her reverie was broken off as the subject of these meditations slipped into the room.

Colonel Waring stood up and found himself looking at Oliver's wife with new eyes. Astrid's colour

rose at sight of him, and colour was extremely becoming to her. She did not look happy, but her face seemed full of unuttered possibilities. Perhaps the glamour of Sybil's prophecy hung about her. Certainly he found himself impressed.

She carried a pile of knitted socks in her hands, and was obliged to put these down in order to give him greeting. She was evidently embarrassed by the necessity of offering him her congratulations, but she did it prettily, encouraged by his evident complacency.

"I forgot you would be here," she said, with smiling apology, "or I would not have brought this hosiery into the drawing-room. It is just vainglory on my part. I wanted Mrs. Brendon to see what I have accomplished! See"—turning to Sybil—"I have succeeded in copying your pattern, and I made Oliver four pairs of socks, sitting on the step of the caravan, knitting like a true gipsy."

"The nomad life is a very becoming one," said the Colonel. "I should hardly have known the white-faced young London lady."

He was repaid by a vivid blush. The girl sat down close to her mother-in-law, and took up her cup. She wore the simplest of summer frocks, but it was fresh, and nicely put on. He watched her, and encouraged her to talk, asking for details of their tour and of the accident with the combative dogs. Sybil, as she listened to her, thought that she never said a word too much.

When the tea-drinking was over she rose, with the instinctive feeling that the Colonel and Mrs. Brendon were better company for each other without a third.

"I will go upstairs and finish unpacking," she observed, with a demure smile, "and take my knit-

ting with me. I had to bring it in and boast, because I took up the art late in life, and Mrs. Brendon said I should never do it properly."

"Child, I am beginning to think you could do anything you try to do!" cried Sybil. "Oliver, in his reduced circumstances, may be thankful to have a wife who can knit such socks as these!"

"I wish," said Astrid, with added colour, "that they had been done in time for him to take abroad. I might have given him two pairs, if I had thought of it, that night he came down to say good-bye; but I was so surprised at his news, and he stayed such a little while, there was no time to think. Well, I will take these and put them away in his drawer upstairs."

Sybil, with a smothered exclamation, half rose from her seat.

Astrid, carefully refolding her work, saw nothing, and her mother-in-law sent a wireless telegram over her head to the Colonel.

"Shall I let her go?"

He turned and regarded Astrid, hesitating, anxious, doubtful. Both held their breath.

The girl's almost unduly slender figure was outlined, in its white gown, against the dark gloss of the mahogany secretaire. Turning, she looked up with a smile, putting back a strand of hair with one hand. For the first time the Colonel saw her attractiveness, and saw it in a flash. He bent over the tray, as though seeking a lump of sugar for his tea, and muttered to Sybil:

"Let her go! Say nothing!"

In a helpless silence, hardly knowing what the result would be, they watched her walk silently across the carpet, open the door and disappear, while the latch fell to softly behind her.

CHAPTER XXVI

"And what you leave," said Nell, "I'll take '
And what you spurn, I'll wear.
For he's my lord, for better or worse,
And him I love, Maud Clare !

"Yes, though you're taller by the head,
More wise and much more fair,—
I'll love him till he loves me best,
Me best of all, Maud Clare !"

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

WHEN Oliver had finished his tea—his appetite was wretched—he somewhat peevishly dismissed his nurse and began to pace up and down his room, with a mind fired with ambition, but a heart as heavy as lead.

He was like a man suddenly awakened. The offer from Mr. Wolfe had supplied the whip to his dormant energy. The words his mother had spoken about Astrid had aroused his conscience.

The days which had elapsed since his accident had been as it were blurred. Thinking was a trouble, so he had not urged his mind to thought. The main facts of existence, as they presented themselves to him, were intensely disagreeable. He had wrecked his own private life, and Railton's malice had wrecked him professionally. He had made a genuine effort to win free of his financial misfortune, and fate had let fall upon him a wanton blow—a mysterious accident for which he was wholly at a loss to account.

Somebody had hoaxed him, it seemed; who had done it, or for what reason, he could not guess.

Thus he had winced away from any consideration of realities. He was ill, he was also out of work; but his mother was there. He was for the present safe and untroubled.

To-day the coming of the letter was like a trumpet call. This state of things must not continue. He would be well soon, and it behoved him to see about vacating his mother's house and going elsewhere.

Dimly, all through his illness, he had known that he wanted Astrid. Now that this new chance had come to him he was sure of it. His fancy, now wholly disengaged from Railton's wife, lit up a picture of a future which his own wife might share. The justice of his mother's reproof was so obvious that he was humiliated to think it had not struck him. After the way he had treated Astrid he had no right to put upon her the onus of decision until he had done penance, until he had shown her explicitly that his one great desire was to be forgiven.

His pride and temper had sent him flying from her in a precipitate rage that night when they had sat together upon the moor. His silly bravado had led him to insist upon catching the last train, when who knew? Had he stayed, had he made confession to her of what he felt, she might have pitied him. As in all his dealings with her, so in those last moments, he had showed at his worst.

The memory of the feeling which had then shaken him made his cheeks hot even now. He had known, moreover, that some strong emotion had been at work also in her. If he could have laid down his pride, maybe it was his chance, his moment, lost now!

To the best of his knowledge Astrid must be in Dublin, for the caravanning expedition came to an end last week.

What would she have said had she known of his accident? Would she have been sorry for him? He almost hated her for her strength, and yet he loved her too. She was inexorable; and a strong, almost violent desire was growing in him to shake her resolution.

If he could succeed in effacing from her memory those awful hours in the Brighton hotel he would have made a conquest indeed. As he recalled his behaviour then it seemed what no woman could pardon. Yet, perversely, the worse it looked, the stronger his desire to show her how different he really was from what he had then appeared.

Possessed with the new energy inspired by Mr. Wolfe's letter, he found writing materials and began a letter to her. He wrote hurriedly, blindly—only thus could he venture. If he reflected, failure was inevitable. He must storm the fortress, and he set down a few lame yet desperate sentences, which seemed like drops boiling over from the turmoil of his heart.

Then, suddenly, the afflatus left him. What were words? How could he tell her, on paper, the vehemence with which he desired her presence? . . . How could one write fluently with one's left hand?

Flinging down his pen, he strode petulantly to the window, and stood staring forth vacantly, with a mist before his eyes.

He saw his mother and the Colonel come out from the drawing-room window just below his own and stroll away across the lawn, arm in arm.

The sight was to him still new and still unpleasant. It intensified his loneliness. Wandering back to the

table, he sat down and rested his aching head upon his arms.

The handle of his door turned softly, and someone came in without knocking, walked a few steps forward, stopped, and cried :

“ Oh ! I beg pardon ! ”

He raised his face, and confronted his wife.

Evidently she had had no idea of finding the room occupied ; quite as evidently she did not know upon what young man she had intruded until he looked up ; for she paused in the act of flight.

For a long moment each stared into the other's eyes ; then Oliver pushed back his chair and rose, thereby displaying the sling and bandages which held his right arm.

She started, checked the movement she had made to depart, and flashed a glance round at the various accessories which showed that this was a sick-room.

“ Oliver, you are ill ! You are hurt ! You were not able to go abroad ! Why—oh, *why* have they not told me ? ”

As she spoke she came a few steps nearer, and, being satisfied that she did not mean to run away, he yielded to a sudden dizziness and sank into his chair again.

“ Why should they—tell—you ? ” he asked, turning so white that she came quite near, in deep anxiety. “ What did it matter to you ? ”

The moment he had said it he wondered at himself. The bitterness had escaped, he had not meant to wound ; he had said, as usual, just the thing he had better not have said. “ Oh, I didn't mean that ! ” he added, with a rush, imploringly. As he spoke he held out his left hand to greet her, noting as he did so that she was not wearing a hat, but

was evidently quite at home. "Why did you come?" he demanded eagerly, almost in a whisper.

She seemed not to have seen the hand; she was looking everywhere but into his face. "Your mother wanted me," she stammered. "I came to help her, and you, as I thought, were miles away! It is far more wonderful that you should be here than I. Won't you tell me how—that—happened?" indicating his arm. "What have you done?"

"Oh, nothing much. Broke my wrist," he answered, hurrying over the words as though he had something far more vital to impart; but she held him to the subject.

"How did it happen? Was there an accident?"

His face grew dark and troubled. "I—well, I don't exactly know," he admitted uncomfortably. "That sounds idiotic, doesn't it? But the fact remains that I can't explain it to my own satisfaction. I have given up trying to explain it to my mother, because she shows me openly that she thinks I am romancing."

Astrid's mind gave one swift leap to a conclusion. "But tell *me*," she urged, too anxious to feel self-conscious. "I shall understand, I am sure I shall! Were you waylaid and robbed, by any chance?"

He looked at her in evident surprise. "What makes you suggest that? No, not exactly, but pretty near it. I was decoyed to a hotel and drugged——"

She exclaimed, almost before the words were out of his mouth, "I knew it! I felt sure of it! Oh, why did I not warn you?"

This was sheer bewilderment. "What on earth do you mean?" he asked wonderingly. "I was not robbed of anything."

"Not of *anything*? Oh, Oliver, are you sure?"

What had you in your pocket? Any—any important letter, or anything?”

“Important letter?” Evidently this suggested nothing to him.

“It must have been done to get the letter,” she urged timidly, beginning to reflect that, having said so much, there were admissions which she must make. “She said—Mrs. Railton said—that he would do something to get it back.”

“Mrs. Railton!” He half rose from his chair but sank back with a gasp of sheer surprise. “Mrs. Railton—a letter! Could it be that! It sounds too preposterous!” He turned to her urgently. “Open the drawer in the dressing-table, on the right! Is my pocket-book there?”

Nervousness was forgotten. She flew to find it.

“Open it, please. The letter was there. It was just inside, and had the Dormouth postmark. I know it was there, for I slipped it in when I was turning out the safe, the very moment before starting for that beastly place.”

“It is not here now,” said Astrid, pulling out the contents. “Here are two letters from—from me. No others.”

“Well, I’m blest!” he remarked weakly. “That was what it meant, was it? Why couldn’t he write and ask me for it? No, I see. That would have been to give himself away, and offer me a chance to score.” A moment’s reflection turned his mind upon another point. “What do *you* know about it? How came *you* to suspect?” he asked in wonder.

He had seldom seen her awkward and embarrassed, but she was so now. The colour rose in her down-bent face. “I met Mrs. Railton one day, quite by accident. She was motoring past the camp. She wanted me to give you a message—to ask you to

burn the letter, because she said her husband was determined to have it, and—and she had not told him the truth about its contents.”

Oliver smiled, a little grimly. “Well, he knows the contents now, and I do not suppose they will please him. Poor little girl! I was a fool not to burn it.”

Astrid’s heart began to swell with the miserable ache which the thought of Vivien always caused her.

“So you and she had a talk,” said Oliver, with an ill-assured laugh. “Why did you not warn me?”

Astrid thought he might have guessed why she should have avoided such a subject, but she answered as calmly as she could:

“I didn’t seriously believe what she said; and—I only saw you for such a short while after that. Such a short while, and so much to hear and to be said. . . . If I had feared any real danger for you, of course I would have spoken.”

“Would you?” His voice dropped, as in sympathy with hers, and sounded low and wistful.

As for her, the thought of her position, banished for a while in the discovery of his injury, was now returning to overwhelm her.

“Your mother let me come—without telling me you were here,” she murmured in an explanatory way. “You will understand I should not have come if I had known——”

“I told her not to tell you of my accident,” he replied, “because I was afraid of distressing you, and I was fool enough to think it might distress you. But I did not suppose you would come here at all, wherever you might suppose me to be. I understood you to refuse all further intercourse.”

This seemed to require a word of defence from her. “Your mother,” she said almost inaudibly, “has been very good to me.”

"You came for her sake?"

"Yes."

"Since you are here," he said after a pause, "there is something I must tell you. I—I suppose you will feel you cannot stay, now that you know I am here. But before you go I must show you——"

"No!" she replied, in a panic. "I cannot wait. I had better go at once——"

He was conscious of but one thing—a fixed intention that she should not leave him. She was still standing near him, on his left side. He put out his hand and grasped a fold of her white gown.

"You are to look at this first. I insist!"

"What is it?" she stammered miserably. It was cruel to prolong her pain.

"It's the future," he said, with a glow of triumph.

"When you opened that door and came in I was just thinking I would give anything to have you here, so that I might tell you all about it. You came like an answer to a call."

She stood where she was, for the reason that she felt quite unable to resist the constraint of his hand; but she hated herself for her weakness. As she leaned against the table, her eyes, downcast, fell upon a sheet of paper with words traced laboriously upon it in a large script, very unlike Oliver's cultivated hand.

She could not help seeing what was written; in fact, the first word was her own name.

. . . Such words! All in a moment the universe was a blaze, the air a whirl of flame.

Those lines had been penned before he knew that she was in the house. They were true! He meant them! . . . What then? . . .

He was so possessed with the idea of the news he had to tell her that her sudden agitation and its

cause were alike lost upon him. Still he held her dress, growing bolder as she seemed to yield, till he had drawn her down in a kneeling position at his side upon a stool which lay beside his chair.

She fought for composure, for something resembling her usual manner. "What—what is it that you have to show me?"

"A letter," he said eagerly, removing his hand from her to thrust it into his coat pocket. "Jove, I shall be glad to get the use of my other hand again!"

"Let me," she murmured, leaning over him with a desperate courage.

"Thanks, yes. Put your hand in there. Is there a letter?"

She drew out the letter she herself had so recently brought into the house, and the full extent of Sybil's treachery was apparent. She shot a glance at him, but he evidently had not as yet connected its arrival with her own.

"Open it, read it," he told her excitedly, "and hold it so that I can read at the same time."

She could not see what she was doing, but she took the paper from the envelope with trembling fingers and, leaning nearer, held it before his eyes. As she did so his arm went round her, and he held her close.

He was calling her name, as he had done upon the sheet of paper on the table. "Astrid, Astrid! If I could have these last months over again! If there was a chance that I could make you fall in love with me!"

"That could never, never happen," she sobbed out, making no effort to free herself, letting her head sink down upon his shoulder.

"Never!" He drew in his breath sharply. "Is

never the word? Not if I did any penance you might set me?"

"Never, never!" She was actually in tears, and was hiding her face against him in a rush of emotion which disposed for the time being of all the claims of pride and prudence. She felt just the primitive bliss of finding herself in the arms of the man she loved.

His masculine intelligence was puzzled by the contradiction between her words and her actions. She cried "Never!" and clung to him. Her surrender was moving him far more deeply than he had foreseen. Something new awoke in him, something almost agonisingly sweet. The cold girl, "who seemed too closely shut up to be loved," had become weak and helpless, adorably in need of him, a creature to be sheltered and comforted.

He would not speak, fearing to put an end to the moment, which, for all he knew, might be only an access of pity, the prelude to a long farewell. He succeeded in slipping his right arm out of its sling and using that, too, to enfold her more closely; and at last, unable to bear the uncertainty, he bent his lips down to the small ear among the tumbled hair and whispered:

"Never? Do you still say it?"

"Of course I do! I must! A thing can't be done over again if—if it has been done already!"

He started, and cried out as though the words had been a sword. "Oh no! Oh no!" he exclaimed, as if rejecting a dreadful idea. "You could not! You could not!"

"Oliver, look back! Think! Why else should I have married you? Why else should your indifference have cut so deep—so deep? You knew, you knew!"

There flashed upon him the words spoken by the Dormouth doctor—spoken and scorned. He answered like a man horror-struck. "I never knew, because I never thought, because I didn't care. *Didn't care!* . . . My God! How you must have suffered! How I have made you suffer! What can I do? Confound it, I could put a bullet through my own fool brains! . . . And yet you are here—here, against my heart? Oh, what's the use of talking, what can I say? Do women forgive these things, even these? Ah! don't you see—can't you *feel*—that I can never let you go?"

"But," she told him, "I will go, I must go, unless you can say just one thing!"

He wondered. "What thing? What is it I am to say? I repent? Well, I do say it, I want to say it in act, not word. Forgive me! I do say that too—say it from the bottom of my heart. Astrid, I have been a callous brute. If another man had done what I've done, I should implore you to have nothing to do with him. I'm at your feet; I repent. Forgive me! Is that what you want?"

"No."

"No? What a determined little word, though so low I can hardly hear it! What else, then, must I say? What is it you want to hear? Not—surely not that I—*love you?*"

She showed him her face then, quivering with a beauty, a new life, that made him feel as though his heart turned over in his side. She let her eyes look into his, as if she would show him her very soul.

"Love you," he faltered stumblingly, hardly able to say the words he would. "Do you need telling *that?* Don't you see that I simply can't exist without you?"

CHAPTER XXVII

" Since God willed
That putting out his hand to touch this ark
He found a woman's hand there, he'd accept
The sign too, hold the tender fingers fast,
And say, ' My fellow-worker, be my wife ! ' "

E. B. BROWNING.

SYBIL and the Colonel sat together under the sycamore, looking at the roses, but they were not enjoying the evening hour. He in particular was bored and unhappy, and this is hardly to be wondered at, since his wedding-day could not be regarded as fixed, so long as Oliver needed his mother. At this moment he knew she was not thinking of him. Her thoughts were in the house, where so much was passing, where, as she hoped yet dreaded, the future of her only son was being decided.

An hour had gone by. Whatever might have happened was doubtless over. When Astrid made the innocent suggestion that she should take the socks upstairs and put them away, it seemed to her mother-in-law like a special leading. Now that she had put all to the test, she told herself she had been rash. Things go wrong so easily.

As the slow moments dragged along her depression grew more and more marked. At last the Colonel, almost impatiently, advised that she should go and find out what was passing.

" What is the good of your body being here with me when your whole mind and soul are in Oliver's room ? " he asked pettishly.

Sybil had not even the grace to apologise. "I can't help it, Walter," she replied callously. "You ought to be every bit as anxious as I am. If they have made it up, we'll be married next Wednesday."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do. Seriously. It is a promise."

"Well, then," with sudden alacrity, "er—don't you think you had better go in at once and find out what they are up to?"

She laughed at him, but she patted his hand affectionately. "All right," she said, "anything is better than this suspense."

Just as she rose from her seat she saw Drew coming out of the house. "If you please, ma'am," said the maid as she reached her mistress, "a gentleman has called to see you."

"A gentleman! Who is it?"

"He wouldn't give his name, ma'am, but he said he hoped you would see him. I am pretty sure it is the American gentleman who married Miss Faulkner."

Sybil's heart jumped. Was there some new complication in the situation? She murmured a few explanatory words to the Colonel, and they went to the drawing-room together.

Calvert Railton was standing with his back to the light when they entered. Afterwards, when he had taken a seat, Sybil saw that he was looking harassed and worn.

"I think it kind of you to see me, Mrs. Brendon," he said quietly. "I am here to inquire after the health of your son, Mr. Oliver Brendon."

Sybil's mien was frigid.

"My son is confined to his room," she said, "as the result of an accident."

"I am truly sorry to hear that. It was told me by a member of his late staff," said Mr. Railton in a

subdued way. "I trust, however, that he makes satisfactory progress towards recovery?"

"Thank you, yes."

"I don't wonder, ma'am, that you should receive me without enthusiasm," said the millionaire, almost humbly, yet with a dignity which Sybil felt herself constrained to admire. "I feel a special regret that Mr. Brendon should be sick, because I have a matter on my conscience in which he is concerned."

"You allude," said Sybil, after a slight hesitation, "to your purchase of the paper of which he was editor?"

"I do. I bought that paper for an unworthy reason, and I have had the mortification, since I acquired it, of finding that I was under a complete misapprehension, and that Mr. Brendon had not been guilty of the conduct of which I suspected him at the time."

"Indeed!"

"That is so. I have behaved in a way of which I feel ashamed, and I saw no way out of that but to come and say so, and ask you to convey to Mr. Brendon my apologies and regrets."

"That is good of you," said Sybil gently, but still coldly. "I can, I hope, set your mind in part at rest. My son is starting a paper almost at once—a new paper, to be financed by a very wealthy man who has long admired my son's work, and now comes forward to back him."

"Is that so?" slowly said Mr. Railton. He stared upon the carpet like one too much surprised to rally at once. "Is that so?" he repeated mechanically.

"For that reason I do not think you need feel that you have done him any lasting injury," went on Mrs. Brendon. "In fact, I fear it may be the other way.

It is likely that his new paper may injure the *Penman* severely, if not mortally."

"I think that quite possible, ma'am," was the answer. "Your son has great ability." He raised his clear, steady little eyes and surveyed Oliver's mother. He admired her immensely, both mentally and physically. As he encountered her gaze something of comprehension, of sympathy, seemed to leap out and meet him. He smiled the pleasant smile which showed his fine teeth. "I don't seem to have played a very successful hand, this game," he remarked quaintly.

She rewarded him with an answering smile.

"Since you are so frank, Mr. Railton, you encourage me to be the same. I deplore the step you took. Any such action, dictated by motives of revenge, is pretty certain to recoil upon the doer. Your cruel use of your large fortune might have spoiled finally two young lives, already injured by your action in Egypt, in attracting to yourself a young, easily influenced girl whom you knew to be engaged to another man. Mercifully, you have not done half the harm that at one time I supposed you to have done. I may assure you that I do not bear you any ill-will, and I do not think that Oliver will in the future, even if he does so now."

"Well, if he doesn't now he must be a plaster saint, which I don't think he is," observed Calvert ingenuously, breathing a sigh of inward satisfaction at the thought that his victim's mother knew nothing about the theft of the letter. "But you are right about the recoil, ma'am. Right every time. Money is a temptation. Sometimes I think it is a curse. I have been paid for the way I have treated Brendon, and I shan't forget my lesson. I shall consider carefully what you have told me, and if you think that

your son would give me a short interview, I might be able to put an offer before him. I have come to the conclusion not to handle a British newspaper and I might very likely make an arrangement with Brendon's backer to buy back the *Penman* at about half what I gave for it. I don't want it, and that's the truth."

Sybil was too surprised to be able to answer at once, and it was left to the Colonel to say, heartily if tritely, that this seemed to him an excellent idea. "If it could be carried through at once," he said, "the fact that Brendon ever resigned the editorship need not become known."

"Mr. Railton," said Sybil when she had collected herself, "I think you the most wonderful man I ever met. I had heard that Americans are 'like that,' but I don't think I believed it. I am a woman who has lived such a hole-and-corner existence that except for those one meets when travelling, I have never known an American."

"I would have been extremely sorry, Mrs. Brendon, if I had lowered your opinion of a great nation by showing myself as a bad specimen," replied he gravely.

She rose impulsively, her hand outstretched, and they exchanged a cordial greeting.

"Oliver will not be equal, I feel sure, to seeing you this evening," she said; "but if you can give me a time when you could come to-morrow I would send a message up to the Park——"

"Many thanks, I am not at the Park. My wife and I are in London, and I will give you my telephone number." He took out a little almanac from his pocket and consulted it. "If you think this business could be fixed up during the next forty-eight hours," he said, "I would wire for accommodation upon the *Lusitania*. I am anxious to be back on

the other side. Will you see if it can be done, Mrs. Brendon?"

"I will do anything that lies in my power," she told him warmly.

He did not linger long. He had the art of coming to say a certain thing, saying it, and taking his leave. Even the Colonel, who had previously thought him detestable, had to admit, when he was gone, that he was a fine fellow.

"I ask you—did I not say I liked him from the first?" cried Sybil triumphantly. "But I am sorry for him," she added almost immediately, with the thought of Vivien in her mind. Her voice was sympathetic. She had an idea that the future might show that Railton had been, after all, the good genius of Oliver's whole life. She sighed for the disappointment which had traced new lines upon the millionaire's face since his wedding-day; but she told herself that a man so brave and so determined would in the end attain his heart's desire.

As soon as the door closed upon him her mind flew back to the two upstairs.

She turned to Walter for a parting word of encouragement and stole away to Oliver's room, her heart beating fast and her courage failing.

On the landing, at the west window, the nurse was seated, with her sewing. Sybil approached her, on tiptoe.

"Is—is Mrs. Brendon with Mr. Oliver?" she asked desperately.

The nurse smiled. "I don't think I'd disturb them, ma'am," she said demurely. "I went in softly, to give him his tonic, and they were both sitting in one chair. They didn't see me nor hear me, and I came away again."

"Thank God!" The tears came uncontrollably,

almost blinding her as she turned and fled downstairs again, and to the shelter of Walter.

"But you must go up," he said later, "because you must tell Oliver of this suggestion of Railton's about the *Penman*, and he must write to Mr. Wolfe to-night."

"Of course, you are right," said Sybil bravely. "I must go in; but I am afraid! A woman is an odd creature. More than anything else in the world I have desired the reconciliation of Oliver and his wife; and yet I feel as if I could not bear the sight of it!"

"I'll take you away—you shall not see it any oftener than you wish, I can promise you," he assured her, with remarkable cheerfulness.

She was smiling, yet her eyes were wet as she knocked at the closed door. She did not knock very loudly, and her summons was unheard. Softly she opened the door and looked in.

Astrid, at the table, was busy with pens and paper. Oliver, his chin propped on his hand, was sitting very close by, dictating.

An impulse of vexation arose in Sybil. Surely he need not be using her as his secretary already. Could he not allow a decent interval to elapse?

She heard Astrid's voice: "If Prentis is already out there for the *Sentinel*, he can stay out there for us and we can keep his job here for him till he comes back. I could do it meanwhile, couldn't I?"

"Of course you could, if it wouldn't be too much for you. You are not strong yet, you must remember."

"What nonsense! I am as strong as a lion! We who next?"

"No more," he said. "You mustn't tyrannise over an invalid: there *are* other things in the world than the paper, you know! My attention is wandering. I can't keep it fixed, because my heart is full of you. An idea has just rushed into my mind, and I must tell you. We should be mighty silly to begin the publication of a new thing in the off season. The first number must not come out before October at the earliest. That leaves us time to take a real holiday first. Where shall we go?"

His voice dropped, and his mother saw the expression of his eyes, as he leaned towards his wife. It was dusk in the room, and Astrid had placed a portable electric lamp on the table for her writing. Its radiance made their two faces clear as in a picture.

"Oh, Oliver!" said the girlish voice, which had taken a new note, and vibrated with an indescribable cadence.

Sybil saw them lean closer, closer, till their lips met. She slipped noiselessly away and closed the door. Always in future she should have that picture before her. The beautiful purple dimness of June after-glow—the window open to the whisper of the trees. Within the room the circle of light, and in its radiance just two faces, leaning closer.

She had learned her lesson. What place soever the mother may hold in the heart of her son, his progress or his backsliding, his success or his failure must be determined by the woman he loves.

She could not speak of it as yet, even to the Colonel, who had come quietly upstairs and stood at a little distance, awaiting a summons to enter.

"Is it all right?" he asked.

She answered, "It is beautiful. They are quite oblivious of everything but themselves. We must

wait till they awake from their dream." As she went downstairs together she added, "What Oliver may have been doing at the Golden Hotel, it is quite certain that she has forgiven him."

"Ah, well," replied Walter, in tones of friendly curiosity, "if she knows what he was after, I hope she will tell us. I confess that I particularly want to hear."

Sybil laughed delightfully.

"Just like a man," she told him.

THE END.

87

1273 4

WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD.
PRINTERS, PLYMOUTH

As they
Whatever
golden Ball
given him."
of frank
er, I hope
ularly wish

